

Letter to President Bush

Colleagues,

Only two of you responded to last week's "poofed" piece. One to tell me (much thanks) that it was Schiller who said "Die Weltgeschichte ist das Weltgericht." The other asked if President Bush were not in fact following Luther's adage in the "Secular Authority" treatise that the prime calling of the prince is to "protect" his people. Hasn't that been his mantra ever since Nine-Eleven? But the issue in the poofed piece returned on Sunday in the Adult Sunday School class at our congregation here in St. Louis. In class the week before we'd studied Luther's essay "On War Against the Turk" and made "crossings" to our own slice of life in the USA today. Last Sunday it was Luther's words in "Secular Authority." When we'd checked the specs on that, we placed alongside it President Bush's "Nine-Eleven-Fifth Anniversary" message and did that old college-exam bit: "Compare and contrast"

What transpired—some of these folks (maybe all) are thoughtful people—was so good that I reported it the next day in a letter to President Bush. FYI here it is.

Peace and joy!

Ed Schroeder

September 18, 2006

Dear Mr. President,

At yesterday's Adult Sunday School Class (Bethel Evangelical Lutheran Church, St. Louis, MO) about 40 of us members studied

the text of the “sermon” you gave the nation on the 5th anniversary of Nine-Eleven. We had the full text (from the NYT) and from that text we looked at twenty-some key statements in your message. They are appended below.

We talked about it as a “sermon” remembering Teddy Roosevelt’s famous word about the “bully pulpit” of the US presidency. You were indeed preaching to the nation Monday evening. We found no fault with that. ‘Fact is, that is what we set as limits in discussing your message. We ruled out any discussion of the sermon’s politics, confining ourselves just to your religious message.

And that is where we have some unhappy news for you—as it was for us when you commended it to us on Monday evening.

In that religious message we heard two heresies—as heresies are understood in Christian language—coming up again and again. And you were urging us to adopt them. We have no choice but to say no. We’re “evangelical” Lutherans. You are an evangelical too. Evangelicals of every stripe say no to these two religious heresies.

One has the classical label from early church history, “Manichaeism,” and the other is often called the “Pharisee heresy.” Here’s what they look like:

The Manichaean heresy

is named after a Christian teacher Mani from the third century A.D. He taught that the world was divided between good people and evil people, that supernatural forces—good and evil—were allied to the respective parties, and that the calling of the good folks was to conquer the axis of evil. In your statements 3, 5 and 18 below you are speaking exactly as Mani did. “They” are evil, and “we” are good. They “hate freedom.” We love it. They want “to destroy our way of life” (is that another name

for our religion?), so we must destroy them before they do it.

When the early church labelled Mani's teaching heresy, they labelled it a false teaching about God, not just about people in the world. Mani's notion of God contradicted the Biblical message about God. Even worse, it replaced the central role of Christ—and for Christian believers that was and is an absolute no-no. Given your personal faith confession, it has to be a no-no for you too.

The Pharisee heresy

also surfaces throughout your sermon to us last Monday. And what is that one? Jesus himself identifies it with the words: "They think they have no need of repentance." By the total absence of any note of repentance in your sermon you encouraged us to believe the Pharisee heresy about ourselves. And, of course, that is not just in this anniversary address of last week. None of us in the class could recall that you have ever used this "re-" word in speaking to us since the WTC cataclysm. Someone in class noted the ominous parallel of a 9/11 in Jesus' own day—the Siloam tower falling and killing 18 people. When people asked Jesus how to respond, he said: "Unless you repent, you will all likewise perish."

Granted, repentance is a dicey business. Both for individuals and for nations. But Lincoln, our first ever Republican president, succeeded in calling for a national day of repentance in the darkest days of the Civil War. Congress even went along and passed legislation to support it. It actually happened. Sure, the Union leaders thought they were "right" in executing the war. But Lincoln knew—even if he didn't go to church, he did read his Bible—that self-righteousness is always in the mix in every righteous human endeavor. Even the righteous are still sinners. Simply stated: the Bible says so.

The Pharisee heresy takes pride in its self-righteousness—as the Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax-Collector shows. When you are sure that YOU are righteous, it's a piece of cake to find evil tax-collectors who are not.

Here's where the two heresies intersect. No human being is ipso facto good. All are flawed. There's an antenna for evil in every one of us. Put in other words, there's a God-disconnect in all of us—both the nice guys and those not so nice. With such humans populating the entire world, evil has equal access into humans consulting in the Oval Office as to those in Muslim madrasas.

Another spot where the two heresies connect is that WE are clearly the ones who will win in the battle against evil. We hear that from you many times. Statements 9, 10, 11, 14, 15, 16, 17 and 21. It's the sermon's constant drumbeat. Some of us in the Sunday class wondered: Isn't that a 21st-century form of Goliath boasting of his clear military superiority, which was true? Yet with one slingshot God's adolescent agent brought him down. You know what Goliath's fatal flaw was. It wasn't deficient body armor.

