

#744 A reading of St. Mark, Crossings-style (Part 3)

Colleagues,

As you'll remember from [ThTheol #742](#) and [#743](#), we're in the midst of the Rev. Dr. Jerome Burce's multipart presentation on the Gospel of Mark, which he first delivered in three one-hour sessions on the day before the official start the Fourth International Crossings Conference in Belleville, Illinois, in January of this year.

Today's installment brings you the first half of the second hour of Jerry's presentation. Having walked us through the "overture" and the various symphonic "movements" and "interludes" of Mark's Gospel (Movement One: **Around the Sea**. Movement Two: **On the Road**. Movement Three: **At the Temple**. First Interlude: **Mt. of Olives**. Movement Four: **To Golgotha and Beyond**. Second Interlude: **Belleville, IL**, or Wherever), he now takes us through the Gospel a second time, this time with special attention to several key episodes including what he calls the "spit miracles."

By the way, we've made a slight change to our plan (from my introduction to [#743](#)) for publishing the rest of Jerry's presentation. We're splitting his second hour into two pieces, rather than one. And to give you a bit of a break from Mark, we'll put a temporary pause on Jerry's presentation next week and instead bring you a piece that we recently received from Ed Schroeder.

Till then, happy reading of Jerry's intriguing ruminations on the structure and thematic content of Mark.

Peace and Joy,
Carol Braun, for the editorial team

1. In this second hour we're going to do a second pass over the body of Mark's Gospel. You're about to find out why. The approach this time will be to dig into specific episodes in each of the first three major movements, and then to poke around a little more in movement four. In the third hour we'll use an episode of the final movement as a springboard into our central question. Once again, how is Mark "gospel"? How is God using this grim tale to deliver good news to us today?
2. To get us started, we'll focus on two key episodes in the Galilean Movement. First, 7:31-37—

Then he returned from the region of Tyre, and went by way of Sidon towards the Sea of Galilee, in the region of the Decapolis. 32They brought to him a deaf man who had an impediment in his speech; and they begged him to lay his hand on him. 33He took him aside in private, away from the crowd, and put his fingers into his ears, and he spat and touched his tongue. 34Then looking up to heaven, he sighed and said to him, 'Ephphatha', that is, 'Be opened.' 35And immediately his ears were opened, his tongue was released, and he spoke plainly. 36Then Jesus ordered them to tell no one; but the more he ordered them, the more zealously they proclaimed it. 37They were astounded beyond measure, saying, 'He has done everything well; he even makes the deaf to hear and the mute to speak.'

Next, 8:22-26—

22They came to Bethsaida. Some people brought a blind man

to him and begged him to touch him. 23He took the blind man by the hand and led him out of the village; and when he had put saliva on his eyes and laid his hands on him, he asked him, 'Can you see anything?' 24And the man looked up and said, 'I can see people, but they look like trees, walking.' 25Then Jesus laid his hands on his eyes again; and he looked intently and his sight was restored, and he saw everything clearly. 26Then he sent him away to his home, saying, 'Do not even go into the village.'

3. Thus our texts. First observation. In any kind of reading context is an essential key to understanding. That's especially so in Mark, who seems at first blush to string episodes together more or less at random. In fact he doesn't. Instead he arranges carefully as a person might who puts beads on a string in such a way that patterns emerge, and from the patterns come meaning.
4. So, back we go to the start of this movement, 3:7. It will help it will help if you open up Mark and follow along. Again, 3:7: J. withdraws to the sea, disciples following, crowds crushing in, fireworks shooting off as he exorcises and heals. Don't forget the key detail: the crowds are from all around the sea, a mix of Jew and Gentile. They all get Jesus' goodies, and on the same basis. This is of the essence to the unfolding story.
5. 3:13. Jesus goes up a mountain and calls to him "those whom he wanted." (Cf. John, "you did not choose me, I chose you.") He appoints the Twelve, a) to be with him, b) to be sent out to preach, c) to have what it takes to cast out demons. This again is of the story's essence. What will follow is Disciple Seminary, Apostolic Training School, the tag-along version. Watch. Listen. Learn. The key instructional topics: i) Who is Jesus? ii) What can he do, and whom will he do it for? iii) How to run with it.

How to push the project along with the confidence that you can do it too, just like he says, or-just as important-with the guts to do it as he did. A hint at the outset: the disciples are slow, slow learners. As if that should surprise any of us who are disciples today. Like they say, look up slow learning in dictionary, and there you'll see Burce's picture.

6. 3:20-35, first lesson for the new pupils: J. isn't possessed. He isn't in league with the devil. He isn't out of his mind, v. 21, where the verb is *exestee*, another of the words in the amazed/astonished group. Conclusion of the lesson: we who do what God wants are Jesus' family. And what does God want? What is to *theleema tou theou*? Answer: sticking with God's Jesus and following him. Disciples today are still struggling to learn that, aren't we.
7. 4:1-34. The second big school day, featuring parables of the kingdom, crowds pressing in to listen, disciples being taken aside for private instruction. With it comes an explanation that has to be underscored, 4:10-13-

10When he was alone, those who were around him along with the twelve asked him about the parables. 11And he said to them, 'To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God, but for those outside, everything comes in parables; 12in order that "they may indeed look, but not perceive, and may indeed listen, but not understand; so that they may not turn again and be forgiven." ' 13And he said to them, 'Do you not understand this parable? Then how will you understand all the parables?

This too is of the essence: there's a seeing that doesn't perceive, a hearing that fails to understand. There is a "not getting it," in other words. Not getting who Jesus is, and what he's here to do, and who he's doing it for.

At the end of 4, v. 34, J. is determined that disciples should get it. "He explained everything in private to them." 4:35: Sorry, right away, on that very day, that very evening, they flunk the first test. There's that storm at sea, 37, where the sea, like the desert, is a testing zone, "Teacher, do you not care if we perish?"—that's "perish" in the present middle tense, signifying that other forces are involved in the action of the verb, We're perishing because greater powers are doing us in, and "doesn't that matter to you, J.?" My, what a thing to ask! "Shut up," says J. bellowing at the wind and the waves, and instantly, of course, the great calm, v. 39, but—get this—though Jesus' speaking works beyond the boat it doesn't work inside the boat. To the disciples he says, v. 40, "Why so afraid," and "C'mon guys, no faith?" But still the disciples don't calm down. There is bad English translating at this point, v. 41, "they were filled with great awe," NRSV. That's wrong! The Gk: Ephobeetheesan phobon megan, they feared a mega-fear, the same as Luke's shepherds did when the lights went on in the field. "Who is this?" they say. Daryl Schmidt in a technical scholarly translation picks up on the imperfect tense of the verb at this point. He thinks it's deliberate, and not an example of Mark's infelicitous Greek. "Who is this?" they would say"— so Schmidt renders it, the implication being that this particular response by disciples isn't a one-time thing but a regular, ongoing response, the key point being that dealing with a hurricane is a snap compared to dealing with a faithless human heart, even for the Lord of heaven and earth who Jesus has just shown himself to be.W

8. 5:1. They're in the country of the Gerasenes, Gentile turf, Decapolis territory. Get out a map and refresh your

memory. From here on J. darts back and forth, up and down, now with Jews, now with Gentiles, always the disciples tagging along, supposedly to learn something. Here they see J. expel a legion of demons. For me the great question in this story is why the locals don't lynch him over their loss of the 2,000 pigs. Do the disciples notice that the cleansing, saving, freeing work that Jesus does will inevitably result in a large loss to somebody? Do we notice that? When we see others getting annoyed or (these days) dismissive of Christians, do we understand what's going on? Cf. Paul in Philippi, Acts 16:16-24.

9. 5:21. They're back on Jewish turf, again with the crowd flocking at seaside. There are two healings now, Jairus' daughter, and en route to that, the bleeding woman. To the latter J. says, "Daughter"—remember the end of ch. 3, who is J. family—"daughter, your faith has saved you, seswken se." Translators insist on rendering this as "your faith has made you well." I wish they'd quit that. It obscures things that English-speaking disciples today are meant to notice.
10. 6:1. The futile trip to "his own country," where it's Jesus' turn to be amazed, ethaumadzen, at the Nazarenes' unbelief. His turn, in other words, to say, "I can't believe it!" He'll have to believe it, of course. All the other actors in the story will leave him no choice.
11. 6:7-30. This is the disciples' missionary expedition sandwiched around the story of the Baptist's death. Notice how this works, because it's a rhetorical device Mark uses more than once. (This is at least the third time it has already occurred, with prior instances in chapters 3 and 5. In 6:7-13 the disciples are instructed and dispatched, and if you jump directly from 13 to 30 you'll notice how the narrative continues seamlessly. 13 and 20 have been pried apart, in other words, and the Baptist narrative

shoved in—yes—the resulting gap. It makes a point. Apostleship is hazardous to your health. Servants of the kingdom are bound to get snuffed when they run around making like the Baptist, proclaiming, v. 12, that people should repent into forgiveness as God's new way of managing sinners and saving them. Many won't want to. Like Herodias they'll get really annoyed when you shake dust from your feet, i.e. when you signal or say that in failing to repent they're stuck with a system and a God behind the system who's bound to make them dead. Our own contemporaries don't want to hear that. They stop their ears. They shriek. They get bitter and mean. Recall the late Christopher Hitchens, or Bill Maher, perhaps. As we'll hear in the Road Movement, if you're going to follow J. you've got no choice but to take up your cross. Somehow, in some way, you'll get nailed too by the hotshots who hate what J. is doing.

12. Deep breath time. At this point refer to the sheet with the double caption "Spit Miracle" [[available online](#)]. Now a pattern is unfolding. 6:30-44. 5,000 are fed in a wilderness area, eremos topos, on Jewish turf. There are loads of lessons for disciples to absorb if their ears and eyes are open. As the action unfolds all sorts of interpretive info is flowing up unspoken through the gaps, all of it basic stuff that even fishermen and tax collectors should know about, let alone seminary graduates. Haven't we heard of manna in the wilderness? And when J. has them sit down in groups on green grass, v. 39, who doesn't hear echoes of Psalm 23, esp. when we've already heard the mob described as "sheep without a shepherd," 34, and who is the Messiah if not the Ultimate Son of the original shepherd king? Etc.
13. Do the disciples get it? Fat chance. Again, 45, they're at sea, the winds hostile and against them, and J. who had

sent them ahead so he could be alone (who can blame him) comes walking. There's this strange bit, 48, of him wanting to pass them by, again, no wonder, they're an exhausting bunch; though notice here how that detail will always get folks in Sunday Bible classes to be amazed-thaumazein. Startled. Disbelieving. Not my Jesus, they say, as if they own him. In the boat the disciples freak out, 50. Jesus joins them, "take heart," tharseite, it is I, ego eimi, as in "your God is with you" "don't be afraid," the wind dies. Reaction? Again, not calm, not fearlessness, but lian ek perissou en heautois existanto, they really, really, really jump out of their skins. How come? Because 52, they didn't learn the lesson of the loaves, they plain don't get it, their hearts are hardened, petrified, though here the verb can also mean callused, as in eyes covered with cataracts. Keep that in mind.

14. 53-55. More thronging crowds, more healing, people touching J.'s garment as the bleeding woman did (chap. 5) emphasis here on touch. And as many as touched it were saved, esozonto. This is usually translated "were healed," but there's more to it than that. "Saved" is the better rendering.
15. 7:1-23, J. argues with Pharisees about cleanliness and what that involves. Paul Jaster has good stuff about that ([ThTheol #710](#)).
16. 24-30 J. heads for Tyre and Sidon, old Jezebel's turf. Along comes a dirty Greek woman to get help for her daughter. There's patter about bread. The dirty Gk. gets what she asks for, her child lying in bed, the demon gone. Pharisees, stuck as they are on old conceptions of cleanliness, don't cash in like this. Neither do Americans for whom hygiene and exercise is the new religion through which lives will be saved for a few years longer. Back to

the disciples. Did they listen to the patter between J. and the woman? Were they paying attention? We know they weren't.

17. 31-37. At last. We've gotten there. Back to where we started, key text #1. It unfolds in the Decapolis. Again, this is dirty Greek turf. People bring J. a fellow who is deaf and dumb. They ask him to touch him. J. takes him aside, privately. Notice, that's the very thing he's been doing all along with his disciples. And now, yes, he touches. That and more. First his fingers in the man's ears, then he spits, and touches his tongue. And after that a big, big sigh. Ephphatha. The guy hears, he speaks, the crowd goes nuts. They blab. More on this in a moment.
18. First, in chap. 8 the pattern repeats, with crucial variations. 1-9, J. is still on Greek turf. Another crowd is fed. The scenario is the same as at the first feeding, key details repeated, including a note, not to be missed, about compassion as the motive that's driving J. His heart, at least, is not hard. As for the disciples, they're still obtuse. You'd think they'd know the drill, but they don't. They raise the same dumb questions and objections. "How can anyone feed people with bread in the wilderness?" v. 4. What's with these guys? As for the rest of the parallels, do your own comparison. It's very important.
19. 8:10, again a boat ride. 11, again an argument with Pharisees who want a sign from heaven—where have these guys been? Clipping along, yet another boat ride, v. 13, and now more back and forth about bread, not with a suppliant (the Syrophoenician woman) but with the disciples who (unlike the woman) don't and will not get it. "Watch out for Pharisee's yeast, for Herod's leaven," J. says, v. 15, and all they can think of is the one loaf of bread that's with them in the boat, and how will they

all eat supper? Whereupon Jesus loses it, v. 17: “Why are you talking about having no bread? Do you still not perceive or understand? Are your hearts hardened (covered with calluses)? 18Do you have eyes, and fail to see? Do you have ears, and fail to hear? And do you not remember? Do you not yet understand?” Loose translation: You bozos!

20. 8:22-26. Here is our second key text. Now they’re on Jewish turf. People bring J. a blind man this time. Again they ask him to touch him. Again he takes the fellow aside as he has all along with disciples. Again spitting, again touching. Again an odd peculiar twist, very unexpected, not a sigh this time, but a misfire so to speak. J. takes a first pass with his hands and asks, “Can you see anything?—as if he himself wonders if that’s in question. Turns out it is—and again, we who operate with our defined set of assumptions about who J is and how he ought to function will be amazed. The guy sees indistinctly, as with cataracts still on. So J. does a second pass with the hands. Now the guy strains to see—he puts some effort into it—and only now is his sight restored, and he sees clearly. “Go to your house,” says J. My house is your house—he doesn’t say that, but if we hear this being whispered somewhere in the background, it’s a pretty good sign that Jesus has been hard at work on our ears and eyes as well.

21. I want to argue that these two miracle episodes, unique to Mark, are at the core his message and of the essence to the good news he means to pass along. So some quick observations just about these episodes—

22. First, that they belong together, to be read as a matched set, ought to be obvious. I won’t belabor that.

23. Nor will I belabor how hearing yet not hearing, seeing yet not seeing, is Mark’s core concern throughout this Galilean movement, above all where the disciples are

concerned. That concern will continue to preoccupy him in the coming movements too. Well, of course it will, and must. How will his word and work bear fruit, how will folks get saved, how will the forgiveness system get touted as God's preferred option for managing the sin problem if these doltish disciples don't get it?

24. Speaking of dolts, aren't I one of them? I need to remember that as I deal with dolts, hearing but not hearing, seeing but not seeing. Take for instance the folks sitting in Sunday pews. I couldn't make it plainer than I do, but still some will insist on despising the weekly invitation to take and eat, to take and drink—it simply can't be the thing it's said to be, can it? Or I think of the woman lying on her deathbed last month. She's been listening to Lutheran preachers her whole life long—she's been listening to me for the last seventeen years—and still she frets about whether she's been good enough to merit a passage through the pearly gates. So there she lies, riddled not only with cancer but with the leaven of the Pharisees. You talk to her about the way of forgiveness, you rehearse the stories, you recite the promises: still, you can tell as you talk that the words are wasted on ears that are deaf to them. Later, when done, you get in the car and you want to scream. One imagines Jesus' comment: "Welcome, dear disciple, to the misery of your Lord."
25. If anything astounds me in this current tour of Mark, it's the sheer difficulty Jesus has in getting disciples to get it. That's the first thing these two miracles underscore. Signs, John would call them. You and I might refer to them as enacted parables, teaching devices, where you and I are the dim-witted students. It isn't easy to get the deaf to hear and the blind to see. Demons scatter with a simple word. A simple touch heals the withered hand or stops the

flowing blood or raises the dead. Yet faced with deafness and blindness as in a lack of faith, a failure to get it, even Jesus has to roll up his sleeves. For this he doesn't touch, he massages. He uses spit. He groans to high heaven with the sheer effort of doing what he's trying to pull off. He blows the first try and has to make a second pass before the eyes are seeing clearly. Shame on us, then, for thinking that pennies ought to drop and people sing with joy simply because they sat through that brilliant class I taught last quarter, or the sermon series I just finished preaching. Getting people to get it—that's hard, hard work, even for God. This is Point #1 of the Spit Miracles and the wider context they're wrapped in.

26. Point #2, and this is even more amazing, though of course it shouldn't be: notice the dogged determination with which Jesus sticks at it. He won't give up. He'll repeat himself again and again. He'll rerun the miracles. He'll cross the sea for as many times as it takes for the dolts to understand that Jew and Gentile are alike to him in this forgiveness regime that he's here to install and underwrite as God's final word to all humanity. I assume, of course, that the Jew/Gentile thing is the immediate *Sitz im Leben*, so to speak, the issue of issues that Mark has his eye on as he lays the story out. Yes, surely other issues are swirling in the air. Again, Paul Jaster does a splendid job of sketching some strong and likely possibilities: the collapse of the temple, the problem of Rome, the sundering of relations between church and synagogue which is very much in the offing. But if Mark writes for the church, as a tool in Christ's own project to unstop ears and open eyes, then the Jew/Gentile issue which so predominates elsewhere in the NT is surely at the forefront of his thinking here. Hence the dance of this particular movement. Just now we've gotten Paul's letter

to the Galatians in story form. It gets repeated also here because so few in that first-century church seem quite to get it. It gets repeated because the Lord of the Church is driving the repetition, again and again, over and over, until ears are open, yes, and tongues loosed, and eyes begin to see. Meanwhile the Holy Spirit is busy groaning with sighs too deep for words, the prayer being that the proclaimers he needs to push the project forward will finally get their wits together and tell it like it is. The Spirit too will not give up.

