

Limpet-Mine Theology and Gospel With No Additives

Colleagues,

Today's guest essayist is Neal Nuske. He's appeared here before. Most recent, so far as I can tell, was ThTh #610 – that's 86 weeks ago. Neal teaches at St Peter's College in Queensland, Australia. We've never met face-to-face. But we have been in email exchange for a long time. He'll give you the details below. I didn't know the meaning of one of his terms in today's post, "limpet-mine." Thought it might be something only Aussies understood. So I looked it up. Not Aussie, just plain English. Limpet: "a marine mollusk that browses over rocks or timbers and clings very tightly when disturbed." Limpet-mine: "an explosive device designed to cling magnetically to the hull of a ship." That is probably all the introduction you need. Limpet-mine theology is a pejorative term in Neal's vocabulary. Even so, get ready for some explosive devices in what he tells us below. [For the Latin and Greek terms that Neal uses, I have put (in brackets) English equivalents.]

Peace and Joy!

Ed Schroeder

For well over a decade I have been a silent listener from "down-under-land" to numerous theological conversations around the 'table' of mehs55@cs.com and an unseen guest in the cyberspace of Crossings! When describing the personal value of such moments to Ed, I suggested it constituted a weekly 'reconfiguring of the cerebral cortex'.

After teaching classes for a week in the subject areas of Study

of Religion – an examinable [Ed:required for the examinations?] course on all the major world religions including Australian indigenous spirituality under the themes: The search of understanding; and The search for meaning, as well as courses on Theory of Knowledge (Epistemology) in the International Baccalaureate program; and, Australia's involvement in World War 1 and The Pacific War, I would then wander back into the Mathematics staffroom. Waiting there via email would be the weekly dose of Thursday Theology. I have appreciated the number of times theologians have dared to comment on the problem of human suffering and the existential implications of the suffering Christ -a reflective domain where it could be suggested that fools may walk in where even angels fear to tread in an attempt to construct theodicy. Such has not been the case.

My particular interest is in the centrality of the 'theology of the cross'. That was the theme of my Final Year Thesis required of us at Luther Seminary in Adelaide in the 1970's. I discovered that one cannot reflect on Luther's theology of the cross without taking into consideration two critical themes in Lutheran theology: these are deus absconditus [God hidden] and deus revelatus [God revealed]. I appreciated deeply the way Elert clarified the distinctions and developed the implications of deus absconditus and deus revelatus in The Structure of Lutheranism.

What seemed an obscure theological work to some of my fellow students was to me a source of clarity, not because Elert resolved the tensions in some pathetic form of theodicy, but because he kept the paradox sharp and intense with no compromise to that innate desire of human reason to make God a rationally palatable and reasonable deity. I think that is why Luther called reason a whore. Its default response is to attempt to dissolve the tension and thereby prostitute faith so that it ends up as a form of consent to a list of theological

propositions rather than a life of trust in the one who lived and died pro nobis [for us].

I encountered deus absconditus at age twelve when struck by a radical and rare form of childhood cancer which resulted in surgery. The consequent hemipelvectomy left me disfigured for life. Hemipelvectomy is a radical form of surgical crucifixion whereby, for the sake of life itself, one is left hanging on the cross of disability. I have been there for 48 years.

I continued to encounter deus absconditus in the lives of my parishioners and later in the lives of my students when I moved into a Chaplaincy-teaching position. I buried many of them. Some died from cancer. One took his own life. In the weeks following that experience my students continued to reflect on the meaning, or lack of meaning, in this experience since the student was a member of the class I was teaching at the time.

I was also doing a course work Master of Educational Studies at The University of Queensland in the area of Curriculum Design. My supervisor, Associate Professor Jim Butler, suggested that I convert to a Research Masters Degree in order to explore how the concept tragedy could be treated in the classroom through an examination of the way various World Religions responded to human suffering. I did so successfully under the topic: Design for adolescents to integrate tragedy into their world-view. We had many discussions about the use of the term 'integrate' because we agreed that tragedy was a paradox, an inexplicable experience which 'rattled' world-views and in some instances blew cognitive universes apart irrevocably. Tragedy is a theological super-nova.

What remains after such an explosion? What is gospel?

I wondered what kind of theological wall Humpty Dumpty sat upon. As a result of the fall, was it only Humpty who was shattered,

or was the wall itself also irreparably fractured? Did the edifice of theology remain intact maintaining its apprehensions of static truth while the fractured, alienated human being looked on in bewildered disbelief, or did the wall itself also collapse?

