

“Living Well. The Balanced Life.” – The Christmas-issue theme of THE LUTHERAN, the magazine of the ELCA

Colleagues,

Fortnight ago I put a PS at the end of ThTh 494 asking for input. Nobody responded. So maybe it's a dumb idea. But I'll try once more—this time right up front, a pre-script. If the deafening silence continues, I'll stop.

Postscript for the immediate future: God willing, on January 10, 2008—four weeks hence [now it's four]—Thursday Theology number 500 will be posted. I want to celebrate that “D-date” [D = 500 in Roman numerals] by taking the day off, and letting you, you all, produce the text. So I'm asking the willing among you to compose a sentence, a few lines, a paragraph (not too big) which, when scissored and pasted, will constitute the text for ThTh #500. For all contributions that come in, Mike Hoy and Steve Kuhl, (past and present presidents of Crossings Inc.) will constitute the scissors-and-paste committee. If Mike and Steve get surfeited with so much good stuff from y'all, perhaps I can take the following Thursday—or even several?—as days off as well. Not fishing for kudos—nor brickbats either! Something like a Crossings Karaoke, an “open mike” where the readership can sing to the readership and we provide the cyberspace mike, the stage—and, if necessary, Steve and Mike as umpires. Identify your prose as “4TT500.” Post to <mehs55-AT-cs.com> by New Years Day.

Here is the text for ThTh #496, a letter to Daniel Lehmann, Editor of THE LUTHERAN, the magazine of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.

[To see THE LUTHERAN (December 2007) online, GO to <<http://www.thelutheran.org/article/issue.cfm?issue=146>> Click on “Cover story” and “Columnists” for texts discussed below. Unfortunately, “faith alone” is insufficient for getting the full text online of all but one of these referenced articles. “Works”—and wherewithal(!)—required.] OK, Dan, you asked us to do this.

“Let us know what we’ve done right, what needs improving” is your invitation on the editor’s page in the December 2007 issue of THE LUTHERAN [p. 4]. And for cantankerous types like me you offer this advice: “If one author [among our theological pieces] disappoints you, rest assured one from the other end of the spectrum will appear in a future issue.”

1. “Right” is Bishop Hanson’s message on the last page which contradicts the three feature articles at the center of this issue. Yes, contradicts. Not just “one from the other end of the spectrum.” See evidence below.
2. “Right” is also the central item [Exercise 2] of Blezard’s study guide, p. 18.
3. What makes these two right is that they “need Christ” in order to make their pitch. That is the fundamental Martin-Lutheran dipstick for all Christian theology and practice. “Necessitate Christ” is the way Bob Bertram used to render that axiom into English. Any proposal that claims to be Christian and doesn’t “necessitate Christ” is NOT just at “the other end of the spectrum.” It’s working with a completely different prism, offering an “other” rainbow. In short, an “other” gospel. In such cases St. Paul does

not suggest we “rest assured [that] one from the other end of the spectrum will appear in a future issue,” as you counsel us.

4. If folks can't divine that an “other” gospel is not the “real” one, how will they even know what “the other end of the spectrum” is? Your counsel to “rest assured” is not assuring, nor rest-inducing. Paul knocks himself out in that Galatian epistle to counter other gospels. No “resting assured.” For the stakes are high when other gospels circulate. It's not variations on a theme or colors on a spectrum. It's the whole ball of wax. When other gospels flourish, he claims, “then Christ died for nothing.” [Gal. 2:21]
5. Editorial policy proposal. Could you not vet the theological articles you publish by this “simple” dipstick? “Necessitate Christ or not necessitate Christ.” And in your “sorry, we can't use your article” return-letter you tell the disappointed author: “We have that word LUTHERAN in our magazine title. ‘Fact is, that's the ONLY word we have. And we even have the chutzpah to use the definite article. We claim to be ‘THE Lutheran.’ For us that means “necessitate Christ,” the cardinal dipstick of the Lutheran Reformation. Our editorial team reads all theological submissions through those lenses. We are fallible, so we may be wrong. But we couldn't find it in your prose. There are other journals that use other criteria for vetting what they publish. So you do have other options. Peace and joy! Dan.” Back to the three feature articles.
6. Parker Palmer's opening piece, “Living Well,” fails the test. Not only does Christ not even get mentioned—and thus surely not necessitated—but even God doesn't make the cut in PP's prose. And what is PP's actual “gospel” for the “wholeness of living well?” After paragraphs of confessing

the sins of his “divided life,” he tells us: “All we need to do is to bring down the wall that separates us from our own souls and deprives the world of the soul’s regenerative powers.” And why trust the “soul” for salvation? Answer: the standard (American? Emersonian?) gospel: “The soul is generative...wise...hopeful...creative.” Thank you Jesus, you’re not needed here. Dan, how can such an other gospel not get caught when your team checks it out at the office? And for the Christmas issue!