27. Two last quick notes, and then we push on, as we must. Maybe this is fanciful, but I can't help but connect the double-pass in the second of these miracles with the two-times crowing of the cock in the Golgotha movement. The rooster declares that for all the work Jesus has put into him, this sad-sack disciple is still blind as a bat. He can't see a thing, not even moving trees, which is to say, he hasn't the faintest clue as to who Jesus or what he's up too. It will take a resurrection for the ophthalmologist to try again.
28. Second note, about the spit. He who heals with spit will be mocked with spit. Those who do the spitting will be both Jews, deaf to what they're hearing, 14:65, and Gentiles, blind to what they're seeing, 15:19. And in the hugest of ironies—Mk. drips with irony, by the way—the spitting of the deaf and blind will be the proximate cause of the healing of the nations. You might want to mull on that for your next Good Friday sermon.

The Divorce of Sex and Marriage: Sain Sex, a new book by Robert Bertram, is now available for a \$10 donation to Crossings. Please include \$3 for shipping and handling, and send your request to clessmannATcharterDOTnet.

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Lutheranism's Crying Need: A Mission Theology for the 21st Century

Luther's Own Mission Theology—Contemporary Lutheranism's Best-Kept Secret

Edward H. Schroeder

A contribution to the LWF conference at Augsburg, Germany, March 26-31, 2009 From Edward H. Schroeder, St. Louis, Missouri, USA

ABSTRACT

Since Warneck (1892), Luther's own theology has been ignored as a resource for the church's mission. Yet, growing Lutheran churches like the Ethiopian EECMY point to the "evangelisch" Gospel foundation for their growth, reminding that the true Gospel is proclaimed over-and-against "other" competing gospels in Luther's understanding. As much as Luther critiqued mono-covenantal theologies in his day, we need to reword for our time the "missio Dei" as a double mission of God, distinguishing Moses and Christ (John) and/or "law and promise" (Paul) to interpret God's two-handed mission operation to the world. To articulate this theology, Luther's rich word pictures of (1) "missio" as "promissio"; (2) promise pebble-dropping; (3) the Gospel as a "Platzregen" ("Thunderstorm"); (4) the Gospel's "Froelicher Wechsel"

("Joyous Exchange"); and, (5) the notion of the "Deus Absconditus" ("Hidden God") can provide vast resources for the church's mission understanding today. (Stephen C. Krueger)

Ever since Gustav Warneck decreed that Luther had no mission theology (1892), Luther has been generally ignored, considered irrelevant, in ecumenical mission discussions. Also, sadly, among Lutheran missiologists. Too bad. Big mistake. Simply stated: Luther saw 16th century Europe—though perhaps already 99% "churched" (as we say today) – as a mission field.

The conference theme is THEOLOGY IN THE LIFE OF LUTHERAN CHURCHES: TRANSFORMATIVE PERSPECTIVES AND PRACTICES TODAY.

My thesis is: If there is to be any future for LUTHERAN CHURCHES on into the 21st century, the primal place where TRANSFORMATIVE PERSPECTIVES AND PRACTICES are called for is in Lutheran Mission Theology and Practice.

In the "theology and life of Lutheran churches," neither in Europe nor in my North American homeland are there many signs that this is happening. Mission programs, evangelism programs, renewal proposals abound, but as an ELCA missiologist—one who DOES know what Lutheran mission theology really is—recently said of the mission program in his own denomination: "it is a program without a Lutheran theology, possibly without a theology at all."

The most obvious place where "transformative perspectives and practices" within Lutheranism are occurring, as LWF publications inform us, is in the Horn of Africa, in the EECMY—Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus. Here is an LWF member church without even the word Lutheran in its name, but instead the "old" word for Lutheran, "evangelical." Which signals what

mission is all about–The Evangel, the Good News. More about this below.

Listen first to this EECMY report of February 26, 2009. Talk about “transformative perspectives and practices!”

Dear Friends in Christ,

We are filled with joy as the Lord has continued His mighty work of salvation amongst us during the last few months where thousands of people came to the knowledge of Christ in the course of the 50th Jubilee celebration of the establishment of the EECMY as a national church and its 10th birth anniversary. The one month evangelism campaign which was the main part of the celebration has caused the sharing of the Gospel to about 370,000 new people and the salvation of about 185, 000 people nationwide. While most members of the church have participated in sharing the Good News with those who did not heard it yet, students are the ones who played the greatest role. Since the outreach effort has continued in some synods exact figure will be known as soon as information reaches us. For me, this was the crown event as it holds the real meaning of 50th Jubilee in line with the idea of freedom of slaves in the Old Testament. The other part of the celebration was where missionaries of past and present were recognized in a celebration held at the national convention center. The jubilee celebration was finally concluded with a grand dinner where senior government officials were invited including the president of Ethiopia, Girma W/Giorgis. On this occasion the Word of God is read and songs were sung which might be the first opportunity for most of the senior government officials including the president to hear the Gospel in such a way. The evening also marked the recognition of some celebrities in the church’s life and

ministry where medals, titles and prizes were awarded.

Yours in His service,
Dinku Lamessa Bato
National Coordinator
EECMY University Student Ministry

[EECMY membership makes it the 2nd largest church in world Lutheranism—over five million members in last year's listing by the LWF from 20,000 of fifty years ago. Second only to the 6 million reported by the Lutheran church of Sweden.]

Lutheran = "evangelisch." It's all about the Gospel. So said the Augsburg Confessors—here in this very city 479 yrs ago. It's all about the Gospel, and the Gospel's own movement into and around the world. But for Lutheran theology, that always raises the question: Which Gospel? For already in the N.T. "other" gospels arose to supplant the genuine one. Many of the NT "books" are reports about differing gospels in conflict in the very first generation of Christ-confessors, the first Christian congregations that ever existed. Has it been any different throughout church history? Is it any different now? Gerhard Ebeling's memorable word about church history is applicable here: "Church history is the history of conflict in Biblical interpretation." And at the center of that variety of Biblical interpretation are varying answers to the question: Just what is THE Gospel?

If "Lutherisch" = "evangelisch," a particular notion of Gospel, how does that link to Mission?

Martin Luther's thesis about missions—if he had had one—would be this: "A mission field is anywhere that 'other gospels' are being proclaimed and trusted." Christian mission is offering—N.B. this verb—the genuine Gospel to replace the "other" ones.

Therefore, Luther's mission field was the church and world of the Holy Roman Empire of his day. Is our day any different? Where are "other gospels" to be found in our day? As much inside our churches as out there in the "secular" world. Not much different from what was confessed here in Augsburg on June 25, 1530.

A spinoff from that gospel-focus is Luther's critique of the mono-covenantal theology in his day, which claimed that everything God is doing in the world is all of one piece, fundamentally grace (according to the ancient scholastic axiom of "God's grace perfecting nature"). We need to reword Luther's proposal for our own time vis-à-vis the *missio-Dei* mantra that has dominated Roman and protestant missiology since the Willingen mission conference in 1952.

Last month I was interviewed on Luther's "mission theology" by Nelson Jennings, the editor of *MISSIOLOGY*, the journal of the American Society of Missiology. Our "conversation" is scheduled to be published in the April 2009 issue of the journal. Here's the give and take.

Jennings said: **Let's follow this train of thought a bit. *Missio Dei* has been a central missiological concept for at least several decades. In your writings about Luther's mission-theology you have advocated speaking of *duplex missio Dei*. Would you mind encapsulating what you mean by this "Double Mission of God" metaphor?**

My response: "Mission" is not a common term in the writings of the Reformers. No surprise: the vocabulary for their theology comes from the Bible, where the word "mission" is not to be found. The term came into Christian vocabulary from European political and military colonialism in the post-Reformation era. But if Martin Luther had used that term – designating what God's

project was in and for God's creation – he would have identified God's two missions in the world. And that duplex mission – God's two different projects in the one creation – he found spelled out in the Gospel of John and the letters of St. Paul, the two heavyweight theologians of the NT.

Jennings: Keep going.

In the Gospel of John it comes already in the Prologue: "The law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ." Both Moses and Jesus were clearly God's agents, God's "missioners," but their missions were different. In Paul's epistles those two very different missions (Moses' and Christ's, "law and promise" in Paul's vocabulary), both coming from one and the same God, surface frequently, especially in Romans and Galatians. In 2 Cor. 3-5 he spells them out – and also details the differences. Here he uses two different words, each of which is his synonym for what we mean today by God's mission. One is "ministry" (*diakoonia*, in Greek). God has two of these, two different diaconates, operating in the world. The other synonym for what we today call mission is "covenant" (*diatheke*, in Greek). God has two covenants, two different covenants, functioning among humankind. Paul's predicates to each of these two missions are well known. One is letter, one Spirit. One brings death, one gives life. One has modest glory, one has glory "beyond all measure." One finally fades away, one lasts forever. When these two missions connect with people, one is Bad News, one Good News. For in one "God counts trespasses," while in the other "God is in Christ reconciling sinners unto himself, NOT counting trespasses."

Jennings: And the connection with today's understanding of mission?

What we today understand as Christ's mission mandate is clearly

the second one. But if we forget, or ignore, the prior one, as God's own mission from which the Christ-mission sets us free, then our gospel is too small. Gospels that are "too small" are finally "other Gospels," and not the Good News intended for all humankind from the crucified and risen Messiah.

Jennings: So in light of your explanation of how the phrase *missio Dei* risks misrepresenting the gospel, should missiologists continue to use the phrase but with explanation, discard it altogether (and use, for example, *duplex missio Dei*), or what?

Labels such as *missio dei* or *duplex missio dei* are not unimportant, but more important, of course, in human language is what metaphors point to. So in order to point to God's two operations in this one world of His – that doubleness pointed out by St. John in his prologue and Paul's frequent references to God's two ministries, two covenants – we could stick with *missio Dei* and add "duplex." Thus we missiologists could work out the implications of God's *duplex missio* in scripture, in mission history and for our 21st century. But that's still Latin, of course, nobody's native language today. So why not come up with something in English, the *lingua franca* (sic!) of today's ecumenical missiology?

To wit?

Well, why not go back to the Bible? Classic for some of us are Luther's own favorite biblical terms for this *duplex missio*, God's left hand work and God's right hand work. Metaphors, of course. Same one and only God, but different works done with the differing hands. God's right-hand mission is centered in the One who now "sits at the right hand of God the Father," Christ the world's redeemer. That's God's salvation work from way back at the beginning of the Old Testament culminating in Christ and

continuing right on up to the *parousia*. God's left-hand mission is all the other works of God that preserve and continue creation, protect it from total destruction, hold us humans accountable as caretakers of that creation, but do not (yet) turn sinners into Christ-trusters.

What about language for non-Lutherans in our American Society of Missiology?

If my suggestions are "too Lutheran," then back to St. John's "Moses and Christ" in his prologue, or St. Paul and his use of the umbrella terms "law" for God's left-hand agenda and "promise"

for God's salvific work of his right hand. In his major epistles – Romans, Corinthians, Galatians – this law/promise duplex is Paul's blueprint for articulating God's duplex mission and message to the whole world. We could even appropriate that line from the American folk-hymn as our missiological mantra: "He's got the whole world in his hands." But then always add: "Yes, both of them!"

End of that conversation.

Luther's journey to becoming a mission theologian was his journey as a reformer. It began with his "Aha!" about the gospel and that began with his "Aha!" about how to read the scriptures in a manner very different from that of his own prior scholastic theological formation. He speaks of it in Tischreden (Table Talk) 5518 as a breakthrough. After describing his "old" way of reading and teaching the Bible, using the ancient "nature and grace" paradigm, he relates his discovery of the "discrimen inter legem et euangelium." "Aber do ich das discrimen fande, quod aliud esset lex, aliud euangelium, da riss ich her durch." "Durchreissen" equals a breakthrough. From this breakthrough

followed not only the new evangelical catholic theology, but also a new evangelical missiology.

Strangely, perhaps, is how his mission theology surfaces in the many sermons he preached on Ascension Day, taking the lectionary gospel for that day (Mark 16) and ringing the changes on Mark's version of the Great Commission.

Several of Luther's "signature" expressions—bons mots that have become standard lingo in Lutheran theology—emerge from these sermons (also in other of his works) to help us articulate his mission theology: First off is the overarching rubric "The secret of Missio is Promissio." In addition these metaphor/word-pictures: Pebble, Platzregen (thundershower), Froehlicher Wechsel (joyful exchange—in American slang "a sweet swap"), and Deus Absconditus (God hidden).

I wish to present these terms to whatever audience I have at Augsburg and discuss with these colleagues the mission-theology resources they offer.

1. The secret of Missio is Promissio.

The Gospel is a promise. This is axiomatic in Lutheran confessional theology. What understanding of mission arises when you begin with this axiom? A fuller treatment of that axiom can be found on the Crossings web site at <<https://crossings.org/archive/bob/DoingTheologyinMission.pdf>>

Relevance today. We witness today the worldwide failure of mega-promises. Promises which people by the millions (billions?) loved and trusted. The promise of communism disintegrated when the Berlin Wall fell in 1989. The promise of capitalism collapsed when Wall Street fell in 2008. The former is now acknowledged by all, the latter by hardly any. We live in the illusion (so Parker Palmer), the deceit (so Walt Brueggemann)

that green paper—with “images” printed on it— can save us. Before long capitalism’s empty promise will be evident to all. Needed—also within the churches where Christians too are despairing (without hope) vis-a-vis capitalism’s Humpty-dumpty fall (even while they, and world leaders too, still hope in it)—is a trustworthy promise. Trustworthy promise? Thought you’d never ask!

2. The Gospel as God’s promise-pebble dropping into a pool.

Luther compared God’s promise in Christ to a pebble, a promise-pebble, dropped into the pond of our world. Like all pebbles, it produces a ripple effect that moves out on its own from the very power of the gospel-pebble itself. Luther articulates his notion of mission expansion from this image. It is the energy within the gospel itself which moves out into the world. The ripple-effect shows up in the most surprising places, where mission executives haven’t done any planning at all. E.g., today in the People’s Republic of China. Or Ethiopia.

Relevance: Instead of “planning” mission programs, Christians are encouraged to see where the ripples are already on the move (possibly in the EECMY today)—and then join in there to “ride the waves.”

3. Platzregen. The gospel is a moving thundershower.

In the gospel Platzregen, the Holy “Gust” (sic!) moves the rain cloud of Gospel-promise—as Augsburg Confession 5 says— “ubi et quando visum est deo” – where and when God wills. Yes, humans are agents in God’s Platzregen operation, but clearly secondary agents, mostly to divine where the Platzregen—on its own—is moving and then get themselves wet in the enterprise.

Relevance: Could help us understand the shrinking numbers in church membership statistics in the USA—even in the US Roman

church at last count. At times Luther spoke of the negative side of the Platzregen-image, namely, God moving it away from lands where it bore no fruit. One such example is from 1520.

“I consider that Germany has never before heard so much of God’s Word as now. There is no trace of it in history. But if we let it pass by without thanks and honor, I am afraid that we shall have to suffer plague and grimmer darkness. My dear Germans, buy while the mart is at your door; gather in while the sun is shining and the weather good, make use of God’s Word of Grace while it is there. For know this, that the Word of God’s grace is like a sweeping downpour, which never returns to where it has already been. It has visited the Jews; but it has gone. Now they have nothing. Paul brought it to Greece; from there it has also gone. Now they have the Turks. Rome and the Latin lands have had their visitation; but it has gone. Now they have the Pope. And you Germans must not think that you will have it for ever, for it will not stay where there is ingratitude and contempt. Therefore, let all take hold and keep hold who can.” (*To the Councilors of all German cities, that they should establish and maintain Christian Schools*, 1520.)

Further thoughts on Luther’s Pebble and Platzregen as mission metaphors can be found at:
<<https://crossings.org/thursday/2006/thur033006.shtml>>
<<https://crossings.org/thursday/2008/thur071008.shtml>>

4. Froehlicher Wechsel (joyful exchange—in American slang “a sweet swap”).

This was Luther’s metaphor for two passages in St. Paul’s writings where the apostle portrays the event of Calvary and Easter as an exchange. In 2 Corinthians 5 our sins get transferred to Christ and Christ’s righteousness gets transferred to us. In Galatians 3 it is the sinner’s curse and

Christ's blessedness that get exchanged.

Relevance: At last summer's quadrennial meeting of the International Association for Mission Studies, the international missiological guild, 140 participants from nearly 50 countries gathered in Hungary to discuss the theme "The Gospel of Reconciliation and Human Identity." The fundamental Biblical text was Paul's classic in 2 Cor. 5. But here the participants parted. Some read the text as blueprint for "the ministry of reconciliation," the clearly yet-to-be-fulfilled task of intrahuman reconciliation, establishing peace and justice within the human race. Others saw the "ministry of reconciliation" as the unfinished task of getting humankind reconciled to God. For patently even though Christ's saving work is full and complete, vast swathes of humanity are not yet trusting it and thus not yet enjoying it.

Which version of the "ministry of reconciliation" is our Christian mission agenda for the 21st century? That was the question. Not only among the alleged "experts" at IAMS in Hungary in August 2008, but throughout the worldwide church.

In my contribution to the conversation I offered Luther's case for mission as the not-yet-finished task of getting sinners reconciled to God, and sought to show its relevance to the chaotic world of the beginning of the 21st century. Its internet location is
<<https://crossings.org/thursday/2008/thur062608.shtml>>

5. Deus Absconditus (God hidden).

At the end of his explanation of the Apostles Creed in the Large Catechism Luther says: "These three articles of the Creed, therefore, separate and distinguish us Christians from all other people on earth. All who are outside this Christian people, whether heathen, Turks, Jews, or false Christians and hypocrites

– even though they believe in and worship only the one, true God
– nevertheless do not know what his attitude is toward them. They cannot be confident of his love and blessing, and therefore they remain in eternal wrath and damnation. For they do not have the LORD Christ, and, besides, they are not illuminated and blessed by the gifts of the Holy Spirit.” [Book of Concord. Kolb-Wengert, edd., p. 440 (66)]

[German text: “Daruemb scheiden und sondern diese Artikel des Glaubens uns Christen von allen andern Leuten auf Erden. Denn was ausser der Christenheit ist, es seien Heiden, Tuerken, Jueden oder falsche Christen und Heuchler, ob sie gleich nur einen wahrhaftigen Gott glaeuben und anbeten, so wissen sie doch nicht, was [wie] er gegen ihn gesinnet ist, koennen sich auch keiner Liebe noch Guts zu ihm versehen, daruemb sie in ewigen Zorn und Verdammnis bleiben. Denn sie den Herrn Christum nicht haben, dazu mit keinen Gaben durch den heiligen Geist erleuchtet und begnadet sind.”]