In its infinite 'wisdom' deus absconditus decided to revisit once more in November 2010 when our son Jeremy aged 29 took his own life after a long struggle with depression. Jan and I entered a cosmic black hole along with our daughter Renee, her husband Tim with their children Harper and Marlo. Marlo entered our world four days before Jeremy took his own life and left our world. That blinding supernova filled our world with a heap of cosmic dust and shit.

Across from another world came the very human and pastoral voices of Ed and Marie. In one of my emails I introduced Ed to the notion of 'reconfiguring the cerebral cortex'. I had also thrown in another concept formed in the midst of the cosmic dust. This I called "limpet-mine-theology". At the time Ed and Marie were in 'exodus' mode, breaking camp and taking another step in that pilgrimage to the promised land. Subsequent to some of the dust settling after their 'reshuffle' Ed replied asking if I would consent to send out one of my replies which elucidated the meaning of the concept "limpet-min e-theology."

I agreed and have exercised some editorial freedom, taking out some of my more colourful language and providing a context as outlined above. At the heart of my email to Ed was the implicit question: What is the purpose of theological reflection? What is the purpose of dogma? What is gospel for those who live with mental illness? What follows is largely the email.

In the midst of the existential wreckage precipitated by

personal loss it has occurred to Jan and me that many formulations/descriptions/explanations of the gospel, and Christian dogma for that matter, come from sharp thinkers, cognitively intact human beings, high-level-functioning human beings.

Such individuals are, of course, important for many reasons. They are a gift for us because there is always the danger of 'flat-earth advocates' rising up and swamping us with their particular notions/definitions/formulations of the 'gospel.'

Sharp-thinkers keep our conceptual world reconfigured so that the word 'gospel' remains 'gospel' – the life I live, I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me.

On the other hand, as Church history has ticked on, 'additional theological ideas' can attach themselves, some like limpet-mines, to 'gospel,' for example, 'gospel' + cultural issues, 'gospel' + 'normal' gender orientation – as if those who are different cannot possibly love Christ; or, to put it in gospel order, Christ cannot love those who are different.

The end result of that particular configuration is moralism and no gospel for those who are in most need of it.

I guess the prime work of Lutheran theology is to prevent "limpet-mine theology" from attaching extras to 'gospel' so that the 'satis' [it is enough] is lost and swamped by additions deemed important for various reasons. To prevent "limpet-mine theology" adhering itself to 'gospel,' some intense and focussed theological analysis and critical thinking always has to take place.

I have been grateful for your insights over the years.

Any student of theology, hopefully, will work their way into the

world of theological ideas and discover that to 'do theology' is a vocatio [calling] burdened by the never-ending process of clarifying and revisiting central theological terms. Add to the cognitive experience of studying theology the experience of living life – existence itself.

This too can 'stuff-up' the mental world because there are times when bucket loads of shit keep pouring down from above.

So, when you get into those heavenly-realms, Ed, you best find a good plumber up there and tell him/her, on our behalf, that something has gone wrong with the heavenly sewerage system. Enough for the moment because the deus absconditus is alive and well, spreading manure everywhere.

Recently we have asked ourselves: What is 'gospel' for the 'insane'?

What is 'gospel' for those who are mentally fragile, unable to live because of an inability to function either in response to a genetic disposition, or in response to the degenerative impact of brain physiology, brain chemistry? Behind all that is: What is 'gospel' for our Jeremy? What is 'gospel' for those who destroy themselves by taking their own lives? Gospel is gift of grace -no "limpet-mines" need to be attached to gospel.

We have concluded that much is added on to the word 'gospel.'

I am reminded of some of those TV ads which begin with an offer for a Knife-Sharpener. Then comes the extra knife, and, before one realises it, there are a thousand attachments all designed to enrich life. You know the routine – 'and there's more!' One is subsequently offered forks, spoons, free holidays, a new kitchen, etc!

In the theological world we find parallels in "limpet-mine-

additives” such as: ‘pure’ gospel – as if the single word ‘gospel’ is not enough. If it is impure gospel then it is not gospel.

Or it becomes: ‘gospel’ + inerrancy, ‘gospel’ + normality, ‘gospel’ + success, ‘gospel’ + creationism, ‘gospel’ + doctrine, ‘gospel’ + literalism, ‘gospel’ + church order/structure, ‘gospel’ + the political-right, etc.