Before we studied your sermon in last Sunday's class we had in earlier sessions read two essays by Martin Luther. In each of them Luther addresses a segment of "secular society." One was on war, the other on political leadership. The first was his treatise on War against Muslims, as Suleiman, the Ottoman emperor, was laying seige to Vienna in 1529. The other was his Handbook for a Christian Prince from 1523. So this was the immediate context in which we studied your sermon. It seemed clear to the class that you would be helped by both of these, although they urge a strategy for political leadership quite different from the strategy you are urging us to follow under your leadership. That is especially so in his "War Against

Muslims.”

Just a couple such instances.

A. *Who the enemy, the threat, is—and Luther’s 1529 essay.* You refer to our enemies in statements 5, 9, 10, 11, 12, 21 and 22. In Luther’s 1529 essay about War against Muslims he tells his readers that there are two enemies outside the gates of Vienna. Suleiman, for sure, but also God. Taking an image from the prophet Isaiah, he says God is using Suleiman as the “rod of his anger” against a phoney Christian Europe where “self” is the real God worshipped, despite all the trappings of its being a “very religious” society. Yes, Suleiman—like Nebuchadnezzar in Isaiah’s day—is a murderous villain—not a good-guy at all—but for the moment God is using one villain to punish another. The “‘way of life” of the Holy Roman Empire was not God-pleasing, he said. So to “preserve our way of life,” no matter how plausible that was to them, was the problem, and God was saying no.

So when God is your enemy, you don’t say all those nasty things about “our enemies” in the statements below. Nor do you boast that “we will defeat our enemies.” Put bluntly in language a Texas rancher knows, that’s “bull” coming from the bully pulpit. When God is ticked-off at a person or a people, there’s only one way to “fight”— and come out alive. It’s the way Lincoln chose in 1863. Why don’t we follow in his train? For those who keep on fighting this enemy—to use your own words—“their fate will be the same as those who tried before.” The maxim Jesus give is “Unless you repent,” your fate is not pretty.

At the conclusion (#22) you refer to our nation being brought to our knees 5 years ago, but “not in the way the

terrorists intended." The same is true when God brings people to their knees and they do NOT repent. That is "not in the way that God intended."

And that brings #8 into focus.

"We didn't ask for this war," you say. It all depends upon who you are facing. If God is using our enemies as the rod of his anger, then he's telling us: "Oh, yes you did ask for it. How can you be so blind as to say you didn't?" It is not simply that we must "meet the test that history has given us," we are now confronting the One giving the test. Lincoln saw that and acted accordingly. You refer in your last sentence to our "faith in a loving God." True, but when confronting the rod of God's anger it's tough love. It's critique. "You have been weighed and found wanting." The only appropriate response is the "re-" word: repent. If you want something to be "confident" about—and confidence was a prominent term in last Monday's sermon—then do what Lincoln did. He analyzed the "American way of life" on both sides and saw that "we did indeed ask for it." Have one of your staff check it out. A Proclamation Appointing a "National Day of Fasting, Prayer and Humiliation." Washington, D.C. March 30, 1863

B. The Folly of Warfare for coping with religious/ideological conflict—and Luther's 1523 Treatise for a Christian Prince. In items 6 and 7 you make it perfectly clear that a "perverted" religion, an "ideology" [secular term for religion], is in the mix, possibly at the very core of the conflict. In this address, and in your words to us before, you have articulated but one strategy for such a conflict. Namely, find the people of the perverted religion, the ideologues who "hate freedom" (your constant drumbeat) and kill them. And in your call at the

end of your message, you urge us to draw on our own American religion—"trust, confidence, faith"—and use this "source" to eradicate the folks of the perverted religion. We will win, you tell us. Not so, says Luther. You will lose.

Luther has clear words about the folly of such a strategy in such a conflict. "What about heresy? False religion? It cannot be stopped by any sword or coercion. Here God's Word must do it; if that does not accomplish the end, it will remain unaccomplished through secular power. It is a spiritual matter. God's word alone avails here. In fact both true faith and heresy are never so strong as when men oppose them by sheer force, without God's Word."

Applied to us at the moment, it's dumb, dumb, dumb to cope with a religion, even a perverted one, using military force. For our Sunday class, the un-success of our five years of such strategy was as plain as day. Luther had even harsher words: For the prince who nevertheless tried to do so, he said "let him rave, fool that he is. He will meet his judge."