Relevance: Luther’s concept of *deus absconditus*, humankind’s common experience of “Godhidden” – in contrast to *deus revelatus*, “God-revealed-in-Christ” – is a fundamental resource for engaging people of other faiths—both the secular faiths regnant in the West and people of other world religions.

In the citation above Luther expresses one aspect of his “*deus absconditus*” understanding. All people do encounter God in daily life. Granted, that is a Christian conviction. God is NOT totally hidden from anybody. But what is hidden in humankind’s common experience of God is “what his attitude is toward them.” And thus, Luther concludes, “they cannot be confident of his love and blessing,” which leaves only one alternative, “they remain in eternal wrath and damnation. For they do not have the LORD Christ, and, besides, they are not illuminated and blessed by the gifts of the Holy Spirit.” “Having Christ” is Luther’s

other favored expression (other than “fiducia”) for what faith is. Faith is “having Christ.” Which brings to mind Luther’s maxim: “Glaubstu, hastu. Glaubstu nicht, hastu nicht.”

This notion of what humans “have” and “don’t have” when they have only deus absconditus encounters to go on, is absent in today’s mission discussions, so far as I know. It is a unique resource from Luther for Christian mission in today’s manifold “world of faiths” – especially to Muslims. [For more on this see “Using Luther’s Concept of Deus absconditus for Christian Mission to Muslims” on the Crossings website <www.crossings.org>]

Can Luther help us Christ-confessors—not just Lutheran folks, but across the ecumenical spectrum—respond to Christ’s Easter-evening Gospel-imperative “as the Father has sent me, so I send you”?

I think so.

Does Christian mission have any future in our “Apocalypse Now” world in the “sea of faiths” of the 21st century? Well, there is this: We have this promise. God did drop the pebble into this very sea and the ripples are showing up on distant shores. Christ still offers the joyful exchange. The Platzregen is still “platzing” on our planet. In Christ God continues to uncover his hidden face in people’s lives. What are we waiting for?

Edward H. Schroeder
St. Louis, Missouri, USA
March 1, 2009

[Augsburg_Mis_EHS09 \(PDF\)](#)

Memento Mori at Home

Colleagues,

We're just back from "the ranch," the Schroeder family farm in Coal Valley, Illinois, where the clan gathered to bury my farmer brother Bob, third in the line of us seven sibs, the first to die. Age 74. Brain tumor. Diagnosed a couple months ago. Glioblastoma multiforme, from which none recover, we are told.

Besides being a highly competent farmer, Bob early on became the grave-digger at various cemeteries in this northwest corner of rural Illinois. Being a farmer-son of my farmer-father he kept records of everything—hog prices, corn prices, weather, Chicago Cub games—and, of course, the graves he dug. For 35 years—1962-97. Total 1740. Fifty per year for 35 yrs. All dug with a hand spade. No machines. In his prime, his kids told us, he could do one in 45 minutes—and then get back to cultivating corn or combining grain. He was a local superstar in many ways.

Bob's the only one of the 7 of us who didn't go to college. Just out of high school, he knew he wanted to be a farmer. He married at 19 and got started on his calling. One of my brothers maintains Bob was the smartest of us all. Though he never claimed that, it could be. None of us doubts that he was the richest of us kids. ['Course, with farm land prices nowadays in his neighborhood, you need only 200 acres to be a millionaire.] After Thursday visitation (some 800 signed the book), Friday church-overflowing funeral (St. Paul's Luth. ELCA in Orion, IL), Saturday clan lunch for story-telling, we concluded by all of us digging and then planting a "Bob" tree (sugar maple, big one, 15 ft tall) on the home-place along Schroeder Road between the two now quite tall evergreens planted for our Mom and Dad, who died

in '74 and '87. There's space twixt those conifers for the rest of us.

So right now we have a close-to-home memento mori before us—but not without hope.

Even if it was a “good” funeral, it was not quite according to the specs Bob had outlined in one of his records. E.g., I know that he wanted “Chief of sinners though I be, Jesus shed his blood for me” as one of the funeral hymns. For reasons unknown to me it didn't happen. When Marie and I last visited him two weeks before he died, he specified this hymn again for his final liturgy. “Dad picked this hymn for his own funeral, you may remember,” he said. That was 20 years ago. “So if even Dad needed that hymn, I do too.” We didn't push to ask him what lay behind this wish. All seven of us sibs know some rascally items about each other. But maybe for him it was big stuff—wrestling with his own unfaith. Or doubt. Or despair. He didn't elaborate. “If even Dad needed that hymn, I do too.” Too bad it didn't make the cut for the actual funeral service. I think it was the public faith-confession he wanted all to hear as his last will and testament.

When he said that at our final visit, Marie and I popped open his hymnal (shelved along with his record books) in the farm kitchen and we sang it. Coupled as it is with the tune of “Go to Dark Gethsemane,” it sounds more morose than its text really is. With a more sprightly tune the Easter accents in the hymn text might surface more obviously, as they do in the “funeral” theology of St. Paul who coined the “chief of sinners” phrase for himself.

That was the last faith-statement we heard from Bob. Since it didn't turn up as his own confession at the funeral, I'm going to give it publicity here.

Chief of sinners though I be,
Jesus shed his blood for me.
Died that I might live on high,
Lives that I might never die.
As the branch is to the vine,
I am His, and he is mine.
Oh, the height of Jesus' love!
Higher than the heavens above,
Deeper than the depths of sea,
Lasting as eternity.
Love that found me—wondrous thought—
Found me when I sought him not.

Only Jesus can impart
Balm to heal the stricken heart,
Peace that flows from sin forgiven,
Joy that lifts the soul to heaven,
Faith and hope to walk with God
In the way that Enoch trod.

Chief of sinners though I be,
Christ is All-in-All to me;
All my wants to him are known,
All my sorrows are his own.
He sustains the hidden life
Safe with him from earthly strife.

O my Savior, help afford
By your Spirit and your Word!
When my wayward heart would stray,
Keep me in the narrow way;
Grace in time of need supply
While I live and when I die.

The conversation during the weekend, when it sought to be

explicitly religious, was seldom as gospel-gutsy as New Testament “funeral” rhetoric. Plato with his immortality of the soul got more footnotes than Saints Paul or John—or even Jesus. Happily the funeral sermon from the pastor of St. Paul’s Lutheran did stick to the Johannine text. But the public rhetoric was not Gospelly, not even Biblical. Instead of the closed eyes and cosmetically enhanced face of the corpse we all viewed in the casket, Bob was (really) open-eyed looking down on us from heaven, sending messages and waiting for us to join him. He was already there in heaven, not here before us in this box. Even without being raised on the last day he’d already conquered death. It was a done deal.

I’ve read again some of the NT sections on this topic (John 6, 11, 14; I Cor. 15; I Thessalonians) to get a second opinion, and then to reflect on how this NT vocabulary might replace Plato’s for Christian talk at funerals.

Some observations:

The rhetoric is notably ALWAYS in the future tense.

John 6. Whoever “eats and drinks” Jesus WILL live forever [and] already HAS eternal life (namely, God’s own life-that-lasts, i.e., life that is everlasting, so it WILL last forever).

John 11. Jesus IS resurrection and life. “Whoever believes in me, even though they die, WILL live.”

John 14. “In my father’s house are many dwelling places.” Jesus “goes” (to the cross) to “prepare a place for you.” But Christ-trusters don’t automatically move there when they breathe their last. “”I WILL come again and WILL take you to myself, so that where I am you MAY be also.”

I Corinthians 15. “All WILL be made alive in Christ.” “We WILL also bear the image of the man of heaven.” “The trumpet WILL

sound, and the dead WILL be raised imperishable, and we WILL be changed.”

I Thessalonians 4. “Through Jesus God WILL bring with him those who have died.” “For the Lord himself . . . WILL descend from heaven and the dead in Christ WILL rise first . . . and so we WILL be with the Lord forever.”

That’s why “hope” figures in in Christian “funeral talk” (I Cor. 15:19; I Thess. 1:3, 2:19, 4:13, 5:8). Hope is always a “future-tense” verb. Hope is faith focused on the future—things that are not yet, but are part of the package of Christ’s promise.

Every WILL reference is a Christ-connected assertion—and a link to Jesus’ own resurrection. “If Christ be not raised,” all such upbeat WILL talk is “vain”—in the literal meaning of the term—empty.

Could this NT way of funeral conversation actually become our own? Why not? Might it be something like this?

The only Bob we knew is in that box. He’s no longer breathing. From his confession we often heard that he claimed Christ-connection. The water-and-the-word of his baptism initiated it. What’s not patent “in the box” as we look at him—as it was when he was still breathing—is his Christ-connection. His death doesn’t undo that. ‘Fact is, it’s another step along Bob’s baptismal way.

That Christ-connection doesn’t transplant the “real” Bob into the heavenly mansions, but entails a promise that Bob has more biography coming. As Bob Bertram liked to say, Christ-connected dying is “death, comma” not “death, period.” There is more to come.

But we don’t expect it to come for Bob until the Architect of Resurrection Himself comes again and touches what’s in the box. So we don’t imagine him “enjoying” heaven as we bury him. If New Testament Christ-confessors NEVER do that, what grounds do we

have for doing so?

Instead we talk about Bob's promising future, not his current celestial home address.

And to do so we'll have to talk about Bob together with the Resurrection Architect, baked together "in one cake" as Luther liked to say.

Sure, it's all hope, but Christian hope is not wishful thinking blowing in the wind. Back to Bob Bertram. He once confected a Crossings semester-long course, "Crossings from Ephesians: Hope Needs Success." And the "success" that grounds Christian hope is God's "Eastering Jesus," as BB liked to say. [There is a macabre link between Bob Bertram and my brother Bob. Glioblastoma multiforme was death's instrument for both of them.]

It's all linked to "if Christ be raised or not." If not, then it is "death, period." If yes, then there is more coming after the comma.

Word has gotten back to us that Jaroslav Pelikan on his deathbed not long ago told his son: "If Christ was raised, then nothing else matters. And if Christ was not raised, then nothing else matters."

Back to last week, up at the ranch—

We took along to the funeral the 7-foot long resurrection banner we have, an artifact from Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, just before Seminex. A student seminary couple, Ann and Mike Brecke, created it in the early 1970s just as the storm clouds of the War of Missouri were gathering. Its combination of text and textiles is stunning. The Breckes created it for the Concordia Seminary chapel during the Easter season, and one day when it was my turn to give the homily, I used their banner as my preaching text. Possibly because of that, they showed up at my office door and gave it to me.

We frequently offer its witness for display, sometimes during a procession, when we attend funerals. So last week it stood in

the chancel at St. Paul's Lutheran in Orion, Illinois. You can see it for yourself at this URL: <http://crossings.typepad.com/photos/banner/> [Make sure you click on each of the small photos to see the full banner. The words are clearer in the "with flash" photo.]

The Breckes chose one of the feistiest Christian funeral hymns there is for their text, "Jesus meine Zuversicht." [Its usual English rendering, "Jesus Christ, my sure defense," is not quite right. "Zuversicht" means "confidence."] In Otto von Schwerin's original, this hymn has ten (sic!) stanzas. The banner text is stanza nine, which sadly no longer appears in the last two ELCA hymnals, LBW and ELW. Back in the 70s the Breckes and all of us "Missourians" were using TLH, The Lutheran Hymnal, and there we had all ten verses.

The entire hymn matches the three rubrics I gleaned from the NT above: future tense, hope-filled, and grounded in Christ's own resurrection. I suggest that you access the photo and then read the two verses copied here: verse one (ELW) and the banner verse, number nine (TLH). If you get a bit "cross"-eyed going back and forth, that's not all bad.

Jesus lives, my sure defense
and my everlasting Savior!
Knowing this, my confidence
rests in hope and will not waver,
Though the night of death be fraught
still with many an anxious thought.
Laugh to scorn the gloomy grave
and at death no longer tremble;
He, the Lord, who came to save
will at last his own assemble.
We will rise our Lord to meet
treading death beneath our feet.

Plato farewell! You are too platitudinous. [Webster: banal, trite, stale] This Good News is really Good and genuinely New. Since Christ IS risen from the dead, that's all that matters. The banner proclaims it in more ways than I can.

Peace and Joy!
Ed Schroeder

A Reunion at the Lazarus Parable

Colleagues,

I got my come-uppance this past Sunday. A prominent ELCA pastor introduced me to a friend of his after the Sunday service of the congregation he pastors as: "Ed Schroeder, heresy-hunter." That was a surprise. [Marie thought she should've told him that "'Gospel-sniffer" was more accurate. By then it was too late. Win some; lose some.]

A bit of background. This past weekend the Schroeder clan gathered "back at the farm" for the 13th biennial gathering of the descendents of my grandparents, Friederich and Augusta (Taube) Schroeder. Both of them came from Germany as teenagers with their families in the 1880s. Their German Lutheran Missouri Synod connections in separate congregations around the Quad-Cities (Iowa and Illinois) led them to each other and to marriage and to the Schroeder farm in Coal Valley, Illinois—and to 14 children! The third in line of those kids was my father Heinrich.

With that many in the first born-in-America generation it will come as no surprise that 140 folks showed up for the 3-day festivities. And that's only a fraction of what the computerized clan genealogists (son Nathan prominent among them) have on their data bases.

Since the Wars of Missouri in the 1970s, going to church on reunion Sunday is dicey. In ancient days we'd all go to Trinity LCMS in Coal Valley IL—the church that grandpa helped build. But ELCAers aren't eligible for communion at Trinity even if you were baptized and confirmed there. That agonizes some of the goldie-oldies—more often the LCMS Schroeders who say “Why can't you ELCAers come to Trinity nevertheless—in memory of grandma and grandpa?” As some of you may suspect, the three generations that have now come after my own are less fastidious about such matters. And for some “going to church” at all is an adiaphoron.

So we attended the ELCA congregation last Sunday—biggest one in the Quad-Cities—where a 10-million-dollar building expansion is just getting underway. The guest preacher, a seminary professor, used the parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus [Luke 16:19ff.] as his sermon text. And neither his sermon, nor any other element of the service, signalled any awareness of the “great gulf fixed” between the building cranes outside the nave windows and the point of the parable. Neither “Moses and the prophets” nor the “ONE resurrected from the dead,” the Jesus who originally spoke the parable, got much of a hearing. Or so it seemed to me. But then that's what you expect from a heresy-hunter.

The preacher did get to level D-1 and D-2 in his diagnosis. And did so compellingly. All of us there in the congregation—preacher and people—were clearly in the Rich Man's robes and not in Lazarus' rags. We had HMOs to attend to our sores, and dogs only as pets. Crumbs from the table? Even our

dogs don't eat crumbs. Crumbs have never been our daily bread.

Yes, and it was even worse than that. Go to D-2. It was hardness of heart, blindness and deafness that was so ingrained that we do not (cannot?) see the wretched and hear their cries.

He articulated both of these masterfully—introducing us to faith-siblings he worked with in Central America who are Lazarus at our door today for D-1 crossovers. Likewise for D-2 crossings he drew parallels to our standard operating procedures (even in our churches) showing the interior sickness of heart that nourishes such behavior in Lazarus-by-passers—[hereafter LBP].

And then he brought in Jesus. But it was too soon.

For the Jesus “necessary” to heal this much of our dilemma is Jesus the example, the instructor, even the critic telling us, yes shouting: “YOU'RE NOT DOING WHAT I TOLD YOU TO DO!” Isn't that just a new Moses? Even to have him say: “Look, I even died for you. Now go and do thou likewise” is not really Gospel. [Yes, this is acting like a narcotics-trained dog, “sniffing” for the Gospel.] Pointing to his crucifixion—for all of us LBPs—as paradigm for what we too should do is not yet preaching THE Gospel. It's “using” Christ for ethics without “using” him for his own primary, and primal, agenda, his “opus proprium” in Lutheran confessional lingo. That primal agenda arises at the God-and-LBP interface.

But to get to that primal use of Christ, you have to go to that “coram deo” interface, the jugular of what the dilemma is. Which I didn't hear from Sunday's preacher. That's D-3 (diagnosis level three): the deepest malady of all LBPs is their (our) God-problem.

Back to the parable. Long before LBP wound up in Hades there was “a great gulf fixed” between him and God's turf, the place where

Abraham's at home. [Btw, "Lazarus" (Lo-azar in Hebrew) is "no help." I.e., not only that he can't help himself, but also that he GETS "no help" from us LBPs.] The chasm twixt LBPs and God is indeed unbridgeable—at least from our side. All LBPs are "no-help" for themselves, nor for others, to span that gap. But we can, and are, blinded by this ultimate fact of life. Only from the end in retrospect did it become perfectly clear for LBP in Hades. Whereupon it's too late. Then LBP pleads for mercy. But he didn't live by mercy before, so why now? Merciless living before the end equals the same for the hereafter.

Jesus puts into the story a line about "Moses and the prophets." Not that Moses and the prophets can bridge the gap either. But when read "unveiled" (as St. Paul notes) they make that chasm perfectly clear. If you don't "listen to Moses and the prophets," you won't have a clue about the chasm. And thus the One raised from the dead, this Lazarus-like Jesus, will be of no interest to you. Not really "necessary." And if/when you do "listen to them" while you are living, you'll also start your mercy-plea while you're yet alive. "God, be merciful to me a sinner" is the full text. And to such a plea, the God of the Bible is notoriously attentive. He actually initiates chasm-crossing. That's what the Jesus story is all about.

Had the preacher taken us to this depth diagnosis of our own LBP malady, he'd have had US pleading too for God's mercy. And then he could have really gossiped us. The Jesus that came "too soon" in the sermon would now be "necessitated" as the Lutheran Confessions like to say. Necessitated as no one else could be—one who has entered Hades in his own death and risen from that death in triumph over it. That means triumph over the God-gap, the chasm that is the bottom-line torment of all LBPs.