Before one realises it, there are a hundred formulations (limpet-mines) on offer and the cross disappears behind a wall, a morass of cognitive additions. Such additions are mostly a result of theologians earnestly trying to preserve the truth. However, in reality, ‘truth’ preserves us because ‘truth’ is not a cognitive theological construct. It is the crucified and resurrected One. So it seems to me the purpose of theological reflection is to break down walls rather than build them around the cross.

While we struggle ‘to get it right’ in our heads, Christ ‘gets it right’ for our existence. We have discovered that the experience of suffering strips away much crap; and, if there is not a crucifix in the centre of one’s cognitive world, it all becomes a very bleak experience.

I am reminded of that simple Nursery Rhyme: Humpty is shattered. I think the wall is also shattered. Indeed, it must shatter so that the cross does not remain hidden and become displaced by theodicy and rationalizations about God. There is nothing more destructive to the essence of Lutheran theology than confusing theodicy with gospel. Or, to put it another way, attempting to reconcile deus absconditus with deus revelatus. I don’t believe the concept deus revelatus was meant to sanitize the concept deus absconditus.

Such will also be the case when we face thanatos [death] –

indeed there is more ahead. It is good to know the Shepherd walks ahead with us into death when we ourselves will become childlike again. We have a deep sense of peace about our son Jeremy, all the while living with the loss. We don't understand what the frequently used term 'closure' means.

Teaching 16 and 17 year olds the subject Study of Religion has given me insights into how many 'limpet-mines' have been attached to 'gospel' so much so that 'gospel' itself is hidden behind the wall of theology. I call it "limpet-mine-theology" because it usually blows-up in the face of the harsh realities in life, and gives no assurance in the face of the inscrutable and unanswerable perplexities of ordinary existence. What then is gospel? What is faith?

A Year 12 (17 year old) student once asked me if I believed 'in the Bible'.

I answered: "No."

When asked "Why not?"

I replied that the Bible was not crucified for me, nor did the Bible die on the cross for me, nor did God raise the Bible from death for me. We had time to explore further this issue. I explained that the sacred text of Christianity was a pointer to the person who was the central figure in this Christian narrative. The class was: The Art of Hermeneutics. (It is extraordinary how interested young adults are in hermeneutics.)

This led to an interesting discussion on the role and importance of sacred texts across world religions and, in particular Christianity. In this class we compared Salvador Dali's The Christ of St John of the Cross (1951) with Gruenewald's Isenheim Altarpiece (c.1515). Students observed that Dali's Christ is anonymous, faceless, hair neatly positioned, no crown of thorns, untouched by the impact of crucifixion, bloodless, without

inscription, and detached from the created world. In contrast Gruenewald's Christ is thoroughly human, unmistakably twisted and distorted by the crucifixion.

Such questions about sacred texts and about gospel have made me more aware of how much young adults have been given the impression that the essence of Christianity for them is what I would now call the 'additives' rather than the centre.

So, over the years on many occasions you, together with the various contributors to ThTh, have reconfigured my cerebral-cortex bringing the cross back into focus. I have not always responded to every ThTh; but, I certainly have read them all.

The other significant 'discovery' for Jan and for me has been the importance of liturgy and ritual. When ritual is informed by gospel, it simply 'says it', and in 'saying it', 'does it' for us. This was particularly so during Jeremy's funeral. The great mystery of the pro nobis was therein preserved – not explained – but preserved and given gratis via ritual.

Grace was given gratis to both the community of the faithful and the unfaithful, that is, to those people who were listening, or watching, and to Jeremy lying 'still' in death, inside a coffin. I suppose some might think I am guilty of 'gospel-reductionism.' If so, to those I would say: Take care. To be visited by deus absconditus is a brutalising experience, so brutalising that the relentless and irrational assaults of deus absconditus can even destroy deus revelatus.

We are survivors, Ed, enduring loss, but not losing our love for life and all we have been given.

Kind regards to you and yours, and keep well in the next phase. Thank you for all you, and your contributors to ThTh, have done for us from afar.

We look forward to see you both 'face to face' on that Day when He who lived and died for us finally polishes the mirror and fixes the bloody plumbing!!!!!! ☐

Neal and Jan

PS How lovely it would be to meet you both, as well as the numerous contributors, or attend a Crossings Conference. We face the tyranny of distance! Hopefully there will be a section reserved in that great heavenly cyberspace for those fringe-dwelling thinkers and theologians who dare to reflect along the boundaries where life and theology collide.