Luther has other caveats. One is jurisdiction. No nation has jurisdiction over other nations. That has been standard Christian political theology all the way back to St. Augustine. Even "wicked" rulers in other nations are no grounds for a preemptive strike by anyone to "liberate" the oppressed over there. Regime-change is legitimate only in your own country. Lord knows, lots of things in the commonweal of America are falling apart. Here's where we need regime-change. But it could be too late. When Pharaoh pursued the liberated Hebrew slaves at the time of the Exodus, the Bible says "God took the wheels off their chariots." Sure it was faulty engineering for crossing the Red Sea. But Who engineered

the engineering? The wheels are falling off of lots of American chariots here at home. Isn't it your calling to attend to that? But you think "the war" is the real threat. Some of our enemies in that war tell us that it would be over if we simply followed their request "Yankee, go home." That's what our forebears told the British in 1776—"just go home." And when they (finally) did, the war was over. Perhaps it's already too late.

However, it never is too late to "do what Lincoln did" and God has been known to do wonders for those who do that.

Which leads to one item from Luther that you yourself affirm as your calling: "we will protect our people." That is Luther's constant mantra as he counsels the Christian prince: "You protect those entrusted to you."

Luther knows how tough it is to be a decent "prince" at all, and even tougher to be a "Christian prince."

His counsel: "Remember, land and people do not belong to you. You belong to the land and people. Your concern is how they may be protected and defended in good peace. Authority does not mean privilege, but service to the governed, just as Christ exercised his authority. Who then would want to be a prince? That's the worst job on earth, full of trouble, labor & sorrow."

He says it again in his closing words:

"A Christian prince's duty is fourfold: 1) to God it's faith and trust, plus sincere prayer 2) to his subjects it's love and Christian service; 3) to his counselors and governing agents it's an open mind and unfettered judgment, never trusting anyone absolutely; 4) to evil-doers it's proper zeal & firmness that justice be done. But never rectifying

injustice in a manner that even more harm be done. Then his state is genuinely righteous, outwardly and inwardly, pleasing to God and to the people. But he must expect much envy and sorrow. The cross will soon rest on the shoulders of such a ruler."

Yet that's a much better fate—for a president and finally even for a nation (for you know who hallowed the cross)—than the fate of those who go forth believing the Manichaeian and Pharisee heresies. Having "trust, confidence, and faith" in such perverted religions, is a deadend, primarily because it ignores God our critic. Ignoring that critic, nobody gets to freedom.

*Sincerely yours,
Edward H. Schroeder
St. Louis, MO*

President Bush's Address to the Nation Fifth Anniversary of the Sept. 11, 2001 Catastrophe.

- 1. They made war upon the entire free world.*
- 2. [On this anniversary] I want to discuss the nature of the threat still before us.*
- 3. On 9/11 our nation saw the face of evil.*
- 4. Yet on that day we saw courage . . . courage . . . courage.*
- 5. Since 9/11 we've learned a great deal about the enemy. We have learned that they are evil.*
- 6. Driven by a perverted vision of Islam – a totalitarian ideology that hates freedom.*
- 7. The war is more than a military conflict. It is the decisive ideological struggle of the 21st century.*

8. *America did not ask for this war. It is not over, and it will not be over until either we or the extremists emerge victorious.*
9. *On Sept the 11th we resolved that we would go on the offense against our enemies.*
10. *“Osama Bin Ladin . . . America will find you and we will bring you to justice.”*
11. *The world is safer because Saddam Hussein is no longer in power.*
12. *Our enemies in Iraq are tough . . . the worst mistake would be to think that if we pulled out, the terrorists would leave us alone.*
13. *Bin Laden says that victory for the terrorists in Iraq will mean America’s “defeat and disgrace forever.”*
14. *We will not allow this to happen. America will stay the fight.*
15. *We can be confident that our coalition will succeed. . .*
16. *We can be confident in victory . . . because of America’s Armed Forces. . . nearly 3000 have given their lives.*
17. *. . . and we will never back down.*
18. *America has confronted evil before.*
19. *Throughout our history America has seen liberty challenged . . . and every time we have seen liberty triumph.*
20. *Winning this war will require . . . a unified country. We must put aside our differences and work together to meet the test that history has given us .*
21. *We will defeat our enemies, we will protect our people, and we will lead the 21st century into a shining age of human liberty.*
22. *[Final paragraph] Dangerous enemies have declared their intention to destroy our way of life. They are not the first to try, and their fate will be the same as those who tried before. Nine-Eleven showed us why. The attacks*

were meant to bring us to our knees, and they did. But not in the way the terrorists intended. Americans united in prayer, came to the aid of the neighbors in need, and resolved that our enemies would not have the last word. The spirit of our people is the source of America's strength. And we go forward with trust in that spirit, confidence in our purpose and faith in a loving God who made us to be free.[ehs Sept. 17, 2006]