

Legalism and the Gospel in Papua New Guinea

Colleagues,

Last week's ThTh post predicted that this week we'd ship out Part II of "Legalism and Ascension Day 2005." The prediction did carry a "D.v.," (Deo volente = God willing), and gave a couple of signals of what was to come. That was the plan. But then came an alternate Deo volente, an unanticipated essay on the very same topic. From someone I'd never heard of in Papua New Guinea. He's Anton J. Lutz, a theology degree graduate (2003) of Valparaiso University in Indiana, USA. How well he learned his craft, his Law/Promise theology, you'll soon see. [They are apparently still hustling that at VU. Is VU "tasol" (Pidgin English, see below) in that endeavor?] Anton tells us a bit more about himself as his essay unfolds. Enjoy!

Peace & Joy!

Ed Schroeder

Events and Comments. Thinking on the "Reform Lutheran" Short Course

Crater Lake, Papua New Guinea

April 21-25, 2005

By Anton J. Lutz

Around here, it's as tough as it is anywhere to put up with other people's bad ideas about God and grace. This last Sunday our pastor was called out of the pulpit and forbidden to preach

by a woman who is feuding with his family. She has been slandering his daughter, who is sick, and now the daughter is taking this pulpit-and-reputation battering woman to court. Her claim on Sunday morning was that the pastor hadn't kept his daughter in line and thus wasn't fit to preach. The preaching replacement (not a pastor) gave us unqualified heresy discreetly bumbling along in the guise of Christian piety. Well, not so discreetly. It was pretty awful.

I gave another pastor a ride the other day and asked him as we bumped along about this business of "taking one's keys away." He answered that it was the Church's job to confront the sinner thrice and then to treat them as they would treat any other sinner. Which, as he understood it, was to ban them from the assembly. If the sinner was a pastor, he'd be banned from preaching and administering the sacrament. And sins, really, are anything a person is irked about and can locate a passage from the Bible to prop up their legalistic usually-contradictory claim. The only three verses I've never heard used are these: One. Judge not. Two. Let the one without sin throw the first stone. Three. Get that plank out of your own eye, stupid!

Around here, it's as tough as anywhere to say something true in the face of other people's bad theological ideas. Tough, I think, but it's one way to talk about what the calling of pastor, theologian and follower of the Master ends up looking like. My name is Anton Lutz, I follow in the steps of my parents, grandparents and great-grandparents in finding my vocation as a Lutheran missionary. I live in Papua New Guinea, in the Enga Province at the end of the road. I'm not a pastor and only a dabbling theologian. I'm an explorer of the places followers of the Master find themselves, and that seems to suit me so far.

Here follows a description of what we could call a theological adventure. I was invited to attend a pastors' and evangelists' retreat at Lake Lau in the middle of the province held during the last weeks of April, 2005. The intent of the organizers was to reinforce in their evangelists the basics of Lutheran teaching and to encourage all present for their return to their places of work. Also invited were Dr Steve Lutz, MD, and Pastor Anjelan who is currently serving at the Wapenamanda Lutheran (GLC – Gutnius Lutheran Church) congregation. Dr Steve was to speak on issues of healthy living and Anjelan was to speak on issues regarding pastoral care.

The attendees included two pastors from Papayuku circuit (now renamed "Promise") and eight or more evangelists and headmen from the congregations of the circuit. Most of the congregations in that area do not have full-time pastors and are served by these evangelists. Also, about ten youth from the Tupangus congregation were present and assisting with things like food transportation, housing, firewood and singing during morning and evening devotions.

With the exception of Anjelan, Steve and myself, all the participants were "Reform Lutheran." Reform Lutheran meaning they've split from the other Lutherans in such a manner that they feel entitled to self-designate as Reformers. In addition to being theologically sympathetic to the Reform cause, Anjelan is from Yakopmanda, our staging point and the home and congregation of Pastor Daniel T Pato, circuit leader of Promise. Daniel was the organizer of the event.

Pastor Anjelan, however, declined to attend at the last minute, citing the spiritual needs of his congregation. In his opinion, as expressed to myself and Dr Steve, "people" are already calling him "Reform" and if he attends this retreat, "they" will have grounds to remove him. Or drive him from his vocation

and congregation. Or, in his words; “they want to remove my Key.”