That also means "necessitated" according to the specs of the "double dipstick" of Apology 4 in the Lutheran Confessions—1)

using Christ for the big job that he alone can do—call it forgiveness—getting God and sinners together again in friendship across that chasm, and 2) giving us tormented LBPs the comfort and confidence that our God-gap is bridged. Which then gives us the courage to be Christ's own little Lazaruses—helpless helpers, wounded healers—living from mercy as the new-breath we inhale, and exuding that same mercy as the odor and fragrance of our daily journey.

The primal use of the Gospel always aims to bridge the God-gap.

The second use of the Gospel bridges the Lazarus-gap.

It's the grammar of Gospel-imperatives: SINCE Christ became God's Lazarus for us, THEREFORE you be his Lazarus to the Lazaruses in your world.

And remember the LBPs are the ones most help-less, really "Lo-azar." They need big help. But that help is here. His name is Jesus.

Real heresy is to keep LBPs ignorant of the big help they need, and then to feed them an emaciated Jesus for the shallow diagnosis. In this sense Gospel-sniffer and heresy-hunter may be synonyms.

Isn't this depth diagnosis and resurrection resource exactly what Luke's Jesus is telling us in this parable? What else could be better news than Christ the God-gap-spanner? And that good news could make a congregation gutsy enough to take maybe just half of their 10 million dollars and give it to some Lazarus Foundation. Imagine who all would benefit from that, both among the LBPs and the obvious Lo-azar types! Imagine how many chasms—yes how many of the BIG ones, the D-3s — might be bridged!

Peace & Joy!
Ed Schroeder

Using Luther's Concept of *Deus absconditus* for Christian Mission to Muslims

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[Presented at the Luther Research Congress, Copenhagen, Denmark,
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Thesis:

Luther's concept of *deus absconditus*, humankind's common experience of "God-hidden" – in contrast to *deus revelatus*, "God-revealed-in-Christ" – is a fundamental resource for Lutheran mission theology and practice. Although generally unused (yes, unknown) in today's mission discussions it is a unique resource for Christian mission in today's "world of faiths" – especially to Muslims.

Prolog:

I know of no Luther texts that speak very directly about Christian mission to the Turks. In scattered places [e.g., his Ascension Day sermons on the Mark 16 pericope for that day,

Mark's version of the Great Commission] he encourages Christians who come under Turkish rule, or are prisoners-of-war, to be evangelists among the Turks. However, he knows that it won't be easy, and may even be impossible. But he does not speak of a program of "foreign missions" anywhere that I have found. My proposal in this paper is to take Luther's notion of *deus absconditus* and work from it to build a theology of mission for today, not only to Muslims, but to all people in the "sea of faiths" (some even claiming to be Christian) in today's pluralist world.

I. Introduction: Are Missions Missing in Luther's Theology? The Accepted Wisdom in Missiology Today Says Yes.

Lutheran churches did not move actively into "foreign" mission work in the wake of the Reformation era nor in the next two centuries that followed. This delay has nourished the widespread opinion that in Luther – and other 16th century Lutheran reformers – "We miss not only missionary action, but even the idea of missions, in the sense in which we understand them today. And this . . . because fundamental theological views hindered them from giving their activity, and even their thoughts, a missionary direction." So says Gustav Warneck in his *History of Protestant Missions*, 1882ff. [Citation from the 1901 English translation, p. 9]

Warneck's work was itself a critical response to other Lutheran mission scholars of his day (Ostertag, Plitt, Kalkar) who claimed the opposite for Luther. But, as far as I know, Warneck's work was the only one that got translated into English. And English is the language of missiology. So his judgment has become the accepted wisdom among today's mission

scholars, including some who are Lutherans.

II. An Additional Barrier in Missiology Today that Sidelines Luther

The reigning blueprint in today's missiology is "*Missio Dei*," a *terminus technicus* proposed for Christian mission just 50 years ago (1952) at the International Mission Conference in Willingen, Germany. The current use of the concept (which may not be what Willingen intended) across the missiological spectrum – from Mennonites and Evangelicals to Mainline Protestants and Roman Catholics – sees God's mission to be all the good things God is doing in and for the world, with Jesus the Christ as God's grand finale in that mission. Christians thus are called to "join in God's mission" with its accents on peace, justice, wholeness of human life and care for the environment – along with salvation for sinners. Important for Lutheran perceptions is to note that there is no fundamental distinction between God's salvation agenda in Christ and all the other good things – care and preservation – that God is doing throughout creation.

It is therefore no surprise that such a unitary vision of *Missio Dei* – a big package of all the good things God is doing – pushes Luther to the sidelines. For Luther's basic claim is that God has TWO missions in the world and that all God's work, even all of God's "good" work, cannot be brought under a single rubric. Luther reads the Scriptures proclaiming that God operates ambidextrously – left hand and right hand – and that these two operations are quite different. One classic text for this is 2 Cor. 3 where the apostle distinguishes the serious differences between God's two ministries (*diakoniai*), God's two covenants or dispensations (*diakhkai*). Those two Greek terms are the closest

NT words we have for mission—and in using two Greek terms, the apostle says God pursues two missions, not just one, in the world. Mission theology drawing on such a left-hand/right-hand distinction in God's work is an almost unknown voice in today's missiology. I will seek to show below that Luther does have a mission theology, and that it builds on his Biblical exegesis about an ambidextrous God.

Today's regnant missiological paradigm built on such unitary *Missio Dei* theology envisions mission practice as follows: to seek out the good and godly elements, God's "grace," already revealed among a given people before the Christian gospel ever gets there. When that data is in hand the mission-task then is to link God's Grace-revelation-in-Christ to the Grace-of-God people have already encountered in their lives. Mission does bring something new, but not qualitatively new. "When the missionaries arrived with the Gospel, they found that God was already there working among the people." That is one way such mission theology gets expressed nowadays.

Luther would ask: "Which God was already working there? God-hidden or God-revealed?" Better expressed, since Luther is a Biblical monotheist: "The one and only God was already there, but in which format? Hidden or revealed?" And if the people did not already have "the merits and benefits of Christ" in the faith they lived, that would answer the question.

III. Some Critical Reflection on this—

1) The *Missio Dei* notion just described builds implicitly (even if unconsciously) on the medieval scholastic axiom: *Gratia non tollit naturam, sed perfecit*. [God's] grace does not abolish nature, but perfects it.

2) The Lutheran Reformation rejected that axiom for Christian theology and replaced it with a law/promise hermeneutic for reading the scriptures, and a corollary left-hand/right-hand hermeneutic for reading the world. That two-phase hermeneutic grounds Lutheran missiology in relating the Word to the world.

3) Thus God's manifold works in creation, the first creation – good and godly though they surely are – are distinctly different from what God is doing in Christ, God's new creation. They are God's good gifts (e.g., Luther's listing of them in the Small Catechism on the Creed's first article), but not (yet) God's grace, the "grace of our Lord Jesus Christ."

4) One of Luther's favored terms for God at work in the world apart from Christ is *deus absconditus*. He uses this term with several different nuances. In all of them, however, God's hiddenness does not mean that there is no evidence of God at all. *Deus absconditus* is a revealer. Theistic evidence abounds. But in that abundant evidence a fundamental aspect of God remains un-revealed – specifically the God-data needed "for us and for our salvation."

Three nuances

a) God's work in creation proceeds via "God's masks," the *larva dei*. God's creatures are the masks, with God hiding behind the masks. That is already a "mercy" on God's part, for if we were to confront *deus nudus* [God naked], we would die on the spot.

b) Yet even though it is a "mercy" on God's part to stay behind creation's masks, that much mercy does not yet redeem anything in creation, least of all humans. Even more "hidden" in God's left-hand working in creation is God's mercy that does redeem, God's mercy toward sinners. That mercy, the *favor dei* [God's favor], comes as *deus revelatus* [God revealed]. That term for

Luther is not just any “pulling back the veil” on God’s part, but God exposing a merciful heart to sinners – both in its promissory format in the OT and its fulfilled format in the crucified and risen Messiah.

c) Yet even here in the mercy actions of *deus revelatus*, another sort of hiddenness surfaces. God’s mercy in Christ comes *sub cruce tecta* [covered under a cross], not so much “hidden” so that it is not visible at all, but “covered” under what looks like the opposite [*sub contrario objectu* = under its contrary opposite]. The most bizarre contrary opposite, of course, is the cross itself, both Christ’s own and our own. Yet Christ’s cross is manifold mercy. By his stripes we are healed. And taking up our own cross to follow him conforms us to God’s same mercy-management “for us and for our salvation.”

5) I propose Luther’s first two meanings of “hidden God” above – God hiding behind creation’s masks, which leaves God’s saving mercy still hidden – as a planet-wide common denominator for building a Lutheran mission theology. Both the person witnessing to Christ and the conversation partner not (yet) enjoying “the merits and benefits of Christ” have this broad base of common experience of *deus absconditus*. Granted, that’s not yet Gospel, not yet redemptive, but it is a common starting point, where there are common places for conversation—and finally for the question: “How do you cope in your encounters with hidden God? You tell me how you cope, and I’ll tell you how I do.” That is a much more “Lutheran” question to focus on than “What do you believe about God? You tell me and I’ll tell you.”

IV. Finally to Luther

1. At the end of his explanation of the Apostles Creed in the Large Catechism Luther says: “These 3 articles of the Creed, therefore, separate and distinguish us Christians from all other

people on earth. All who are outside this Christian people, whether heathen, Turks, Jews, or false Christians and hypocrites – even though they believe in and worship only the one, true God – nevertheless do not know what his attitude is toward them. They cannot be confident of his love and blessing, and therefore they remain in eternal wrath and damnation. For they do not have the LORD Christ, and, besides, they are not illuminated and blessed by the gifts of the Holy Spirit.” [Book of Concord. Kolb-Wengert, edd., p. 440 (66)]

[German text: “Daruemb scheiden und sondern diese Artikel des Glaubens uns Christen von allen andern Leuten auf Erden. Denn was ausser der Christenheit ist, es seien Heiden, Tuerken, Jueden oder falsche Christen und Heuchler, ob sie gleich nur einen wahrhaftigen Gott glaeuben und anbeten, so wissen sie doch nicht, was [wie] er gegen ihn gesinnet ist, koennen sich auch keiner Liebe noch Guts zu ihm versehen, daruemb sie in ewigen Zorn und Verdamnis bleiben. Denn sie den Herrn Christum nicht haben, dazu mit keinen Gaben durch den heiligen Geist erleuchtet und begnadet sind.”]

2. People who “believe in and worship only the one, true God [but] nevertheless do not know what his attitude is toward them” are people who have indeed encountered God, God as *deus absconditus*, to use Luther’s vocabulary. They have not encountered *deus revelatus*, God revealed in Christ.

3. With no “Christ-encounter,” they “do not know what God’s attitude is toward them,” viz., God’s merciful attitude toward sinners. They do not know the Gospel. Not knowing the Gospel (never having heard it), they cannot trust it, and the last two sentences in the citation above are the inevitable chain reaction.

4. Luther does not confine this analysis to the Turks, but to

all “*was ausser der Christenheit ist.*” So initially I propose to proceed with the same general perspective for all mission theology reflection, and later come to specific focus on the Turks, i.e., Islam.

5. At first Luther’s evaluation of heathen, Turks, Jews, or false Christians and hypocrites is surprising: “They believe in and worship only the one, true God . . .” “Only the one, true God”? What does that mean? Since Christ is absent in such believing and worshipping – “they do not have the LORD Christ” – the object of their faith and worship must be *deus absconditus*, the one, true God, but God with his mercy-for-sinners undisclosed.

6. Remember that the hiddenness of God does not mean that there are no signals of God at all in people’s lived experience. On the contrary. God’s creation abounds with such signals, as Paul says in Romans 1:19ff: they have been evident “ever since the creation of the world.” But not so the Gospel, God’s “mercy to make sinners righteous.” Out there in our general experience of God in creation such Good News is *abscondita*, hidden – often contradicted – in the God- encounters all people have in God’s creation. That Gospel is what *deus revelatus* is all about (Rom. 1:16f): “For in it [the Gospel] the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith.”

7. *Deus revelatus* is God in the Gospel. *Deus absconditus* is God in the law. It is the same “one and only true God” but as different as left-hand and right-hand. Put into the format of the creed: encountering *deus absconditus* [Romans 1] is a first-article relationship with God – in whatever form it may take – but not (yet) a second-article or third-article encounter with God that leads to “new creation.”

8. Because *deus absconditus* encounters with God are common among

all human creatures – those who trust Christ as well as those who do not – there is common ground here, common “God-experience” as *Anknuepfungspunkt* for Christians to engage in God-talk with “heathen, Turks, Jews, or false Christians and hypocrites.”

9. This proposal is in conscious contrast to the widespread axiom in missiology today that “common experience of God’s **grace**” is a point of contact for Christian conversation with people of other faiths. The Good News of God’s mercy in Christ is not “common experience” in the God-encounters of daily life, even those that do indeed bring blessings. Those are *deus absconditus* encounters, if for no other reason than that God’s mercy in Christ is not accessible there. It is *abscondita*.

10. Our common human experience of *deus absconditus* is not all gloom and doom. It includes all the gifts of creation that make human life possible and even enjoyable. See Luther’s gift-list in his explanation to the creed’s first article in the Small Catechism. “*Alles ist Gabe.*” But there always comes a “but.” “But” none of those good gifts suffice to get sinners forgiven, to remedy the “*des alles ich ihm [Gott] schueldig bin*” [for all of which I am already in debt to God] with which Luther concludes that first-article explanation in his catechism. God’s gifts of creation are gifts that obligate us receivers to “thank and to praise, to serve and obey him. This is most certainly true.” And where is there one human who is “paid up” in fulfilling these obligations? For just one day, let alone for a lifetime?

11. Hidden here is God’s grace and mercy for sinners who aren’t paying up – who can’t pay up – their “debts.” Forgiveness is also a gift, but a grace-gift with a qualitatively different character from God’s gifts in creation. This grace-gift covers failed obligations. It does not impose new ones. But what about

the common “God-experience” of unfulfilled obligations, the common experience of the consequences of “*lex semper accusat*”?

12. *Deus absconditus* encounters have their downsides, also their dreadful downsides. And that too is common God-experience throughout the human race. What might we learn from beginning interreligious conversation with the daily lived experience of “God hidden”? How do encounters with the hidden God appear in the experience and perception of people of other faiths? That leads to the opening question for mission conversation proposed above: “How do YOU cope?” Where in their own “grace” experiences do they find resources for coping with the obligatory aspect of creaturely gifts received, and with the consequences of failed accountability in meeting such divine debts?

13. Not exactly parallel, but close, are these words from Kosuke Koyama, once a Christian missionary in Buddhist Thailand. He discovered common denominators in linking his own “non-grace” – yes, non-faith – experience with that of his Buddhist neighbors. “We are just alike. We want money. We want position. We want honor. We are both concerned about ourselves. We are failing to practice what the Buddha or Christ commanded. We are quick in judging others and very slow in judging ourselves.” Koyama, himself a Luther-devotee, does not link this to *deus absconditus*. Yet his words do signal what both he and his Buddhist neighbors “don’t have, don’t receive” from their common daily life encounters with *deus absconditus*.

14. And “having” is one of the key terms in the Luther citation above. “To have Christ”– *Christum habere* – is a regular synonym for “faith” in Luther’s vocabulary. “Glaubstu, Hastu; Glaubstu nicht, hastu nicht.” [When you believe, you have (something). When you don’t believe, you don’t have (it).] Faith is a having, a possessing of a resource not had before. And with new resources, you can cope as you were not able to cope before.

Yes, even cope with dark side of encounters with *deus absconditus*.

15. So a missionary coming from this *deus absconditus* perspective would first of all listen as people tell of the God they believe and worship, listen for what they do have, anticipating that since/if they do not claim the Lord Christ, they do indeed not have him. Signals of such “not having” are consistent with *deus absconditus* encounters: “not knowing God’s [merciful] attitude toward them, [consequently] having no confidence of God’s love and blessing, remaining in eternal wrath and damnation, not being illuminated and blessed by the gifts of the Holy Spirit.”

16. Note that all of these benefits are centered in one’s relationship to God, *coram deo* data, and all of them a “having,” a possessing that people did not have before. E.g., the freedom that comes with “having Christ” is first of all a freedom at the point where it is often least expected: *coram deo*, in our relationship with God. The unitary *Missio Dei* perspective widespread today, while not ignoring faith (=having Christ), in no way makes faith’s *coram deo* agenda so central to the mission task as Luther does here. Primary items in such *missio dei* agenda are in Luther’s language God’s left-hand work in the world and/or the fruits of faith, once the *coram deo* agenda is healed. But the focus on “having Christ” for *coram deo* healing is a very minor melody. To modify Hamlet a bit: “To have, or not to have (the merits and benefits of Christ) – that is the question.”

17. It ought to be obvious. In order for someone to “have Christ,” someone else must offer Christ. Christian mission is precisely such an offering. In Apology 4 Melanchthon makes the point that the fundamental verb accompanying God’s promise is “offer” (in contrast to the law’s fundamental verb “require”).

Both Luther and Melanchthon complained that the medieval church so often “made Christ unnecessary,” and with that it was joining the ranks of the Turks and Jews. The upshot of “sharing” *deus absconditus* experience in mission conversation and dialogue is to listen for and to hear those signals of people’s need for Christ – the same need(s) the Christian also has living in the same *deus absconditus* world we all do. It is a *coram deo* need which “necessitates Christ.” That Christ-offer is what the missionary is called to do.

IV. Now to Islam: Deus Absconditus and Deus Revelatus in the Life Experience of Muslims.

Selections from texts in the Appendix below:

1. Luther Engelbrecht, missionary to Muslims in India: “What’s Good, What’s New in the Gospel for Muslims?”
2. Lamin Sanneh. Born and raised in Muslim West Africa [Gambia], now Prof. of Missions and World Christianity at Yale University. “Muhammed, Prophet of Islam, and Jesus Christ, Image of God: A Personal Testimony,” *Int’l Bulletin of Missionary Research* (October 1984), p. 169- 174.
3. “Muslims Tell . . . ‘Why I Chose Jesus,’” an article in *Mission Frontiers* (March 2001)

V. Some Conclusions

- 1) No one’s day-in/day-out religious experience – whatever their religion – is grace alone.
- 2) To center inter-religious conversation on grace-experiences

leaves vast areas of God- experience untouched, and almost guarantees that Christian grace-talk, centered in the crucified and risen Messiah, will be blurred.

