

Repentance is not Popular—Neither in our Nation, nor in our Church

Colleagues,

First off this announcement from the Crossings office:

This year's St. Louis Advent Hymn Festival will be held Friday evening, December 7. Time: 7:30 pm. Place: Atonement Lutheran Church in Florissant, Missouri. The festival theme is "He Comes!...And Aren't You Glad?" It will be in honor of Dr. Robert W. Bertram with Petter Nettleing and Dawn Riske Hoy, organists. There will be a dinner beginning at 5:30 pm (\$7.00 per person, please RSVP 314-576-0567), and a reception following the service. Everyone is invited.

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That may not be so surprising for the nation. But that it's hard to find/hear repentance-talk or repentance-act among Christians, that is strange. Really strange. Amongst folks who live by the forgiveness of sins, admitting our sin is par for the course. It's step one in rendering us candidates for the forgiveness. Like saying I'm hungry, when you haven't eaten for hours—or, as with many in our world, for days. Throughout scripture there is joy accompanying repentance—just in case we needed an additional lure for doing it. In the penitential Psalms (e.g., 51) the person praying expects "joy and gladness" to come from the process. "Restore to me the joy of your salvation" is the flip-side of "Against you, you alone, have I sinned, and done what is

evil in your sight.”

So count it all joy. And therefore, like eating, doing so daily. The first of Luther’s 95 theses, hyped just a few days ago at Reformation Remembrance Day, claims this to be the original plan: “When our Lord and Master, Jesus Christ, said ‘Repent,’ he called for the entire life of believers to be one of penitence.” That’s not self-flagellation. Or masochism. Repentance is a turning—turning around—away from something toward something else. Finally a turning AWAY from death TOWARD life.

This coming Sunday is exactly two months since September 11, 2001. ThTh 170 posted that week recalled Luther’s 1529 call for repentance in a world-political situation similar to our own. The need that he saw for repentance, you may recall, was that God was one of the two enemies confronting the Holy Roman (aka Christian) Empire of Europe. And God was mad! Therefore the prayer of repentance was the only strategic response that would work vis-a-vis this enemy. Without it, Europe “didn’t have a prayer.” Question: Do we?

Repentance has not been significant in the public conversation in the USA, nor in the USA churches, nor in “my” church, the ELCA. But shouldn’t Christians—Lutherans especially—be about that business? Even if Luther hadn’t promoted repentance for such a time as this, doesn’t the Bible? St. Augustine is another ancient worthy who thought so, as you’ll see below. And then there’s always Jesus: “If they will not listen to Moses and the prophets,” he says in Luke 16, “neither will they be convinced by Someone risen from the dead.” Isn’t that a “woe” from Jesus [also a “whoa!”] addressed to us? How can it not be?

I didn’t expect the ThTh postings—six in a row (#170-175)—to make a dent in the public square. [Oh, me of little faith!] Even with that fantastic precedent that someone passed on to me, and

I to you, about Lincoln's unapologetic call to our nation for "Godly repentance" during the American Civil War. Nor with my two letters to the US president. But I did think churchly voices—even if they'd never heard of ThTh—would do so. Perhaps simply from reading the Bible and holding it alongside the TV screen. *[Footnote: Karl Barth once said that his paradigm for preaching in the village of Safenwil (I think it was) Switzerland, his first pastoral assignment, was to go into the pulpit with the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other. And then just tell the folks what he saw when he read them together.]*

I was disappointed with the November 2001 issue of the ELCA church magazine, THE LUTHERAN. Nearly half of its print pages are devoted to the Apocalypse Now of September 11, and never once does the word repentance appear (I read the texts very closely) anywhere on those pages. I mentioned that to a colleague, and he told me that the topic was indeed present in the articles, but much more "subtly" than I (with my sledge hammer approach?) wanted to see. To which I can only say: The penitential Psalms are not subtle.

Another disappointment came yesterday in a general letter to "Sisters and Brothers in Christ" from one of our ELCA seminaries. With a page and a half devoted to seminary education "after September 11," the "re-" word was not to be found. Real absence instead of real presence. And that in a letter calling for "Lutheran public voices who will take up responsibly and response-fully the task of stating clearly what God is up to in this hurting world."

If the worldlings themselves won't take up that topic, we churchy folks are surely called to do so, right? So "what is God up to in this hurting world?" That is the question. Would that our new ELCA bishop Hanson would lead us into open and public

conversation on that very topic. Starting tomorrow when he meets for the first time with the 40-plus members of the ELCA Church Council. "Stating clearly what God is up to in this hurting world" is surely on their agenda.

And now to Augustine.

In his "City of God" Augustine is addressing the charge that Christians are responsible for Rome's defeat at the hands of Alaric (410). Why the Christians? Because their "new" faith led the Roman populace away from Rome's classical gods, which then triggered the decline and fall of the empire.