Interested, I pressed further. Anjelan and Daniel told us that several other prominent teachers and theologians of the GLC have recently (in the last year) had their “keys” removed. What this means, if it is true, and what the cause is, I do not know.

But while I may not know, I do suspect. I suspect that the removal of one’s Key is something resembling a mix between defrocking and excommunication. It is not handed down as a response to theological heresy, however, but instead intends to combat political mis-alliance. The GLC, apparently, has their own set of Keys, which they can grant and revoke. The Reform boys, I was led to believe, still feel they have authentic Keys. But not GLC ones. Such that Daniel could blithely encourage Anjelan to just do what is right (come present at this short course with his friends) and not worry about getting his Key removed. Daniel seemed to enjoy the confidence of one who has already been cast out (or already cast himself out) and is enjoying the new-found freedom.

“They” is the “Office.” Neither more nor less ambiguous. “Office” indicates ambiguous Gutnius Lutheran Church officials, bishops and administration.

A few days later, Dr Steve and I picked up Pr Daniel and Pr Anjelan from Wapenamanda and drove with them to Papayuku and then to Yakopmanda. At Papayuku, I noted that the old circuit office was perhaps the most dilapidated yet perhaps-functional room I’d ever seen. The Bible School was on vacation and reported to have fewer than ten students and one teacher. Across the road from the old circuit office, smack in the middle of the station, was the huge superstructure of a “haus

sel” – a revival tent.

The crowd that gathered was civil and friendly in their interactions with each other. As we drove away, however, Daniel confided to me that the whole station had sold out, that they were “haus sel” worshippers, that even the so-called Lutheran pastor had fallen on his knees in that very tent! Apparently I was supposed to take this knee-falling as a form of idolatry. In fact, the reason the Reform Lutherans left Papayuku station, even abandoning the very name, was that so many had fallen to this “false religion.” Now, I was assured, they follow the liturgy, hold fast to the cross of Christ and to prove it all, have named themselves “Promise Circuit.”

At Yakopmanda we were warmly greeted and welcomed. They showed us around the church building. It was kept in a well-groomed yard with a solid wall and gate installed in front. “We are pure here,” they kept assuring me. “We have not collaborated with any revival types or with the Lutherans that do.”

That night, as it became clear that Anjelan could not be talked out of his plan to return to Wapenamanda without accompanying us on the retreat, Dr Steve suggested that I be permitted to tackle some topics or in some other way add to the short course. After all, he pointed out, I have a degree in theology. It was quickly agreed that I would take Anjelan’s topic – shepherding the people of God. As the night wore on, then, I looked across the fire at Anjelan and asked: “I don’t really know what your situation is: we have on the one hand ‘Kristen pasin’ [Christian ‘fashion’ = Christian way of life, in Pidgin English] and, on the other, “Kristen bilip” [Christian belief, faith] – can you explain to me your beef with these revival types on each count?”

Regarding “Kristen pasin,” he said, the movements have forsaken

the liturgy. They require their people to give up smoking and betelnut. They dance as they worship and sing for forty minutes at the beginning of the gathering. They declare that the more "traditional" Lutheran pastors preach a false Gospel. They've given up the creed, the Our Father and the invocation of Triune God at the opening of a gathering. They steal our faithful Lutheran members and some of our clergy have fallen to their wiles as well.

Regarding "Kristen bilip," he said, movements value dreams and spur-of-the-moment prophecy as coequal with or superior to scripture. They believe that real Christians speak in tongues and that this is a key mark of authenticity. If one's works do not come up to Christian par, one is not a real Christian. Among other things.

I was surprised that Anjelan could form these two lists off the top of his head with no discussion or even time for careful thought. These concerns were obviously long-held and carefully considered. And I could easily see why a group of competent Lutheran clergy might consider cutting ties with those who participate in and condone (even tacitly) such behavior and belief.

How best to talk about shepherding the people of God, given this reality? I fell asleep with thoughts swirling.