3. The grace of God in Christ is not simply an unexpected and undeserved experience of goodness, as one missiologist defines it. It is rather a surprising fresh word of mercy from a Creator whom we chronically distrust, and to whom we are unendingly in debt.

4) Might not this fact – Christians' own chronic distrust of their creator, with all its consequences, and their willingness to confess it – serve as a leaven in the dialogue? Even a leveler? Christians come with paradoxical God-experiences and paradoxical faith-admissions. "Lord I believe; help my unbelief" (Mark 9:24). And Christians admit to being "simultaneously saint and sinner."

5. Thus, Christians are no "better" in their moral life or the strength of their faith than their dialogue partners. They might even be worse. Their claim is not about themselves, but about a Word they have heard that encourages them to live in hope before the face of God despite all evidence to the contrary.

6. Inter-religious conversation that sidelines the negative God-experiences is not speaking the whole truth. To talk about Christian grace-experience without specifying the antithetical God- experience it must cope with does not give the dialogue partner a fair shake. Nor does it clarify the Good and New in the Good News of the one Christians call Lord.

7. When Christians do not hear from the dialogue partners how they articulate their own negative daily life experiences of the divine, and what resources they "have" to bring them through their own valleys of the shadow, then Christians are left impoverished, and the conversation is skewed.

8. It may sound negative to push religious dialogue in the direction of humankind's common experience of *deus absconditus*, but it does bear promise. First, it ecumenizes the project to include the whole human race. Everyone has personal data useful for the conversation. Everybody can do it. It is not the preserve of the elite. Second, it's existential, not cerebral, – about life, not beliefs. Though beliefs may eventually enter, the conversation begins on common ground. Remember the Koyama citation above. Third, the standard barricades in Christian-Muslim conversations – Trinity, Christ's deity, jihad, morality – are moved away from center focus. Fourth, it's "easier" to get to Gospel. What the Christian conversation partner has to offer is the Jesus story as Good News – something Good and something New – both for Christians coping with their own experience of *deus absconditus*, and for the parallel experience of their Muslim conversation partners.

Appendices

APENDIX A.

Luther Engelbrecht gives his reflections on 25 years in mission to Muslims in India.

"Why Muslims choose Jesus? What for them is Good News? The quranic material about Jesus is quite attractive. The extensive Islamic traditional material [Hadith] in my opinion, is even more so. What more do we have to offer? The Incarnation and the Cross, against both of which most Muslims are well inoculated. Following what I understood was our Lord's own self presentation ("Messianic secret" and all), I shared Jesus with my Muslim

“audience” in India particularly as Luke portrayed Him, serving both genders and all segments of society with love and compassion, portraying the “signs” that Jesus did (of which the Qur’an and Hadith have an impressive array) rather as expressions of love and compassion instead of signs of power. Of course, the only “sign” that Jesus made much of (except perhaps in the “semeion” Gospel of John!) could come only at the end, again as in the self presentation of Jesus.

As the meaning of “agape” emerges in the ministry of Jesus and the involvement of the Father therein, its and His ultimate expression in the Cross takes on new meaning. The cross denied in the Qur’an represents the defeat of God and His special prophet/apostle/word/spirit ‘Isa ibn Maryam. The true Cross of Christian faith and proclamation is something else, coming at the end and followed by the resurrection and the ascension in different order and with completely different significance from the quranic story. Islam’s “Theology of Glory”-approach, of course, is more attractive to “the flesh”. Those who “choose” to follow the crucified One rather than the Victor at Badr and Khaybar (as today’s Muslim Palestinians remember!) are usually people who resonate with the Prince of Peace (would that all those who profess to be His followers were the same!).

APPENDIX B.

From Lamin Sanneh Born and raised in Muslim West Africa [Gambia], now Prof. of Missions and World Christianity at Yale University, member of the Roman Catholic Church

Herewith a summary of his article [not easy to understand] in *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*, Oct. 1984, “Muhammed, Prophet of Islam, and Jesus Christ, Image of God: A Personal Testimony.”

1. "Divinity is compromised by personification in Islam." [For God to get close to being a human person would contradict God being God.] "Nevertheless the Prophet came very close to personifying God in handing to us God's revelation. He was more than a prophet. We were taught to imitate his example. He became for us an intercessor. At that level 'he bore our infirmities.'"

2. Citing specific passages of the Q: "Within its own terms Islam was affirming the inescapability of personal religion." "Muhammad as the devotional magnetic pole of Islam brought personal religion within range of the ordinary worshiper. But he also released us from a cramped transcendentalism" [Allah being so far away].

3. "This was an abatement, not of God's sovereignty, but of that view of it which rejects that it could have human proportions." [Sanneh is constantly arguing with the "orthodox" interpreters of Islam who claim that Allah is untouched by anything human.] "For the fact is that God did establish decisive and meaningful contact with the historical man Muhammad." M. was our ally and help. "M. the intercessor had . . . brought God within range [of us]." "This makes short work of rigid transcendence."

4. "If human striving [jihad] is worth anything at all, it has to be worth the Creator having a stake in it, of his being at risk in our risks and vindicated in our moral life." This leads Sanneh to speak of "God's unfathomable compassion, what in my language we call his 'numbing' capacity to take on our suffering." Thus there is "intimacy [which] rests on a genuine reciprocity. If we can go on from there . . . the gap narrows considerably between that and the biblical account of Jesus Christ as the divine breakthrough in human form."

5. This possibility "scandalized Muslim thinkers, and a defense was quickly mounted to guard against adopting a human role for

God. Yet even al-Ghazali (d.1111), foremost critic of making Allah human, still leans in that direction. "We were shackled to dogma . . . [B]ut our hearts knew better, and here [in the texts he cites] we have both the Q and the Hadith as our ally." "I was in my search increasingly afflicted with the sharp dissonance between this Inner Reason and the fixed center of Exterior Authority. Of course, by looking both at the religious sources before the cold hand of systematization fell on them and at the rich devotional literature available since that time, the dissonance is less pronounced."

6. Mohammed as both deliverer of revelation & "intercessor par excellence" opened the door to "the demands of human need [that] required that the door to personal experience of God be unbarred. M.was the gate through which people, stirred by life's hurricane, would rise and affirm that God went on his knees & came within human focus. Our trials and misfortunes, as well as our triumphs & blessings, are also his. . . . The prophet, any prophet, is in this regard not just God's missionary, sent to represent Someone, who would not deign to come himself. The prophet is God's mission, the prince who can feel in his veins the heartthrob of God's solicitude. We are a spiritual nobility, conceived in the womb of divine compassion, and the prophets are our kin. Through their earthly exposure we catch a reflection of the stature God also conferred on us at creation."

7. "The clearest expression of this inner Reason is the gospel affirmation that although the Word was God, 'it became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth.' . . . Finally, the wraps are taken off and God deals with us outside the veils. God is in the picture now." [He cites Jeremiah 31 new covenant, and Hebrews 1 & 2 "many ways of old in which God spoke, but now..."] "By adopting for himself the full logical consequences of the moral significance of human existence, God achieved a stupendous breakthrough in Jesus Christ, and no one who is familiar with

his ministry and teaching can fail to discern in the following passage the clear-cut details of his portrait even though it existed long before his earthly life." Then comes the Is. 53:3-5 citation.

8. " God, who normally delegates his authority to the prophets, is committed to the logic of that delegation by being willing to express himself in one such prophet who, by virtue of that special relationship, must henceforth be described by the strong language of filiation [Son of God]. Rather than rendering him immune to the tragedy of human disobedience, such a prophet is in fact the supreme subject and victim of its consequences. 'It pleased the Lord to bruise him.' No proximity to the human condition is more poignant than that. It is too lifelike to be mistaken for what it is, a full-blooded encapsulation of the original divine intention. God through him would know our plight & feel our sorrow. Jesus is God in full engagement. Put to grief in the unspeakable agony of human sinfulness, Jesus is the definitive measure of God's 'numbing' capacity to take on our suffering, the Suffering Servant now unenviably receiving the double *salat* (=the fivefold daily prayer. Meaning not clear.) of God & human beings. The Suffering Servant is God's self-portrait, & our unflattering self-witness."

9. "Our perception of this truth is indispensable to our obtaining a right and fulfilling relationship with God. Redemptive suffering is at the very core of moral truth, and the prophets were all touched by its fearsome power. But only One embodied it as a historical experience, although all, including the Prophet of Islam, walked in its shadow. Those who consult their hearts will hear for themselves the persistent ordinance proclaiming God's ineffable grace."

APPENDIX C.

Muslims tell . . . “Why I Chose Jesus,” an article in *Mission Frontiers* (March 2001)

This is a Fuller Seminary report drawn from questionnaires in the past 10 years filled out by 600 believers who came from Muslim backgrounds. Here are the captions in the article which collect the responses:

A sure salvation. Hope of salvation is “a bit elusive for many, even the most devoted Muslims.” “With Jesus I have confidence about the end of my life.” Taught that the “bridge to heaven was as thin as a human hair,” an Indonesian woman came to faith in Christ “realizing that she could not save herself, but that Christ could.” A West African woman wanted to know for certain that her sins had been forgiven and washed away. A Persian emigre to the US said: “Oh yes, I feel more forgiven, more assurance of forgiveness.” An Egyptian man stated “Assurance of salvation is the main attraction of Christianity for a Muslim.” A Javanese man said simply, “After I received Jesus, I had confidence concerning the end of my life.”

Jesus. His character “overwhelmingly attractive.” He never retaliated. His love for the poor. The Sermon on the Mount. When asked what particular teaching attracted him, an Egyptian man stated simply, “the crucified Messiah.”

Dreams and Visions. One-fourth of those surveyed state that dreams and visions were key in drawing them to Christ. A Malay woman heard Jesus in a vision saying: “If you want to come to me, just come.” Feeling that she had tried her entire life to reach God without success, she now saw God initiating the effort to reach her through Jesus.

Power of Love. Nearly half of all Muslims now following Christ

“affirmed that the love of God was a critical key in their decision.” God’s love for me in Jesus. Christian people who love one another. A Bengali man says he was “subdued by the revelation [sic!] of God’s great love, his own sinfulness, and Christ’s great sacrifice for him.” A West African man from Gambia says simple: “God loves me just as I am.” His experience in Islam was “rigorous submission to God” yet he could never “please God.”

Personal relationship with God. Proximity or nearness to God, contrasted with “no possibility of walking together with God” in Islam. Another contrasted “being adopted as God’s son’ with its Islamic opposite: “God is universal and has no family. There was no way of knowing what God was like.” [sic!] The author concludes: “Apparently, when Muslims do have an opportunity to see the love of Christ revealed [sic!] in all its fullness, they are finding a life with Christ quite compelling.”

Edward H. Schroeder

[LuthersWritingsTurks \(PDF\)](#)

For a Nation to Repent (Continued) #4

Colleagues,

I’ve been out of town for most of the week since the last posting. Four of the past 7 days were spent in Minnesota with 250 church-workers (most of them pastors) at the Fall Theological Conference of the Southwest Minnesota Synod of

the ELCA. The topic was "Thinking Theologically about Sexuality." You know what the actual topic was. There were two presentors, each of us giving two 50-minute presentations and then each responding to the other's essay. The other speaker was a Lutheran seminary prof, good friend, presenting the "traditional" view, which he affirms. Because of past ThTh postings on this topic I was invited to be the dissenter. We were both mandated to ground our positions in the theology of Reformation Lutheranism. We both sought to do so, but it came out different. I hope to tell you about it in more detail soon in these postings. Returning home yesterday evening I met the mini-deluge of responses from you readers about the notion of God calling the USA to repentance. Including this one: "Ed, I simply note that in your most recent posting of points of view received [ThTh #171], you left my comments out and I never heard from you. Peace! [Name] "

To that colleague I regret to say (what I say to all): There are too many responses coming these days for me to fulfill either of these two requests. Therefore more than one of you will be able to say the same thing: "you left my comments out and I never heard from you." I regret that, but I see no other option. Today again I select a few—both negative and affirmative—and pass them on to you.

Peace & Joy!

Ed Schroeder

-
1. Ed, Thought you might enjoy this – fits in with what ThTh 172 was about, I think! [Luth pastor] These words were issued by the President, in an official proclamation

responding to cataclysmic events affecting the nation. "We Americans," the President said, "have been preserved, these many years, in peace and prosperity. We have grown in numbers, wealth and power, as no other nation has ever grown. But we have forgotten God. We have forgotten the gracious hand which preserved us in peace, and multiplied and enriched and strengthened us; and we have vainly imagined, in the deceitfulness of our hearts, that all these blessings were produced by some superior wisdom and virtue of our own. Intoxicated with unbroken success, we have become too self-sufficient to feel the necessity of redeeming and preserving grace, too proud to pray to the God that made us!"

Was it George W. Bush who issued that proclamation? No. It was Abraham Lincoln, in his "Proclamation Appointing a National Fast Day," March 30, 1863.

His words are just as timely today.

You can read the full text of Lincoln's proclamation, which resulted in a "day for National prayer and humiliation,"

at:<http://showcase.netins.net/web/creative/lincoln/speeches/fast.htm>

2. Thanks so much for your repentance messages. Right on target for all of us and the texts for this Sunday just amplify. Difficult for me to preach such truth in a place like [name] where I am serving as interim, but I am trying. Peace and Joy [Luth. pastor]
3. Blessings abound on this courageous, profound message of repentance. I have been inspired by these Scriptural words. Peace and Joy, even now. [Retired Luth. University prof]
4. Well done! If only 'Dubya' would read and take heed to

your prophetic words and chosen hymns.. After receiving your scholarly study, one can only exclaim—"That'll preach!" [Luth. pastor]

5. You have now proven to me that you are no longer worth reading – your ego – your theology that ignores the scriptures and your self indulgent pride are more than I can take. [Luth pastor]
6. Would you be writing such a letter to the President if he were a Democrat? Your letter strikes me as nothing but a partisan attack against an official of the "wrong" party. Did you write such a letter to Bill Clinton after the mass murders at the embassies in Tanzania and Sudan? If you recall, Bill Clinton and his administration are the ones who lashed out with poorly thought out vengeance and retaliatory military strikes in the face of terrorist-perpetrated mass murder. I recall that you came to Clinton's defense, even in the face of his adulterous affair. [Ed. As far as I can recall, not true. In private conversation at that time I referred to him as a lecherous (bleep).] (Unlike the prophet John the Baptist who took Herod to task for marrying his brothers wife.) It appears that you select your prophetic statements carefully to be addressed only to those of the "wrong" political party. The Bush administration has been using an enormous amount of restraint against vengeance and retaliation. The Bush administration has even had the guts to change the name of the operation instead of insisting on the "infinite justice" misnomer. The Bush administration has spoken strongly against people who want to blame the mass murders on all Arabs or all Muslims. The Bush administration's response, all things considered, has been thoughtful, restrained, well-conceived.

You certainly are correct about Christians' need to repent in the face of calamity. Our Eucharist services on Sept.

16 were services of repentance. The church's role is to call people to repent, as you say Luther said it, as well as to support the fight to protect others from being mass-murdered. We ought to expect the church to call us to repentance. The President is not the church.

In order for your argument to be consistent, you must exhort Jewish people to repent in the face of the Holocaust. That has an odd ring to it, doesn't it? There's a fine line between calling for repentance and blaming the victim. Will you also write a letter to the leaders of Israel, requesting that they call for their repentance in the face of the Holocaust?

Finally, I see little difference between yours and Jerry Falwell's position. You both agree that the mass murders were God's justice being meted out against sinners. The only difference is who you perceive the sinners to be. You say that the sinners are the conservatives, big business, military, etc. Falwell says that the sinners are the liberals, gays, feminists, abortionists, etc. Neither of your politically partisan, non-nuanced approaches convince me. Both positions strike me as avoiding naming the thing for what it is – evil. Mass murder is evil. In the story you quote about the tower of Siloam, the point was not who the sinners were, the point was to repent, that is, to turn to God instead of turning to the victims and listing their sins, blaming them for being part of the “big business” world or the “military establishment.”

Compassion and aid for the victims' families. Personal repentance. Prayer for terrorists, that God change their hearts. Support for the prevention of this happening again – even the use of some force as the lesser of two evils. Support for our leaders in the midst of this

excruciatingly difficult time. This is and will continue to be my approach. You simply have not convinced me that it is time to attack our President and to blame him for not calling the nation to repent. [Luth. pastor]

7. I find your insistence that the events of 9/11 are God-led to be offensive. You offer the evidence of comparison to past events citing both scripture and history. Yet, you do not substantiate the charge that this is God's action now. It sounds more like Ed's left wing political ideas speaking than God to me. I also find your insistence that human repentance is a precondition to the Gospel is terrible theology. How can we by our good works of repentance become worthy of the Gospel? Have we done repentance good enough now. Your response does not sound Gospel centered at all.

On the other hand, to say that other people hate us because of the way we treat them and the implication is therefore, that we earned and deserved this. To say, if only we had been better people then we could have earned our way out of this, is also works righteousness. This too is terrible theology.

I do believe that this is a repentance moment, but it makes a huge difference in the way we repent if God is against us(your position) or if God is for us (the Gospel position). Your position has no hope because we all sin and fall short of the glory of God. We will never be able to repent good enough. The Gospel precedes repentance on our part and makes repentance possible. We repent not so that the Kingdom of God can come, but rather we repent because the kingdom of God has come in Jesus Christ.