Not so, says Augustine. Rome went down the drain because of its own injustice. And God doesn't tolerate injustice forever. He is indeed longsuffering—even for the empire's 1000 years (you know God's idiosyncratic calendar)—but he does "count trespasses." When the trespasser refuses to turn around, God finally visits the iniquity of the fathers upon the current population of the empire. Empires are in a bind, he says, for by definition they cannot "turn around" and still be an empire. Why not? Because injustice is built into the very structure of an empire. For an empire to repent would mean to cease to be an empire.

How so? Empires are one people subjugating one or more other peoples. And that can never be done without injustice to the peoples under the thumb (or military boot) of the conquering ones in charge. So Rome may have called its imperial management of other peoples "pax romana," but the pacified peoples themselves didn't experience it that way. Just look at the NT gospels for evidence of what one conquered people thought about Rome's control of their lives.

So it was not the Christians who brought about Rome's downfall, he claims. It was God, the ultimate critic, finally giving the empire its just deserts. "And what I say of this [Roman] people

and of this republic I must be understood to think and say of the Athenians or any Greek state, of the Egyptians, or of the early Assyrian Babylon, and of every other nation great or small.... [They] are void of true justice."

Were Augustine alive today, he'd have many more empires to add to that list. Just in the 20th century we've seen the demise of many more empires: Russian, British, Japanese, Hitler's "Third empire, [aka Reich]" which lasted only 12 yrs! Every colonial power by Augustine's definition is an empire, one people subjugating another people. In this first year of the third millennium there's only one empire left. And more than just one voice from the outside finds this one to be an oppressor, despite the "pax americana" we bring to the world. Why should this one be an exception to the rule, namely, to God's rule about empires, God's final rule "over" empires?

I don't think Luther mentions Augustine in his treatise "On War Against the Turk" of 1529. I'll have to read it again. But he could have done so, for he's in Augustine's ballpark with his claim that the Divine Critic is confronting the "Holy" Roman Empire outside the gates of Vienna.

Forty-nine years ago—1952-3—Dick Baepler and I were exchange students in Germany. We were half way through our 5-year program at Concordia Seminary in St. Louis and got scholarships to do our third year overseas. In that year Stalin died, Eisenhower was elected US president, and armistice came in the Korean War. While Dick and I rejoiced at Eisenhower's achievement in Korea, our German fellow students, all with bomb-etched memories of World War II, marvelled at our euphoria. They thought it naive. Why? "Don't you realize," they said, "that this is the first war in your nation's history that you didn't win?" We'd never thought of it. It was the "vision thing."

Thirty years later we Americans not only did NOT win the Vietnam war, but we were trounced, by a people with a puny fraction of our resources. We have no obvious victories either in some of our other wars—on poverty, on drugs, on crime. How many wars do we have to lose before we get the message? Expressed biblically, before we repent?

Is God now upping the ante? After defeat in Vietnam the world's last empire is now pounding an even more infinitesimally-resourced Asian nation, basically, as one of you said, "making small rocks out of big rocks." Yes, there are military targets being hit. Yes, there is also collateral damage in the process—dead civilians and swarms of refugees. And we are striving mightily to keep those numbers to a minimum, we're told. Yet it can't be helped in view of our overall objectives to bring about the new international "pax" of a terrorless world. Doesn't this sound like the ideology of empire that Augustine tells us God will not tolerate? In the imperial politics of the deity God counts trespasses—in Augustine's words, injustice. Every one of those collateral corpses is being tabulated, most likely also the military ones. So who—who all—is in trouble?

We brushed off our defeat in Vietnam. Tragic, we said, especially for our own soldiers who died there and also for the ones who survived, but finally no big deal. Suppose Afghanistan, or whoever our mysterious enemies are, suppose they beat us. then what? "God bless America" is heard and seen everywhere in public today. You literally cannot escape it. The theological question is: whence comes the chutzpah that expects God to make an exception for our empire and bless it?

And achieving a "terror-free" world? Who is kidding whom? Look up in a Biblical concordance (sometime soon) the terms terror and terrify and see who The Subject is of many of those

references. To cope with terror, to finally undo it, you have to cope with God. And therewith we're back to repentance—not breast-beating but turning away from one path and into an opposite one. I suppose that can happen two ways. Either you get the alternate vision first and then turn around. Or you turn around (are forced to turn around) and your vision is necessarily focused elsewhere.

It's hard to imagine how the USA on its own volition could turn away from being its imperial self. But it may not be totally hopeless. Even if God applies a two-by-four. With the recent empires mentioned above that crumbled, the individual peoples DID survive—though many of their number, millions often, did not. Vicarious repentance on the part of American Christians—from a few for the many, from a remnant for the multitudes—could maximize the number of survivors. The joy of such repentance could also have a ripple effect. We have it on good authority.

In that very Peace & Joy!
Ed Schroeder