We walked on Thursday and after settling into camp and eating dinner, got into a fascinating discussion. The group asked Dr Steve to tell them about the tsunami of December 26. (He had gone to Banda Aceh and Nias in the second and third weeks of January.) Instead of telling them a tale of woe and hope and disaster and grace, as he can do so well, he instead asked them why they wanted to hear this. Why do you care about so many who died?

It became clear that what they really wanted to know was “Why did this happen to them?” Which is another way of saying, “Will it happen to us?” Which is another way of saying, “Tell us what they did wrong so that we can avoid the same fate.” These implied issues became explicit as the conversation wore on.

In the ensuing discussion, both Genesis 19 (Lot and Sodom) and Exodus 20:5 (the so-called Conclusion of the Ten Commandments – really the prologue) were called upon to defend the position that God really does hand out curse and death on those who fail to follow the appropriate laws. Both texts were again used the following day in a discussion regarding HIV and AIDS. How best to talk about shepherding the people of God in this context? I fell asleep again with my thoughts in a muddle.

By Friday morning, I had a long agenda of things that I thought needed prompt and careful attention. As follows: What is the point of being “pure Lutheran?” What is the Good News? How can we keep from people hearing it as Bad News? What is the role of a pastor or evangelist? What are they actually supposed to be doing? Keeping the flock’s faith pure? Growing the flock? Ensuring good attendance? What, actually, is the point of liturgy? How many kinds are there? Does God really care if we dance and sing for forty minutes? Does God really care if we demote the authority of scripture and denounce other clergy as false? How can we understand the one Tok Pisin [=Talk Pidgin] word, “bilip,” such that it speaks of faith, the things one believes, and how neither are a work required of us prior to salvation? Et cetera.

And, ambitious as always, I thought it was a good idea to tackle all this in my two or three hours. No, no. No need to comment at all.

I centered most of my remarks on the ideas found, I am led to

believe, in the Augsburg Confession, Article IV, Justification by Faith alone. For proclamation to be Good News, it must cling to the sufficiency and necessity of the Cross. And it must give comfort to the penitent sinner. That makes three utterly unforsakable points – sufficiency, necessity, comfort to one penitent. So, then, if we tell someone God will love them (save them, redeem them, help them) if they repent and/or believe, how is that Good News? That's not the GOOD news at all! I think I must inevitably hear it as Very Bad News. What if I believe something that isn't quite orthodox? What if I don't believe very strongly? What if I usually do, but on Thursday, the morning I die, I have a size 4.5 doubt? If my salvation is depending on something I do and do very well (or at least well enough), like believing or repenting, then I will never hear it as truly Good News. Maybe we can call these the Lutheran versions of works-righteousness: belief-righteousness; repentance-righteousness.

So then the work a pastor must do is to make God's Word come to the ears and minds of people as real Good News. And yes, even hearing that I can't get to God on my own is Good News. Good News because it is paired with the proclamation that Jesus can and did do this salvation thing for me, without my participation or cooperation. The Cross alone is sufficient. Jesus Christ alone is necessary. This is Good News and it is received by trust, not assent.

But so often, and these pastors and evangelists pointed this out to me, they fall and fail and insert "sapos"-statements [Pidgin from "suppose," grammatically an "if" – Sapos (if) you do this, then God will do that.] into their sermons. "We hear what you are saying and see that we don't usually say it [the Good News] like that; we tell people if they don't believe, then they are going to hell. We tell people, if they aren't serious about repenting, then they are already judged." And

some cited the Genesis and Exodus texts to me. And then some included John 3:18 and something in Romans 3, the verse of which I did not catch. "What do you say to these?" And as I don't know my favorite proof texts to counter such vicious attacks, I just had to say "Well, it sure sounds like God has conditions on his utterly free gift of life. And it sounds like Jesus didn't have it in him to do all the saving. And it sounds like you better get your act together if you want to see heaven. And it sounds like God promises mercy only to those who jump through the right hoops." I said it. Just like that.

"But hold on. That is NOT how it is. God is enough. God is always enough. We don't need to help God save us. We can't. We trust (holimpas) [from "hold it fast"] God's promise because it is God's promise. We don't believe [the right things] in order to get God to make us a promise. Don't put God's mercy in a little box. Even in a little box with sides that have Bible verses written on them."