This is such simple theology I don't understand why you can't see the implications of your position. Perhaps this

is a reaction of fear, wanting something absolute other than the Gospel. God's peace. [Luth. pastor]

8. Ed, When I received this attached email "Where is God?" [Ed: Theme of which is that God was everywhere in the rescue operations, but not at all in the destruction], I thought of you and our exchange of emails and the flood of responses you have received in the last two weeks re: your theologizing about 9-11. But the email on "Where is God?" (which ironically must be really getting around because in the last two days I have had some of my members refer to it) is a classic example of the kind of "theology of glory" that is around these days. It seems that so many feel they have to "defend God" when these horrors happen. Not only does this stuff have no way to comprehend any notions of the wrath of God, they also don't have use for the cross. They categorically say that God was not involved in the WTC disaster. But what kind of a God is this who seems to let things get out of control or is absent from the falling, deadly debris? Perhaps a better way to answer the question about where is God without scaring them off with the deepest level ... of the deus absconditus [Ed: "hidden god" Luther's label for God the killer, as in Psalm 90] is "cross talk." God was there in the disaster, right there in the midst of the crumbling rubble, getting crushed and dying "with" those people who lost their lives. Isn't that what the cross is all about? God joining us in the midst of the worst sort of bloodletting to not only suffer with us but finally also to offer us hope of life beyond . . . precisely because the crucified one lives! I gave this answer to some pious ladies in my Bible class this morning who had also quoted this email (thinking it was the Gospel!) and surprisingly they liked my "rewording" of the 9-11 tragedy with the

cross of Christ better!!!! The Gospel does enable us to more honestly deal with the harsh realities of suffering without always having to rationalize them or explain them away. [Luth. pastor]

9. Yes, I'm afraid the fear of the "R" Word, etc. is all around us. I actually heard a neighboring ELCA pastor's sermon from 9/16 (tape-delayed by a week for the radio) that said he could not believe the the victims on the disasters on 9/11 could possibly be "collateral damage" for God's judgment on our nation. Actually what he said seemed much closer to "this tragic event is NOT because of God's judgment upon this people" because "God doesn't operate that way." I sort of wanted to agree with him except I thought about Pilate & the Siloam tower too; and Job's children, and the Pharoah's armies, and the women and children inside of Jericho, and the "innocent ones" of Jerusalem who didn't survive to follow Jehoiachin to Babylon or Jeremiah to Egypt. Keep at it, Ed! We all need to hear it: "unless you repent you will all likewise perish."

Luther keeps me going in times like this and sets the tone of judgment/grace:

*Even as we live each day,
Death our life embraces.
Who is there to bring us help,
Rich forgiving graces?
You only Lord, you only!... (LBW #350)*

Add my Kyrieleis to yours too!! [Luth. pastor]

10. The response [of some of your critics] is typical of those who hear you talk about God using the horrible events of history to work his terror. [Those who] want to be "good"

(like God is always "good") have a terrible time truly appreciating the wrath of God and the deus absconditus. They hear you "talking politics" and being unpatriotic by daring to raise the stakes and propose that God might be using the terrorists of 9-11 to drive us all to our knees. A suggestion: maybe you need to go out of your way to show that the repentance you are calling for and the kind of theological question you are raising involves a whole lot more than just you making political judgments about America's bad behavior in international and foreign affairs. I think you would say that any experience of "negation" could be God's wrath and that repenting and clinging to Christ is the only way to be sure that we can face God's wrath and live through it. I know [some pastors who] do not even have stuff like this on their theological road map. Another interesting spin on all this. Could it be that America is the equivalent of the ancient Cyrus of Persia and that God might be using America to combat terrorism in the same way that he used Cyrus to destroy evil Babylon which enabled Israel to return to Jerusalem??? Cyrus may have been no more "godly" than the super power America, but the prophets still saw Cyrus and the Persians as God's tool for good.

This whole business of making judgments about relative right and wrong, goodness and evil, especially on the world stage of international affairs is so ambiguous and so multifaceted that maybe some of your (and mine) rather black and white judgments about America bringing this upon herself may not be so black and white. But I am still with you on repentance all the way. Such repentance is required not because it means that you and I have got the real, only and true understanding as to what God was doing on 9-11 but rather in the face of such massive suffering and death Christ is our only hope. Isn't this all about

magnifying Christ and his work? Isn't Christ the only place where God has definitively revealed what he is up to in this world? And isn't repentance our clearing the deck of any blind spots, idolatries or self justifications that prevent us from clinging to him and only him?

Actually I think [some of your critics] are the ones who are substituting their political judgments for the ultimate truth of God . . . Christ crucified and risen. Their peace and certainty come from knowing beyond a doubt that God was NOT using the terrorists and that we are unambiguously a force for good in this world. Talk about dangerously trying to figure out the hidden God!

I hope this doesn't sound too muddled. One thing I do know from almost 25 years in the ministry now. Faithfully proclaiming repentance and faith, faithfully preaching law and Gospel, drives everyone nuts. One minute we sound like a liberal democrat and the next minute like a conservative republican. That makes me feel somewhat vindicated. God's Word must never be co-opted by some political ideology either of the left or right. [Luth. pastor]

11. Finally, a few words from the pastor's reflections in The Olive Leaf, the monthly newsletter of Mount Olive Lutheran Church in Mukwonago, WI: At this time of national strife, turn to God on behalf of our nation, as part of our nation, and repent. For the boldness of Christ was that he regarded our sins as his. Our boldness is that we regard our nation's sins, as well as the sins of the whole world, as our own, and then, by faith, give them to Christ to bear and to forgive. Who knows? Perhaps God will be merciful, on account of Christ and our humble prayers, and grant us new possibilities. We can certainly hope. God's peace be with you in these troublesome times. Pastor

Tim's questions (and Ed's responses) about Christianity in Bali

Colleagues,

Once before a thoughtful response from nephew Tim Hoyer, ELCA pastor, to these Thursday postings generated another edition of ThTh. Well, its happened again. Read on.

Cheers!

Ed

Tim,

Two postings I have from you, each with enuf questions to exhaust the small handful of answers I have lying around the Bali parsonage these days.

1. You ask: "What is the style of preaching you have heard there?" The answer is that, like you, I'm booked every Sunday, and thus I only hear my own. I do yet want to get to Indonesian language liturgies, but I won't really know what's going on. My (almost) total experience of church life here is with my English-language crowd where a very un-Balinese American-style fundamentalism shapes the spirituality. How that got to be their ethos is something I'm trying to find out. I got some help at a recent clergy seminar on "Living Together in [Indonesias] Pluralist Society." One speaker pointed to "colonial theology," as the source, namely the Northern European pietism that came

with the missionaries, and is still regnant in Indonesia. That makes sense to me. Whether its the whole ball of wax, though, I wonder.

2. You ask whether your wife's experience when she was in Nepal is corroborated here, namely, that the Gospel of "a grace-filled Christ connexion to a God of mercy, [is] something so good that it is hard to believe as true." From what we were learning, its true here too. Hinduism is not a user-friendly religion/way of life. Besides the zillion (seems to us) required sacrifices day in and day out, the ugly terror in the masks of the deities who populate the Balinese dance dramas we view are hardly winsome. And if the mask isn't enough, what these deities do to the human participants on stage is dread-full. The gods are never satisfied. They don't play fair. You really cannot win. "Balance" between the bad ones and the good ones is the most to be hoped for. Evil never gets conquered, so you go for balance—manipulated as best you can in your favor with appropriate ritual actions. Harmony (between the good and evil powers) is another English word we frequently hear from Hindus, but it's not harmony as in music. Sounds to us like this harmony is "balanced" music. Namely, generating enough good noise to restrain, cover over, the bad noise so that you are not destroyed by its deadly decibels.

One of the churchs "drivers" while taking us to a meeting, told us that hearing about a Jesus who loves "bad people" was what prompted him to switch. To my impious add-on, "bad people like you?" he just laughed. As I've mentioned in other missives, Christ's plain power to counter the destroying demons is a constant comment in Christians' confessions.

3. To my musings about the rituals on Wall Street, you gently

protested: "It is not as if we have rituals to the gods before we trade and sell our stock." Well, I wonder. Are you sure? What all was going on when that day-trader back in our homeland (ritually?) sacrificed the "oppressors" in his stock game plan? Im not in-the-know about the technical specs of ritual. Liturgical types would know more. But Wall Street surely abounds in salvation lingo, doesnt it? So can ritual be far behind? Savings and losses. Gaining or getting wiped out. Earnings. Making a killing. And what kind of animals "really" are that bull and that bear that mark the markets yin and yang, its upside and downside? Is the growing wave of Lone Ranger murders becoming a grass-roots ritual for our countrys "Hinduism," sacrifices to silence the Evil Spirits that people sense are killing them? It is a grisly kind of balance, of course, some counter "noise" these Lone Rangers choose "to silence the deadly decibels breaking my eardrums, breaking my heart?"OK, that's to your email of July 30. Now to the one from Aug. 2 with its eleven (11!) question marks. I'll tackle a couple of them.

4. When I tried to do some Christian crossings to the first cremation we witnessed, I focused on two items: immortality of the soul and immutability of karmas law that you get what you deserve. Thereupon you say: "Wait a minute. Doesnt the Gospel too, and not just God's law, says no to immortality of the soul?" Of course, it does. My point was to simplify matters by assigning the "NO" word to the law—lex semper accusat and all that—to signal that human souls are not death-proof (immune to God's critique) any more than any other segment of a sinner is. Then for balance (oops!) I assigned the "YES" word—Yes, karma can be broken—to the Gospel. Doesn't Paul say somewhere that Christ is God's big Yes to us? Well, then. I wasnt anticipating such analytical readers as you are.

5. Your final set of questions addresses whether Christ's power over the demons and disease points to a D-2 remedy, but doesn't go all the way to the D-3 turf to remedy "our problem with God?" I've thought about that too. When is D-3 a genuine "God-problem?" Seems to me that if the focus is on a sinner's "faith" in the demons, even the terrified faith called fear, then that locates the matter in the human heart, D-2 turf. Whatever we "fear, love, and trust," is what we "hang our hearts on," someone famous once said. So FEAR of the demons is a "hang your heart" reality. All that's the language of D-2. But then again, if the focus is on our demons actually owning us, possessing us as in the recent Gospel pericope of the Canaanite woman's daughter, that sounds like D-3 stuff, doesn't it? Namely, that dear daughter's disconnection from her Creator-owner, and already harvesting the consequences. Is that "hell," or isn't it? And if so, isn't that a D-3 dilemma both for this Canaanite daughter and her mother too?
6. 'Course, the D-2 and D-3 data are difficult to filter out cleanly from the telescoped text of the pericope, since this feisty mother comes on so strong as the gutsiest genuine disciple Christ ever had, and that right from her opening words. She makes a pitch for "mercy," to the "Son of David" [who implements God's Davidic mercy covenant—see 2 Samuel 7—not the Mosaic "other" one] and claims this one as her own "Lord" (=my owner). She's coming out of D-3, but by the time we meet her, she acts and speaks as though her D-3 is already a "Yes, but..." The God-problem I think is not just "Now, let's get to D-3 where we have to confront God," but to ask in this text: Is this woman God-abandoned? Does the text point that direction? When she accepts the "dog" designation, isn't she "same-saying" a D-3 diagnosis? Of course. But at the very moment of her

same-saying this diagnosis comes her faiths feisty “But....”
“Yes, the diagnosis is all true, but nevertheless I trust that you, Master [‘kyrios,’ same term she used in her opening statement] supply crumbs for just such dogs. So feed me. Are you Davids Son or arent you?”

I’ll stop here. Now that I think about it, Tim, your feisty questions—deep too—hint that this hero of the faith might just be somewhere back there in your own family tree. Im glad I married into your clan.

Peace & Joy!

Uncle Ed

Implications of Justification in the Many Contexts of Today’s World

Seventy “younger” Lutheran theologians, most of them from the two-thirds world, travelled at the invitation of the Lutheran World Federation to Wittenberg, Germany, at the end of October this year to talk about the Implications of Justification in the Many Contexts of Today’s World. On the last day of their meeting, Reformation Day, the 31st, they presented their theses, 12 of them, to the member churches of the LWF. And where did they post them? Not on the door of the castle church in town, as Luther himself had done with his 95 theses 481 years before, but on the Internet. Talk about new contexts for justification! What Gutenberg’s printing press did for the cause of justification by

faith alone (JBFA) 500 years ago, the Internet can do for it now, they said. So they put their message where their mouth was. You can see for yourself at www.lutheranworld.org/wittenberg/document/theses.html

Although professed Lutherans presented papers on the justification issue, the LWF brought in “outsiders” to deliberate the issue of cyberspace as a medium for JBFA. One of those from outside the club was Ignacio Ramonet, a leading French journalist. He warned that cyber-tech wineskins come already partially filled with their own wine. The brute fact of inequality between the “info-rich” and the “info-poor” marginalizes millions of people, he said. Information technology is not immune to original sin. The “brave new world” of “a perfect market of information and communication, completely integrated . . . without borders and functioning permanently in real time” is just that, a utopia more akin to Dante’s inferno than anything else.

But another speaker—maybe not really an outsider since, like Luther once, he’s a Roman Catholic monk—sounded a more cheering note. This came from a very different context, namely, a monastery in the middle of the New Mexico desert. The monks of the Monastery of Christ in the Desert (Albuquerque, NM) have picked up the tools of the Internet to create a global community on the World Wide Web. Their site now averages 20,000 “hits” per day, though they once got a million a day when CNN featured them and the New York Times gave them a front-page story. What they offer is chants, homilies, prayers, information about the monastery, links to other resources and even information about sustainable building and renewable energy.

Two of the monks answer the prayer requests, while another, originally trained to illuminate manuscripts, provides images for the site, drawing on the artistic traditions of New Mexico

and other streams of south-west US culture. Only a minority of the Web-visitors are Roman Catholic, and many say they have no religion at all. Their latest project is to set up an on-line prayer calendar. The monks are working with IBM to replace their prayer books with computer panels, so that people around the world can log on and pray with the monks in “real time.” Brother Aquinas Woodworth, the architect of all this, relished the irony of explaining the virtues of new communication technology to Lutherans in Wittenberg.

The reports in Lutheran World Information (LWI) and Ecumenical News International (ENI) don’t reveal whether last October’s “younger” Wittenbergers actually got around to crossing today’s internet context with JBFA theology . Can the Reformation Gospel exorcise the demons that Ramonet warned about and run on the internet as it once did on the printing press? And vis-a-vis the New Mexico monks, can JBFA good news go on-line as readily as their prayer calendar does? Does the Gospel need not only “real time,” but a real face with a real voice in order to interface with people today as well as (it seemed to) in the past? These are the agenda items confronting our own Crossings web-spinners. Ideas and experience from any of you receiving ThTh will be greatly appreciated. We need all the help we can get.

How did JBFA itself fare at the Wittenberg gathering? Some answers can be deciphered from the twelve theses [actually paragraphs] of the “working paper” they posted on the web. Their language bulges with additional terms from today’s contexts: process, complexity, concern, today’s world, interpret anew, meaning, accents, implications.

After an opening preface on justification articulated in classical Reformation terminology—they were after all in “Lutherstadt” Wittenberg and it was October 31—the document then “tries to explicate this code language” for people today. So the

12 theses proceed under the overall caption: "What Justification could imply..." Then come the contexts.

"In the context of global economics" today we're bombarded with the ideology of justification by production, prosperity and consumption. [I've seen that just today in the Christmas wish-lists our grandchildren have presented to us.] Au contraire JBFA with God's declaration of our identity and value in Christ. "Justification frees one from the tyranny of the market, and impels Christians to care for those who are victims of the market ... and its religion of productivity."

"In the context of global communication . . . justification implies that we oppose the messianic promises of mass communication systems and that we encourage their practical enhancement of genuine community."

"In the context of gender consciousness . . . justification means the equal value of women and men . . . challenging stereotyped or generalized views about gender relationships with a sensitive understanding of the real conditions of both genders" in widely different contexts throughout the world. Both self-righteousness and self-deprecation are manifestations of sin. Justification liberates sinners of both kinds.

"In the context of pluralism...we as justified people can remain open-minded towards understanding other people, religions and beliefs." Why? Because "our righteousness is not inextricably linked to the code language by which we communicate the faith, but is ensured by the Christ whom we confess." This suggests, it seems to me, that if Paul could be a Jew to the Jews and a Greek to the Greeks, then being a Muslim with Muslims and a Buddhist with Buddhists is not beyond the pale for Christians today.

Thesis nine notes that "secularity is part of the world's pluralistic character." Though it can strengthen freedom and

solidarity, secularity pushes its own justification agenda. "People are forced to justify themselves vis-a-vis others and are therein both accusers and accused." The modern pressure to justify oneself is itself a global problem. Here JBFA is timely. "In this situation justification in Christ offers God's freedom from the awful compulsion to demand and to accuse, and to justify and protect ourselves." Here too the challenge is to "communicate the good news in terms adequate to the context," which must mean—though the document doesn't say so—as a secularist to the secularists.

The document is "good Lutheran" in pinpointing the justification agenda that comes in the guise of secularity. Even "better" Lutheran would be to say that this pressure to justify ourselves, though mediated by the contexts we live in, does not come finally from those contexts, but from God's own self—as Adam found out in the context of the bushes in Genesis 3. And it is in the face of God's own demand that we justify ourselves that JBFA is the deepest good news of all.

"In the context of the church" the new Wittenbergers say: "The church is a consequence of justification. . . . When the church lives in the certainty of justification, it can risk prophetic witness and need not feel obliged to mimic culture's criteria of success." It need not maintain a chronic defensive attitude. It can acknowledge its failures and guilt. "Finally, the justified church need not justify itself even by reference to its theology of justification, but can and will expend itself for the communication of justification through all the world."

The final thesis is a "Conclusion: Justification as the call to Apostolic Witness."

Curmudgeon that I sometimes am, I was grumpy after my first reading. Maybe because I was too old—and too unknown—to get

invited to the party. But I softened up when I went through the text a second time (almost) rejoicing here and there, as you can detect above. However, had some of us “older” folks been there, we might have put in a plug for one significant element in the 16th century context for justification talk missing in this message.

These younger Wittenbergers speak of justification as somewhat “flat.” Sinners are OK with God when they trust Christ; nothing more is needed. That’s true. But in Luther’s day justification by faith was a phrase that jolted. Justification was not merely a courtroom term, but a gallows term. Capital criminals were “justified” (=given their due justice) when they were executed. The big deal about JBFA is that sinners get justified (put to death) in their union with Christ. He dies our death with us and for us. Then just as he was raised at Easter, Christ-connected sinners survive their own executions to walk in newness of life. That’s hardly flat. Yet for sinners it is very flattering.

Linking justification as a new way of dying to today’s contexts probably calls for another conference. Maybe it could be done next year in Wittenberg on the occasion of Katie (von Bora) Luther’s 500th birthday. She was born on 29 January 1499. Celebrations are in the works at the “Lutherhaus” which she managed during her and Martin’s time in Wittenberg. Oftentimes better than Martin himself, he said, she lived in the death-defying freedom of JBFA.

And apropos of dying, while writing this I got a phone call with the news of the death this evening of Carl Volz at Luther Seminary, St. Paul, Minnesota. A Seminex colleague from days gone by and a gutsy JBFA contextual theologian, Carl relished the flattery of having already died with Christ. He signalled the new life in Christ already operational in the vitality with which he carried out his callings. He’d patently gotten his

second wind, the Holy Gust. Requiescat in pace.