OK, so it’s Parker Palmer. Marvelous writer that he is, he’s not operating on any patent Lutheran spectrum. But PP surely doesn’t need the ELCA to hustle his “other” spectrum of the soul. He’s already got a humongous following. In today’s Mars Hill melange of messianic messages, were Blessed Paul on the scene, he’d surely say: “My gospel is a different one from all those others being hustled here in the marketplace. Mine’s about a crucified and risen Messiah, a.k.a. a baby in a manger. I know it sounds wild, but let me tell you about it, anyhow. Especially if you’re intent on that classical Greek virtue of ‘sophrosyne,’ which someday will be rendered in English as ‘wholeness.’ That’s exactly what this Messiah’s offer is. And when you tune in here, you’ll see that the other offers don’t even come close. Including the one that urges you to harvest the powers of your own soul.”

7. In the second theme article Diane Jacobson does indeed have Christ (6x)—and God too—present throughout her essay. So she’s on a different spectrum from Parker Palmer. That’s clear. But “necessitate” Christ? Nope. Granted, she’s a professor of the Old Testament. And her “God’s shalom = wholeness” message is solidly OT grounded. She even hypes God’s “promises,” a term that’s necessary when you are necessitating Christ. But she never gets beyond

the OT in spelling out the substance of her promise-message. She never tells us how/why Christ is “necessary” for all those shalom promises to be trustworthy. Moses, Hannah, prophets, psalmists all get their due. But she gives no signals as to “how” those shalom promises are fulfilled—so Christians claim, don’t we?—other than to assert it (sortuv) in her second-last sentence: “God’s peace is ours decisively through the cross of Christ.” If it is indeed decisive, Diane, then SHOW US how that is true, how the cross of Christ completes, fills-full all these OT shalom texts you commend to us. A throw-away line at the end, axial as it indeed is, doesn’t do it. Surely not for a Christmas issue.

8. John Kirkpatrick’s counsel in the third theme article is good “left-hand kingdom of God” stuff. The fact that he doesn’t need to mention Christ at all to ground his case is understandable. God has other agents and agencies in place to administer God’s law of preservation. Christ is not necessary here. That’s very Lutheran. Kirkpatrick’s counsel highlights God’s left-hand regime of “caring” for creation, and us as primal agents for just that divine task. But that’s not God’s redemption agenda—where “balance” and “imbalance” are matters of everlasting life and death. To address that “balanced life” topic, you need to “necessitate” something else. Someone else. Suppose you had asked Kirkpatrick: “Give attention to the Babe in the manger, if you can, as you tell us about ‘Living a Balanced Life.’” What might he have come up with? All the more useful that would be—and edifying—because he is not (I’m guessing) a salaried theologian, but an MD and “chief medical director for THRIVENT,” thus a layman with a high calling in an outfit that impacts thousands of your readers. How about a sequel from him doing just that?
9. Blezard does it “right.” Finally! His Study Guide pushes

us to work through John 10 –Jesus the Good Shepherd—to get the specs on “the abundant life we have in Christ. How Jesus gives us wholeness again.” And I like the “again.” The three major articles don’t get us to THAT wholeness. They leave us still frazzled. We do indeed need it “again” after listening to them. Hal lelujah for Blezard.

10. But super Hallelujah for the Bishop on the last page. He fesses up in the very first sentence that he is NOT going to follow the path proposed by the theme articles: “I have grown weary of trying to lead a balanced life.” Why? “Striving to achieve and maintain balance functions like God’s law. It reveals both God’s desired intent and my failure.” Though he gives a nod to Jacobsen and Kirkpatrick, he eschews PP completely. And for good reason. He’s writing an Op Ed piece “contra” PP. And even his mini-kudos for Jacobsen and Kirkpatrick fade away when he articulates his own proposal for “centered rather than balanced” life. And the center is You know Who. Hanson then proceeds to spell it out—no shibboleths, no throw-away lines: “The challenge to lead a balanced life . . . is law without gospel. It is God’s command without God’s promise. It denies or disregards that wholeness is God’s gift to us in Christ Jesus and is therefore devoid of both the cross and the resurrection.”

Didn’t anyone on your editorial team notice that our leader was saying “away with them” to those Christ-less three feature essays?

Is this what you meant in your own p. 4 opening Christmas letter as you said: “We’re giving the presiding bishop a more prominent position”? Prominent, not in giving him more space, but prominent in having him be our “teaching bishop?” Necessitating Christ when others don’t? GO for it. Do indeed give him such increased prominence. People

have pestered you (I've done so too) about the mish-mash of less-than-Lutheran theology that surfaces in our magazine. Also about the "official" theology coming from the church headquarters in this or that declaration. But if the ELCA's "official" theology is that of our chief "official" as proclaimed in his "page at the end," then that just might be Christmas present enough for all us readers in this December's issue.

Peace and Joy!

Ed Schroeder