The point of Lutheranism, I told them, is to stick to Augsburg IV and keep saying it – ever new – so that it is Good News and not Horribly Bad News. Say a promise, not an if/then! The point of Lutheranism isn't to be the Holy, Pure, Real and Only church – though, of course, those are all realities. Except for the Only part. Lutherans continue to remind the world that Jesus Christ and He alone is enough to effect our salvation. Lutherans must not give up this claim. It's the claim we went to bat over, way back when. Even if it is tempting to get lots and lots of members and material benefits galore by joining up with a movement. Or tempting to feel pretty good about your stellar doctrine and piety.

Going into this, I had the hunch that some of this would be news for them. In my years of listening to Engan Lutheran sermons, I know that most pastors fall easily into teaching

beliefs-righteousness. And I know that once a person thinks they know something, its terribly difficult to persuade them that they have been wrong or even that there is another legitimate position that can be held. And yet I was very pleasantly surprised with their attention, their careful questions, their willingness to take what I was saying seriously and ponder it. Beginning during that session and continuing over the remaining two days I heard repeated and heart-felt comments to this effect: "Thank you so much for coming and teaching us. We have no input and we can see that we've been astray and have been making God's Good News into Bad News. Thank you for reminding us of God's mercy."

By way of summary, my point in the discussion of liturgy was simply that we ought not jump like frogs just because something is new and/or foreign. It needs to be evaluated, like everything else, according to Scripture and the principles of Augsburg IV. If something in the praxis or theology of a new liturgical breed denies that Jesus was enough or claims that something must be done by the human creature to get God to love and redeem it, then yes, react to it. You'd be doing wrong to let such notions slip into popular theology. But, inherently, there is nothing damaging with extended scripture reading (Ezra did it) or dancing in worship (David did it) or lengthy prayer (Jesus did it).

The rest of what we talked about that day circled mainly on these ideas. After a fishing expedition we settled in for a post-dinner discussion. The main concern they raised was this: "We have been ever zealous for the Lord and now they seek to destroy us. We are the last pure remnant that preserves theology and liturgy the way the missionaries taught it to us without letting the movement types bastardize it. And they (the main Lutheran church) have cast us out and don't let us attend seminary and keep us from being fed and strengthened. In fact,

we have to resort to these Bible studies and seminars among ourselves for renewal and encouragement. We have been ever zealous and are being destroyed. Tell us what we should do."

And in it I heard a hint of the "So many Christians tell each other that they must do certain things in order to be acceptable to God – most often a familiar, comfortable combination of 'believe/repent!' But we know we shouldn't proclaim that sort of Bad News. Truly we know. But it's going to be very lonely. And very tough. And I think I'm going to fail."

By my translation and paraphrase you can tell that I referred them to the tale of Elijah's despair and God's response on Sinai. "No, you can't quit. Go do your job, I'll be with you." I didn't know what else to say.

I will say this about that group of pastors and evangelists: they know their needs and that they cannot fulfill them adequately on their own. They consider themselves the true keepers of the sacred missionary legacy – meaning that the words of theological neophytes (yet still whiteskin-missionaries) like myself and Dr Steve carry inordinate weight. I ended up being invited to speak at their district conference next month on God's mercy and the Good News. I think: if there is anything reformed Lutherans should be really good at talking about, it's God's mercy and the Good News. But they want me (!) to come and talk on those issues.

That night, Aposel Yaros delivered a stunning sermon at evening devotions which never once lapsed into "sapos" talk. At the end, he asked, "Is that how the Good News is supposed to be?" And we all said: YES!

Aposel Yaros is one of four men present with us who have completed three-fourths of their seminary education at Timothy

Lutheran Seminary and never returned after their vicarage [year of internship]. There are several factors, I am sure, but the current complaint is that even if they did want to go back and finish, they will not be permitted because they are "Reform." It could also be, of course, that they will not stoop to fraternizing with such types as inhabit the seminary. But their words to me were that they would, in fact, like to attend and are prohibited from doing so.

On Sunday afternoon two of my new friends who I thought were on top of things ran a rousing short course on church growth. The church is alive, we were told, and God isn't interested in seeing it die. For you see, like plants in the garden, either something is growing or it is dying – there is no neutral status. So we can see that God wants it to grow. But, be warned, you can't count growth by numbers of pew-sitters.