Peace & Joy!
Ed Schroeder

Responsible Theological Education

Edward H. Schroeder

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“...that Thy Word, as becometh it, may not be bound, but have free course and...”

That line from the collect (“for the church”) is a motto for responsible theological education. Of course, theological education is a churchly task. Were there no community of Christ-believers, what we today call theological education would not exist either. Oh, historians might study the church’s ancient documents and its history for purposes of better understanding the human dream. But surely they would not busy themselves initially to let that Word have free course. Of course it might just happen, given what that Word, whenever encountered via whatever vehicle, is always capable of doing “where and when it pleases God.”

The Word, and the free course that becomes it, is the nucleus of the business of theological education. But, as the collect reminds us, that agenda is instrumental to yet another purpose:

“to be preached to the joy and edifying of Christ’s holy people”— which agenda in turn is also instrumental: “that in steadfast faith we may serve Thee and in the confession of Thy name abide unto the end through Jesus Christ our Lord.”

It is simply “becoming” to the Word to have free course. Curricularly as well. This freedom, of course, is the strongest indictment of the theological education now taking over at major LC-MS institutions. The “binding” resolutions (consciences, contracts, clauses, or whatever) allegedly imposed to protect the Word are crass contradictions to the very Word that is the agenda for theological education. That same freedom, of course, is also the grounds that guarantee the failure of such theological education. Imagine trying to bind molten metal in a paper cup. Poof! Or trying to “work” molten metal with wooden chopsticks. Disaster! For the chopsticks!

Doubtless the freedom of that freely coursing Word is a risky vertigo-inducing cascade—sparks, heat, energy, glow, and all. Our harshest critics probably have the least notion of how daring that risk actually is. It carries us away and leads us to risk telling, not just our leaders, but God Himself that we fear no criticism, not even His. Such cosmic freedom for sinners is what that freely-coursing Word is all about. It cannot be bound. Neither can we when we are riding on it. True, people can be barricaded from it, and the free word can be aped by surrogates and supplanted by them, and it is not easy to detect the genuine article when the counterfeit has been cunningly molded. Is that not what is happening in the “education” coming from 500, 801, and elsewhere these days like never before?

When the Word gets its free course to people, their “joy and edification” is the result; and when Christ’s holy people are rendered this service, they themselves are outfitted for “steadfast faith,” “serving Thee,” “confessing His name,” an

“abiding to the end.” The end-product of responsible theological education is the response it creates in the final client: consumer jollification and edification. This is not the same as consumer satisfaction. All efforts to get grass-root laity support for a movement must bear this in mind. If you do wish to measure consumer satisfaction, the Word itself gives the standard for what satisfactory satisfaction is. Suppose we conducted our own “Saxon visitation” in the LC-MS. The question for the people to answer in order to test how responsible our theological education has been is this: How are you doing on the items in the last half of the collect? Has our churchly care delivered to you the free-coursing Word so that you can cope in joy and edification on the turfs of steadfast faith, serving Christ, confessing the name, and abiding to the end?

We are tempted to say that “our” theological education does all that, while “theirs” does not. Until it has been tested, all we can say is that the collect text is our explicit agenda with the Gospel’s own freedom at the heart of the matter. Judging from the horrendous history of the controlling board at 801 and from Robert Preus’ inaugural speech at Springfield, an alternate, yea antithetical, agenda is elsewhere the clear order of the day. And because it countermands what the free-coursing Word channels out for itself, it will fail. Thus Christians at work on the “free course” agenda should encourage one another to have no fear—not really—of the rampant take-over now underway by agents of the other agenda. Tears, yes; but fears, no. The counsel of Gamaliel is our insight. In seeking to silence, to bind God’s Word, they are not finally our opponents. Rather, they are “opposing God”—perhaps no more wittingly than the Sanhedrin did it— which inevitably leads to grim consequences for their program and its programmers.

How does this “free course” platform for theological education qualify as “responsible”? Simply stated, “responsible” is a

value judgment term. Responsible action is "right" action. Irresponsible is "wrong." It is not finally the action, but the actor who is being evaluated by the term. The person is the bearer of the qualitative evaluation. The approval or the disapproval is placed on the person's back and the consequences to be suffered or enjoyed.

By what yardstick of evaluation does any churchly action qualify as responsible, right, kosher, approved? Answer: by the yardstick of the very Word of God under discussion above. At root that freely-coursing gospel Word is evaluative. Fact is that's how it creates freedom. It liberates folks out from under a whole spate of deadly negative evaluations and sets them loose in a new creation of such new evaluations as: beloved child in whom I am well-pleased, forgiven, righteous, holy. Can such a yardstick of personal evaluation be used for such a corporate phenomenon as churchly theological education? If for no other reason than that our critics say "no," we ought to see whether it might not be "yes."

It means setting up structures that are compatible with the perpetual aim of the Gospel, as Melanchthon says in Augsburg Confession 28. If molten metal is what you've got to work with, then the instruments must be compatible; otherwise you're not being responsible, not making the proper response. Where our molten metal metaphor limps is that the paper-cup and chopsticks alternative suggests more a mental defect than a moral one in the practioner. The folly of trying to bind the Word would not seem so bad if one had never encountered it before. But for people who have been praying the collect all their lives to do so is morally culpable. Not merely mistaken, they are wrong. God's own Word judges their venture culpable. Like their ancestors, the Galatian judaizer- Christians, they are not merely "foolish," but under the apostolic (God's) anathema.

A proposal for theological education is responsible if it is a proper response (cor- responds) to the perpetual aim of the Word of the Gospel. Does anyone doubt any longer that the conflict in the LC-MS is over this yardstick? How can there be consensus on responsible theological education, or responsible anything else, as long as the yardstick for measurement and the very power that elicits our response, the Word and its free course, is so conflicted?

It is at the root meaning of the term response/responsibility that I am already at stage two in a process. I have already been acted upon. For example, like Adam in Genesis 3, God bids me hold still for a moment while he checks me out: "Adam, where are you?" Or, again, a claim is made upon me by every encounter with some fellow human being who demands my attention, my time, perhaps my tears, money, help, even my life. So the responder does not start on an empty stage. Something has already been plopped in front of him and now he's compelled to respond; and the response is proper/improper, responsible/irresponsible, if he did/did not do what he ought to have done. He ought to have yardsticked his response by the yardstick that God himself is finally using for cosmic evaluation (a la Romans 2.16) "on that day when, according to my gospel, God judges the secrets of men by Christ Jesus."

It has been given to you..." is the apostolic formula for looking at what has been plopped in front of us. Even when we have an active role in shaping the history that now confronts us, "it has been given to us" for our responsible, faith-full response. Exile has been given to us. Elim's existence and continuing care have been given to us. The historical-critical method has been given to us, by the same God no doubt who gave St. Paul rabbinic methods and the Lutheran reformers humanistic methods of Biblical interpretation. The tradition of academic freedom has been given to us. The Reformation heritage has been given to us.

Missouri's conflicting history has been given to us. For most of the readers of this journal the task of theological education has been given to us. What responses are responsible according to the yardstick of the freely-coursing Gospel? For the remainder of this piece I offer some ideas for being responsible towards a few of the givens of this paragraph.

The Gift of Historical Critical Methods

Every Elimate had his own way for responsible use of this gift. Here's a segment of mine. Rabbinic methods in the New Testament era and humanistic methods in the late middle Ages were used both by those who read the Scriptures rightly and those who read them wrongly. The methods were no guarantee one way or the other. If Rabbinic Torah- centrism and humanism's pelagianism were false doctrine (and they were, and are), defect in the "-ism" did not prevent faithful use of the exegetical methods that arose with the "-isms." Finally, it was the Word itself, wouldn't we say, which used them to carve additional footage in its "free course to be preached to the joy and edifying of Christ's holy people." There is nothing more or less "faithless" about historical-critical methods than there was about first and sixteenth "secular" tools of interpretation.

One thing our sixteenth century fathers did when using the methods of their day was to insist on asking their own questions, and not the pelagian questions, of the texts. They addressed the texts not with pre-conceived answers, but with consciously perceived questions: What is the Word of divine criticism here and how does it flow? What is the Word of divine promise here and just how promising is it? What little I really know of critical historical methods does not indicate that such techniques—for separating traditions, chronicling development of a text's own history, clarifying the historically conditioned aspect of a Biblical writer, sifting the mythic and legendary

components loose in ancient texts—would inhibit final asking of the “free course” questions. How did folks then get critically evaluated via this text? How did folks then get any message of joy, if at all, coursing through to them via this text? Is there anything which *ipso facto* rules such questions out of court when current scholarly methods are used on Biblical texts? Is not that the “responsible” question to be addressed to this issue in theological education? And hasn’t the unbound Word already shown that it has been using this channel for the further charting of its own course?

The Gift of Academic Freedom

The tradition of academic freedom has one of its roots in the Reformation. Simply stated, it says: No one tells you ahead of time what you have “got to” believe; the data themselves tell you what you “get to” believe. Isn’t that an interesting twist? That is true as well of the data at the center of the collect for the church. Our danger is not that we will believe and teach things too expansive, too liberal, too good to be true, too radical, and thus we need restrictions to hold us to a more modest pantry of credibles and teachables. No, it is rather that apart from the Word’s own liberation we are chronically too chintzy, too miserly about the truth. That applies to both the depth of the truth of the bad news and the even more profound depth of the truth of the good news. Our defect is that we stand incredulous (you wouldn’t believe!) before all the heady stuff which we get to believe from the free course of the Word.

When we make a confessional commitment this notion of academic freedom is not being short-circuited. Instead it is being practiced. We are not “binding” ourselves to all the things you “gotta” believe, but willfully tying ourselves to that cascading flow, that One Source of all that we “get to” believe for our own and others’ “joy and edification.” And we admit that we

don't yet know what all that is. Is that responsible? The collect's Gospel yardstick says so. We trust that God concurs.

The Gift of the Community

At a seminary where the confessional commitment is held to be a "get to" rather than a "got to" there is no bondage in being bound to a confession. So in life together the model of conciliarism (Acts 15 is the first recorded instance of it in the church) shapes community life insofar as it is consciously organized at all. Problems are not pleasant, but they ought not be let go to waste. There is the expectation that everyone can still be edified, that consensus is a realizable goal, though it may take hours and hours of talk and worship. Seminex's own internal achievement on this score is very modest. But the vision is consciously perceived. It is now documentarily framed into our charter and by-laws. We are now trying to keep it going in practice.

But that is not just Seminex's bag. That's the gift of the entire Elim movement. Since One is our master, we are all of us equal sub-ordinates. This does not deny that some are older and others younger, some wiser, some gifted this way, others gifted that way. At Seminex just one year ago we were all led by the student body's own initiative, their taking the risky first step of gutsy Gospel freedom. It was given to the rest of us to respond to what the free course of the Word had moved them to do.

Is such leveling equality of persons responsible? Since One is our master this risky consequence is what we "get to" believe. Would that our current church leadership did not think that such equal sub-ordination were too good to be true. The gospel yardstick says it is indeed true. We trust that God concurs.

The Gift of The Tradition

In commemoration of St. Stephen's Day this Christmas, I read his story in Acts. His speech there is the Christian model for reading one's own community's tradition. Stephen measures the tradition of Israel by the yardstick and sees that there were two traditions in the tradition. One was a tradition of the people's just plain cussed unfaithfulness back to and including the patriarchs. The other was the tradition of Gods continuing to send agents of His freedom-bestowing Word to these very same people even as they persecuted and slew them for their trouble.

The LC-MS tradition is similarly a mixed weaving of two traditions. One is some just plain gosh-awful legalism, ruthlessness, unlove, and unfaith (e.g., what the fathers did to Scharlemann in the early sixties, to the 44 in the forties, to Brux a generation before that, and more), which qualifies New Orleans and what has followed in its train to be genuinely "traditional" Missouri. And there is the other tradition of evangelism, pastoral care, Biblical-Gospel fidelity fostered by agents whom God has given to us in the very face of the other tradition. Faithfulness to the tradition is to read the history of the fathers as Stephen did, normed by the Gospel, and, of course, not to be surprised at the reaction that follows.

We know that the Reformers read their tradition in precisely this way. If you will, you might say they did a "gospel-reduction" process on it. Better still, this is the way the Word of God Himself read the tradition when He traversed Palestine and engaged the official keepers of the tradition. So when we seek to do likewise, we call that responsible. We trust that He concurs.

Finally Seminex, as Gift and Promise

Is Seminex all that promising for responsible theological education? I have left most of the bases untouched about what actually happens in a week's worth of work. Not only the bases and how we run them, but the outfield as well have hardly been mentioned. This essay has been mostly about the pitcher's mound, one could say, and how that center of the diamond looks to me. It doesn't say anything of how good the game is that we are actually playing.

Seminex's promise for responsible theological education is not apparent in its institutional givens: longevity, fiscal fixity, public acceptance of itself and its graduates. But then measured by the yardstick its very temporariness might well be its promise. Nor is our community of any "gnostically" superior quality as we practice the faith. We still have one Old Adam/Eve in each one of us. Chapel attendance is not automatically easier for us than for other readers of this publication.

The promise of Seminex lies in what has been given to us: to live very publicly by what we confess; to enjoy and be edified by the unbounding which Exile bestowed upon us; to do something with the Gospel-reduction Platzregen which God showered upon this bunch at this time (Caemmerer, Piepkorn, Bertram, Krentz, Tietjen, etc.; their names are not legion, yet God has made one out of them!); to have a share in Elim, the movement, and to be paycheck-receiving beneficiaries out of it; to have students who first came and keep coming.

Perhaps it could finally be said that what has been given to us is a model of church reform that is "free course" rather than programmatic. We have no five-year plan, although we wistfully long for one out loud. But then how could we? We are subordinates, not the Head. He, not we, has his hand on the

conveyer-trough of the free- flow. Our agenda is to be faithful with what gets plopped in front of us. We don't say it very often, though we should, that the central historical question at Anaheim is not what will "they" do, but what is "He" going to do. Until He does, we've not yet got Anaheim to respond to.

Does that mean being lackadaisical? No, it means doing today's pre-Anaheim agenda with a view toward tomorrow, of course, but not with the chopsticks notion that we've "got to" channel the free-flowing course of events to make sure that such and such takes place before July 1, or the end of this year, or of this century. It (He) will channel us—to our joy and edification, and surprise! Is that a responsible view of the reform movement and its theological education, action, reflection? I think so. But if it is not, then the yardstick presented in the collect needs to correct it, and such correction is invited. Which very thing, "the Holy Spirit, and the wisdom that cometh down from above" promises to do "for the church," viz., US.

Edward H. Schroeder

[ResponsibleTheologicalEducation \(PDF\)](#)

What's Lutheran About Higher Education? Theological Presuppositions

Robert W. Bertram

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(Four Theses)

In the encyclopedia of the university's arts and sciences, the closer you advance toward that center where humanity was more substantively the object of your studies the more it would make a difference whether the general view of man from which you proceeded was Christian or something else.

(Editor's note: Dr. Bertram kindly agreed to present the luncheon address previously scheduled to be delivered by Dr. Arthur Carl Piepkorn, Graduate Professor of Systematic Theology at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis. Dr Piepkorn died suddenly in December of 1973. In his introductory remarks Dr. Bertram indicated that while enunciating four theses to develop his theme, he would treat in detail only the first of them. During the question and answer period, much of his thought on the remaining three theses was presented, and he has consented, upon request of many LECNA members, to have this discussion also printed in these **Proceedings**.)

1) What is Lutheran about higher education is the claim to be able to speak not just for one denomination but for the whole of catholic Christendom and to be held publicly accountable for that whole claim. But such claims to universal validity and universal accountability are characteristic also of good higher education.

2) What is Lutheran (or Christian) about higher education is the discovery that Christian higher education is practically the

same as any good higher education. What is distinctively Christian is the distinctively Christian ground from which that otherwise very general discovery proceeds.

3) What is Lutheran (or Christian) about higher education is that it is a way for students to learn about sin under Christian auspices.

4) What is Lutheran (or Christian) about higher education is the persistent re-asking of that very question, and the persistent re-answering of it.

Elaboration of Thesis One

If there was anything that the original Lutherans – say the first signers of the Augsburg Confession – did not want to be, it was original Lutherans. They wanted to be neither original nor merely Lutheran. They wanted to be only Christian – only that but also all that. No more than that but also no less. When they claimed as they did, to be confessing only what all faithful catholics and the prophets and apostles before them had ever confessed, their claim was not so much an act of modesty as it was an act of audacity, at least of extraordinary self-confidence. They were saying in effect to the whole church and to the world that in that historical circumstance their confession was the one best way to confess the faith, for all Christians.

That is the sort of all-out claim which no Christian group can make within the hearing of the rest of Christendom and expect to get away with it – that is, without being challenged. The Lutheran confessors not only expected to be challenged, they invited challenge. Yes, they pleaded to be challenged. Most daringly of all, they called for God Himself to check them out. But also they appealed to the whole church not only of their own

time but for all time to come to scrutinize their confession for its fidelity to God's Word. The confessors, in short, opened their books to public audit. And they did so, not because they were unsure of their confession but precisely because they were sure of it. They were sure enough to be utterly open and vulnerable. That is being church – and confessional and Christian and classically Lutheran. But isn't that also an objective of higher education: to claim only that which is valid universally but, in venturing such a large claim, to risk wholesale exposure?

However, that bold brand of Lutheranism – so heroically vulnerable in its claim to universality, demonstrable universality at that – is not the sort of Lutheranism, alas, which most of our churches dare to present to the world nowadays. I believe we could again begin to dare that, even in our higher education. Unless we do dare it, we are doomed to continue thinking of Lutheranism in the same cautiously insulated way we now do, namely as but one denominational alternative among others. That is playing it safe. That way our confession is less likely to be questioned by others, since we have been careful in the first place not to implicate them in its claims. But that way there is also no reason ultimately for Lutheranism's extension into other people's commitments, let alone into their arts and sciences. Then all we claim for our confession is that it reflects the particular way the Gospel happens to strike us Lutherans and our Lutheran ancestors and, just maybe (as we cross our fingers) our children. Whether or not our confession ought to strike other folks that way, we can at best wish. Even then we don't dare wish it for them too loudly lest we create an impression of intolerance. As if it were the claim to catholicity which makes for intolerance. But does it, really?