And then, then they launched into a lovely list of "if-statements" put on every single aspect of the Gospel. As though they had forgotten or disregarded every last thing we'd come to agreement on the previous day. I was impressed. I did my best to keep my mouth shut to the last and then tried, carefully, to ask him where God's mercy was. "I've heard a lot about God's checklists for acceptability just now." We had another excellent discussion which concluded where the previous day's had; strong assertions of the principles of Augsburg IV and how they inform how we read all our favorite Biblical "if-then" passages. Etc. And that pretty much wrapped things up.

By way of summary, let me say these:

The reform pastors and evangelists were as Lutheran as any I've met. They are considerably more thoughtful than most.

They have an instinctual hunch about other theologies which deny the necessity and/or sufficiency of the Cross. In their phrase, (we) Lutherans cling to the cross.

The group I was with have a deep and unsatisfied hunger for spiritual, pastoral and theological nourishment.

The group I was with truly have the attitude of learners. Impressive for Engans and for Lutherans.

I had heard that the Reform group has no interest in missionary/overseas input, money, etc. I saw nothing to corroborate this. If someone were to come offer short courses to them, to make it possible for them to have relevant and useful teaching materials and so forth, they would be very grateful. Furthermore, I've heard second-hand that some GLC pastors who attended Pastor Harvey Kath's short course held at Lake Kopiago suggested to him that groups like the PNGMS [=Papua New Guinea Mission Society, mostly folks who once served in PNG] send two teachers – one for the steadfast GLC and one for the breakaway, yet still faithful, Reform Lutherans.

There is a sickness in the GLC where pastors are having their Keys removed on a political whim. That this is happening to those pastors most theologically on-the-ball just makes the situation worse.

In my opinion, (perhaps unfounded), most of the rank and file clergy of the GLC have no ill-feelings toward the Reform Lutherans. Many share the same concerns as the Reforms and yet are themselves unwilling to part ways with the GLC. For whatever reason.

It is almost pointless to try to cram in everything [that I tried to cram in] into even a one-week course. I need to

remember that I learned and came to believe these things over many moons. Yet I'm glad we got the chance to be there with them and say the things we did. The Lord might still work in mysterious and unexpected ways.

Which is really to say: I don't actually expect attitude, behavior or skills change to result after a "short course." As Dr Steve notes, among hospital staff, short courses do nothing to change patient care. But if a person goes to a one-year course, then yes, one can see that they have learned something. Old ruts are not easily re-dug elsewhere.

There is a tendency among Papua New Guineans to tell the whiteskin what they think he wants to hear. "Yes, what you've said is sweet to our ears." And as one has said, the Enga will make you a Bigman if you blink twice. Which makes the final quality of our reception among them uncertain. But they did ask that we put down on paper all that we had discussed and presented so they could have it for future reference. Which might indicate something. Or it might not.

I've also decided to take them seriously on their request for teaching materials. We noted a dearth of useful / authoritative resources for the pastors here to use. And there is so much crap floating around. Like in a septic tank. Papua New Guineans in general and Engan Lutherans in particular experience an authority crisis when it comes to who is worth listening to. Just because it is being sold in the Kristen Book Shop or in the religion section of Barnes and Noble or being published by Fortress or CPH does not mean that it is worth anything. For instance, it's likely that if you or I were to write a basic pamphlet or a book on Christian teaching or theology and distribute it to them, they would read it over and over and then take it to heart. Regardless of your true authority or mine.

And I am likely not the appropriate theological watchdog for what is taken as authoritative material by Lutherans here. And I'm not sure that the folks who remove other people's "keys" are any better. Nor, likely, are people who spend their time in other countries. Huh. It might be worth thinking about, anyway.

The one resource that several of the Lake Lau retreat participants had was a little pamphlet published by Kristen Press Inc., Richard Haar, 1988. Its four sections are Marimari Tasol, Baibel Tasol, Bilip Tasol and Kraist Tasol [tasol = that's all] – grace alone, scripture alone, faith alone, Christ alone. I thought most of it very good. The "Bilip Tasol" section was confusing and contradicted its own claims and in the end was not very useful. Given my predispositions, anyway.