In fact might not the opposite be the case? Isn't it the

denominations which want to be left alone theologically – out of fear of exposure, I suspect – which are most prone to intolerance, intolerance not to outsiders perhaps but at least to their own membership? Isn't this a real and present danger with those who are concerned to be just Lutheran without risking Lutheranism's catholicity and – aye, there's the rub – its ecumenical accountability? And if such escapism, such flight into religious pluralism for one's own denomination immunity – if that is what is Lutheran about higher education, then isn't higher education under such auspices well-nigh impossible? I am tempted to say: show me a body of Christians who settle for a Christian faith which is merely their own version of it, and I will show you a church-body which is but one short step away from the harshest intolerance. For, having begun by saying ever so modestly, this is only the Gospel the way we see it, they are patsies for the next step which says, therefore the way we see it is all that matters. So instead of church, they mistake themselves for some private voluntary organization which speaks only for itself and which, like any business corporation, can decide by a majority vote of its members what its employees shall and shall not teach. As some of us can attest, denominations can get away with that without serious challenge from the rest of Christendom, so long as they prudently avoid claiming too much universality for their own confessions and content themselves with cultivating only their own traditions. And they have correspondingly narrow institutions of higher education to show for it.

However, as we are saying, to claim to be speaking only for Lutherans is not very Lutheran whether in higher education or anywhere else. To claim to be speaking for the whole Christian church, indeed for the God of all that is – that is Lutheran. Ah, but then wouldn't we be subject to audit by the whole Christian Church? Exactly. And wouldn't we be especially

vulnerable if we made that claim in places of higher education? Right, especially vulnerable. But what if we could not make good on our claim to catholicity? Well, then, to quote one of the favorite sons of this state, if we cannot stand the heat we ought to get out of the kitchen. Or to put the matter a little more positively, let's do recapture the catholic boldness of our radical confessional heritage, and of course re- incur all the exhilarating risks and vulnerability thereunto appertaining. In the process we may not last any longer than the University of Wittenberg did. But oh, while we last, if we could do that much or even half that much, for all of Christendom and higher education!

Open Discussion

(After a re-reading of all four theses, response was invited from the audiences)

First Question: I don't want to let Bob get away without saying a word about one of the other remaining theses. And I guess I want to ask whether I understand number two as he wants it understood In my notes: "the discovery that Christian higher education is the same as practically **any** good higher education, but what's distinctive is the Christian ground from which that discovery proceeds." Is that it?

Bertram: Right.

Questioner: Do I hear you correctly that it's not the Christian ground for all the ramifications of the education, it's the Christian ground for the discovery? There's chemistry and economics and history and business administration, all these disciplines and their sub-disciplines. I take it you are not claiming that these disciplines rest on Christian grounds but that the discovery about the nature of higher education and the

nature of the Christian enterprise rests on Christian grounds.

Bertram: Right, that much at least I was trying to say. Really I wanted to venture something even a bit more radical than that. (Perhaps what I regard as “even more radical” is what Dr. Jungkuntz was asking in the first place.) The standard conundrum is, Is there such a thing as Christian mathematics?” And everybody in the room laughs and says, “Of course not.” And the answer truly is “Of course not.” You listed other disciplines in which the same answer would apply: chemistry, economics, even disciplines outside the laboratory sciences. How about a discipline as problematic and controversial as Dr. Ahlstrom’s, namely, history? Is there such a thing as Christian history, Christian historiography – say, a Christian history of China? I am tempted to reply that even in the case of the discipline called history there is no such thing as Christian history. I mean history – like the history of China – Christianly revealed. History – writing done well is history – writing done well whether it is done by Christians or non-Christians.

Now that discovery is not particularly earth-shaking. But what I am suggesting is that it makes a great deal of difference what your grounds are for making that discovery, and your ground for asserting it. Any secularist, any noble pagan can see there is no such thing as Christian chemistry. So at least in their conclusions the Christian and the non-Christian are in agreement. But once they begin to probe as to why they drew that conclusion they are going to discover that the grounds for their reaching that conclusion are really quite different. The secularist makes the statement literally as a negative, “There is no such thing as Christian chemistry.” The Christian, too, agrees with that negative form of the statement. But then he adds, “There is also an affirmative, a positive, shall I say a celebrative reason for asserting that there is no Christian chemistry. In short, **thank God** there is no such thing as

Christian chemistry. Thank God that there is such a thing as chemistry. And thanking God is in this case not just a pious expletive but an assertion of full theological seriousness. In other words, God still runs chemistry, thanks be! At least, more or less He does. Just how far our chemistry teaching and learning are His operation, I obviously don't know. But in any case what Christians do have ground for believing is that chemistry has a great deal about it that is godly.

Just because there is no such thing as Christian chemistry it does not follow that chemistry therefore is god-less, spiritually neutral, something that God has nothing to do with. On the contrary, the chemical realities of the world and our teaching and learning of them are, as Christians believe, God's own doing. So much so that there are chemistry professors galore, by far the most of them perhaps, who do God's chemical bidding without even knowing whose bidding they are doing. That can be an advantage. That way God does not have to worry whether the world's chemists are sufficiently Christian in order for Him to advance the science of chemistry. That should be a source of assurance to us all. It can be that if our own final source of assurance is Christian. We Christians, so we claim, are in on the happy secret of who is behind all this chemistry. It is always reassuring for employees to know "who is in charge around here," at least when the operation is in good hands. Given that basic reassurance, it is then a further assurance to know that chemistry does not have to be Christian in order to be good – that is, in order to be God's.

Put it another way. Christians, and I should hope this would be especially true of Lutherans, feel under no particular compunction to say, "Only that is Christian which is **distinctively** Christian." True, that is a fallacy which we have often gotten ourselves into when we ask the question, "What is Lutheran or Christian about higher education." Often we read

into that sort of question a premature assumption. We assume mistakenly that in order for something like higher education to be Christian it would necessarily have to be unique, different from any other good kind of education. It would have to be something only Christians have and nobody else has, else it could not qualify as Christian. Since when? Admittedly, that may be so about many things, many of the most central things of the Christian proclamation, namely that they are distinctively Christian. But that certainly is not true of **all** the things which Christians do and enjoy. That is a great Christian fact to celebrate. For isn't it so that there are many, many things which characterize Christian existence even though they don't characterize Christian existence alone? How good it is to know that we Christians are not confined and limited to only those things which make us different, exclusive. There is many a good thing which characterizes Christian existence, for example, Christian higher education, yet not only in the sense that it is **uniquely** Christian but also in the sense that it is simply **characteristically** Christian.

Let's put the matter in the parlance of the theologian. We have been asking, What is the Christian reason – not only the negative but also the affirmative reason, for saying that there is no such thing as Christian chemistry or Christian political science? What we are asking about, in theological terminology, is the Christian doctrine of creation. The creation is available in one measure or another not only to the participation but also the knowledge, the intellectual grasp of all of God's human creatures, Christian or non-Christian. It comes as no great surprise that people doing political science, for example, are capable of doing it reasonably well independently of whether they are Christians or not. This then might raise a second orbit question, "Wouldn't you expect that Christian political scientists would do political science better than non-Christian

political scientists would?" Yes, I guess you would expect that, and I suppose that God does have a right to expect that. Yet I have to say that in my experience that expectation is not being awfully conspicuously fulfilled. Perhaps that failure simply reflects the low estate of the Christian sector generally nowadays. May be in other generations Christians did perform better than their non-Christian neighbors, and did so conspicuously. However, if even in our own day the question keeps arising, Isn't there some way in which Christians do things superiorly, then I think the way we might better state the contrast between Christian and non-Christian is as follows. I'm not sure that Christian political scientists do political science all that much better than non-Christian political scientists do. But what I certainly hope is that Christian political scientists do political science better than those same political scientists would if they were not Christian. Now that would be some gain. At least let us be thankful for that much. When you look at the Christian political scientists on your faculty, just say, they could have been worse.

Second Question: Well, I think I understand well what you mean. It does seem to me that you are perhaps presuming a more objective kind of chemistry and political science and mathematics than you really have a right to presume. After all these are human disciplines, and it's people who decide the kinds of problems that political scientists and chemists and mathematicians and historians will deal with. Even the hard sciences do not really grow out of themselves. They grow out of the endeavors of human beings who have values and whose work in their discipline is in part dictated by the kinds of people they are. So there is a sense in which the kind of work done in chemistry by a chemist may be different if his value system is different. Or the kinds of problems he cares to deal with as a chemist are different from those of the non-Christian.

Bertram: I do appreciate that comment. In fact, my own comments were meant to presuppose the one you made. Mine were only a kind of antiphon to the one you just made – a kind of corrective, may I say, to the way in which your sort of comment has often been exaggerated among us. Maybe my experience differs from the experience of the rest of you. My experience generally has been one in which that accent of yours has been the overwhelming one, often to the point of caricature. And I suppose I had hoped with my comments of a moment ago to provide a counter accent by way of balance. Nevertheless, even when I concede what you said about the false presumption of “objectivity”, even when I concede that the most traditionally objective sciences – astronomy, for example, or mathematics or some of the more questionably objective ones like economics – are not really so objective after all, do I by that concession contradict the point I was making: namely, that the discovery that there is no such thing as Christian chemistry may itself be a Christian discovery? To be sure, as more and more of the scientist himself and his valuings enter into the object of his research, naturally his conclusions, his judgments, are going to reflect himself and who he is. That I suppose is true enough. But that very observation, of course, has been made by non-Christians as well as by Christians, just as both Christians and non-Christians can agree on the observation that there is no such thing as Christian chemistry. Allow that to stand as an observation which both Christians and non-Christians agree to, namely, that as you reach those perimeters of objectivity where the man’s own subjectivity begins to transgress those limits, his “object” will reflect increasingly his own subjectivity. In other words, granted that subjectivity makes a substantive difference. However, I would still ask whether the kind of valuing that the man does necessarily makes his science less valuable if the kind of valuing he does is not Christian. Different, perhaps. But less valuable? Suppose his scientific

conclusions are just plain good, despite the fact that they reflect his own non-Christian subjectivity. Isn't that possible?

Suppose the non-Christian in question is a humanist. Lying here on the table is a book which Mrs. Farwell has been reading for her book club; the author is Abraham Maslow. Maslow is a humanist psychologist. Because he is, you and I might say, well, there are all sorts of places in Maslow's view of man where we would have to bow out, being the Christians we are and his being the non-Christian he is. To be sure. Yet at the same time it may be a bit more difficult, might it not, to identify just how it was that objective clinical research and therapeutic techniques had been vitiated by the **humanism** in Maslow's subjectivity. It may well be that where his conclusions went wrong they could have been corrected by simply improving on his humanism, not necessarily by transforming his assumptions into uniquely Christian ones. In short, maybe what Maslowian psychology could profit from is not less humanism but more of it, and more of the right kind of humanism.

Now having said all this, I would like to come back to the main thrust of what you said. I don't mean to say for a moment that Christian subjectivity may not enhance what a scientist does with his object. Emil Brunner used to speak of the law of the closeness of relations. What he was talking about was that in the encyclopedia of the university's arts and sciences, the closer you advance toward that center where humanity was more substantively the object of your studies the more it would make a difference whether the general view of man from which you proceeded was Christian or something else. That Brunnerian thesis is still true and still pertinent. However, I think what is also needed in our appeal to the people we have to reach today is to affirm the secular – however, to affirm the secular for radically Christian reasons. That is why I have been arguing that our reasons – **our** reasons – for saying there is no such

thing as Christian chemistry – ought to be Christian reasons.

Third Question: Would you comment on Theses 3 and 4.

Bertram: All right. First of all, Thesis Three. I owe that definition of a Christian university to one of my all-time favorite colleagues, John Strietelmeier of Valparaiso University. A church-related university is a place where young people learn about sin under Christian auspices. Not that they need Christian auspices to learn about sin. That they can learn elsewhere, perhaps almost as well. No, the implication is rather that Christian sinning is apt to be a more auspicious context in which to learn about sinning at all. What do they learn about sin that is particularly helpful for having learned it under Christian auspices?

By Christian auspices I do not mean merely the fact that the campus has a department of theology and a chapel. If I were a church-related university administrator today and you gave me a choice between a) a department of theology with required courses in theological instruction, b) or a chapel with the kind of liturgical commitment you might expect from undergraduates today, of c) a campus community with a sizeable majority of Christian faculty and Christian students, I think that if I had to choose between those three, I'd choose the third one, the Christian community. For it would be hard to imagine having the other two without first having that community. That's generally what I would mean by "under Christian auspices."

But under such auspices, what advantage is there for learning about sin? Well, for one thing, one advantage that comes to mind, one cardinal Christian lesson about sin is that sin is not ultimate. I don't think that that lesson, by itself, would come as a revelation to most American youth. By itself, in fact, that is not a Christian lesson at all. I mean that many people,

Christian and otherwise, believe that sin is far from ultimate. As a matter of fact, for many folks what is far more important about sin than its ultimacy is that it is fun. Or at least necessary. Or at the very least, inevitable. Christian lesson about sin is that there is a reason why sin is not ultimate and, apart from that **reason**, sin is ultimate. In Jesus as the Christ (and sooner or later you've got to name the Name) – in Jesus – the Christ sin is not ultimate. But anywhere else it is. That is partly what I had in mind by my third thesis, concerning the advantages of learning about sin under Christian auspices. The first lesson, as we just now said, is that in Jesus Christ sin has been domesticated, trumped, dethroned. But a second lesson is like unto that. What Christians learn in the process is that therefore they need not be so intimidated by sin that they hesitate to stand up in prophetic criticism of it. I guess the older I get and the more involved I become in political situations not of my own choosing, the more I am convinced that one of the greatest of the *beneficia Christi* is the gift of speaking judgment. The Lord knows it is a difficult enough lesson to accept criticism of oneself. But often enough it is more difficult by far to have the guts, if I may use such an expression, the sheer Christian courage to stand up and advance critical judgment against someone else especially against principalities and powers in high places. And what makes that already difficult task even more difficult is that there seem to be so many clear biblical injunctions against it, against the passing of judgment. What is significant though, is that the same prophetic biblical spokesman who inveigh against passing judgment are the very ones who perhaps in the selfsame sentence do just that themselves, that is, pass judgment. Which only underscores that judgment is by the Lord, not by us, and that any mere mortal who dares to speak that judgment in His behalf had better proceed with fear and trembling. And yet, **not** to speak His judgment when that is what He requires is more fearful

still.

In this connection I remind you of one of the sub-themes in Professor Ahlstrom's presentation this morning, and that is the high endorsement I took him to be giving to that one of the three strands in Lutheran higher educational tradition, to the **critical** tradition. I would endorse his endorsement, and I would say that the theology of the Lutheran Reformation is peculiarly suited to that capacity for criticism. Martin Luther observes, not once but many times, that one of the greatest cultural achievements of the Reformation in his own lifetime was the way ordinary Christian people were suddenly able to stand up and to make judgment, *indicium* upon all the realms and sectors of secular and ecclesiastical life. For example, said Luther, the plainest people in the parishes are now, thanks to the unloosing of the Gospel in their midst, so liberated that they can judge the vocation of a wife or of a merchant or of a prince to be every bit as prestigious and pleasing to God as the vocation of a monk. And so Luther predicted that if the Reformation would continue – though he did not seriously think it would – then before long all of life would be *sub judicio nostro*, “under our judgment.” That is, it would be subject to our own critical evaluation of it.

Now Luther took such ability to criticize to be an act of great freedom. Of course he had good precedent for that. That observation did not originate with him. He had appropriated that from the New Testament. At 11 Corinthians 3 Paul, in his rather esoteric distinction between the two dispensations, tells how his fellow Jews gathered in synagogue to read from Moses, that is, from the Torah. When they are face to face with the *logos tou theou*, that law of God which judges sin, they cannot bear to face it and instead have to continue to read it the way their forefathers had had to look at the blinding terrifying light of Moses' face when he came down to them from the mount of

legislation. They had to have their Moses – that is, their Law – veiled, masked, toned down, filtered. So intimidating was God's critical activity against them. That is indeed what the divine criticism is, intimidating, whether you have to suffer it against yourself or have to exert it against others. It's intimidating, that is, "until you have seen the Lord," the Lord Christ. Seeing him enables the sinner to look the divine criticism – or at least to begin looking the divine criticism – full in the face without being destroyed by it.

Now that happens also to be the modern western university tradition at its ideal best: free to be criticized and to criticize. That being so, might we not expect that one of the happiest assets for Christian community of teaching and learning would be that it is empowered with the kind of liberty to raise the Mosaic masks and to engage in criticism without fear of even that awful reprisal which comes upon all Christians and non-Christians alike who pass judgment. You know that if you judge you will be judged in return. But then if we know that, how can we so boldly extend sovereignty to all the people in a society like ours and thereby extend the franchise and with that extend the obligation, not just the right but the obligation, to be critical. For isn't that what the "public opinion" in a democratic society dares to do: to exercise a lawful and godly responsibility for judgment without fear or favor? In our society the people are obligated by God himself, so we believe, to cooperate in the divine *krinein*, *krima*. (That's where we got our word criticism.) The citizens are divinely obligated to engage in criticism. Yet at the same time, according to the New Testament witness, there is hell to pay for them when they do. No wonder they renege at the prospect of being critical.

But then given that agonizing dilemma, how can people deal with that? To which the Christian community replies, We thought you'd never ask. How can people bear their responsibility to be

critical when at the same time there is hell to pay for being critical? God so implicates them in the critical process that, when The Last Analysis comes, He can justly say to them, You have no right to protest against my now criticizing you, because by your own active complicity in my critical process – as a seminary professor or a chemist or a reader of editorials in the Post-Dispatch or whatever – you have forfeited any right to exempt yourself from that process when it now turns on you.

How can you lure Christians to engage in that critical process which they are under divine obligation to perform and still be honest enough to warn them that the risks and the cost of engaging in that process are exorbitant? Well that raises, to the point almost of a scream, the Christological question. Here finally we have supreme reason for making use of the history of Jesus Christ. For, as we believe and confess, he underwent the divine *krima* for us. Having done so he has liberated us in turn not only to accept the criticism which is our due but also courageously to engage in the advancing of that criticism wherever and whenever it needs to be advanced. I think that would be a major contribution by the theology of the Lutheran Reformation to our post-Enlightenment, critical-liberal university situations today.

Robert W. Bertram

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