

The Kingdom of God in Today's Mission Theology – A Controversy. PART TWO

Colleagues,

Here is the second half of the book-review-essay begun last week and posted as ThTh 369. The book that triggered these ruminations is: *CONSTANTS IN CONTEXT: A THEOLOGY OF MISSION FOR TODAY*, By Stephen B. Bevans and Roger P. Schroeder. Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2004. Pp.xxii, 488. Paperback \$30. [Part I of the essay is available on the Crossings web-page <www.crossings.org> Click on Thursday Theology.]Peace & joy!

Ed Schroeder

I have another Roman Catholic conversation-buddy at missiology meetings who agrees (mostly) that the KoG initiated by Jesus is God's regime-change with sinners, but he wonders whether I've got a hangup always harping about the forgiveness of sins. "That's one of many NT metaphors" for what the KoG is, he reminds me. And that's a good reminder. Forgiveness of sins is not THE shibboleth, the word you MUST recite in order to be missiologically kosher. So here's what I recently passed on to him: Is Forgiveness of Sins a required shibboleth for Christian mission theology? Nope.

A. I am not (repeat NOT) saying that if you don't mention forgiveness of sins [FoS] you're not kosher.

- B. What I am saying is that FoS clearly focuses THE good news on healing the sinner's God-disconnect.
- C. There are umpteen (well, at least a dozen or so) other Biblical metaphors for this operation. Central to all of them is that the sinner-and-God fracture gets remedied.
- D. Just off the top of my head I remember these:
- Luke's penchant for lost and-found rhetoric (chapter 15) And it is lost from God and found again by God (through the work of Christ) that he's talking about, better, that his Jesus is talking about. Though Luke does get specific about FoS in his mission mandate at the end—even putting it in the mouth of the Risen One.
 - John's metaphors of “not having” God's own Life and “having” it. What that Life is all about, and how the “having” happens, shows up throughout his Gospel. He makes it “perfectly clear” – just in case the reader missed it—in his closing verse of chapter 20.
 - Paul's many metaphors for the Gospel healing the God-malady: bondage/freedom; cursed/blessed; slaves/heirs; bastards/adopted kids; and the biggie in 2 Cor 5 –not reconciled/reconciled to God. [N.B. I didn't even mention justification!]
 - The Epistle to the Hebrews likes the cultic lingo. E.g., Two diff. sorts of priests—one who doesn't (cannot) access the mercy-seat of God for sinners, and One who does.
 - Etc.

Summa. All of these say: Christ's unique work is to heal the God-fracture for folks. All these biblical metaphors are utilized to proclaim: Christ does it. And the writers do not intimate that there may be other options for getting this business done. They may be mistaken in that claim, but that

they make such a claim is indisputable.

Ergo, FoS is not my required shibboleth. Not at all. Attending to humankind's God-fracture, the Gen. 3 agenda, is what I'm hollering about. The Bible offers many metaphors for this—and other languages doubtless have others that are useful. FoS probably is, however, a most obvious metaphor for getting the God-problem fixed. Also an “easy” image from which to move on to the human corollary it invites, viz., “faith,” the trusting reception of the forgiveness offer. No wonder it appears often in NT rhetoric for the gospel.

At last year's week-long international missiological gathering in Port Dickson, Malaysia, we participants encountered the same two alternate readings for the Gospel of the Kingdom of God.

Herewith a few lines from my ThTh report to the listserve. [For the full text GO to ThTh #325 & 326, September 2 & 9, 2004 on the Crossings website: www.crossings.org]

THE TWO GOSPELS AT PORT DICKSON

Teresa Okure called that to our attention at the midpoint of our 8 major presentations. “‘Integrity of the Mission’ is given full attention in the 4 papers we have heard so far,” she said, “but no one yet has attended to ‘in the light of the Gospel.’ What is that Gospel? What its Light?” And then she gave her own answer focused on Jesus's life and work and, as I recall, in her view an event both “new” in God's work in the world and “necessary ” for gospel to be Gospel – and for mission to have “integrity.” She was offering us her version of the Gospel, a version I'll call Gospel B below. But that wasn't the version we began with in the first of the 8 papers. Call that one Gospel A. Here are its contours. . . .

Gospel A is the mission Gospel offered in Constants in Contexts. S&R designate their own mission theology model as “prophetic dialogue.” “Prophetic” means saying “no” to inhuman and unjust actions in human affairs throughout the world—and a decisive “no” to the sinful structures supporting them. [Here is where sin does get into the conversation, but not sin that needs forgiveness, rather sin that calls for extermination. Sorry, sinner. God’s old regime is to be enacted here.] That prophetic “no” is also addressed to such destructive “sins” in our own and other religions.

“Dialogue” signals the mission agenda for Christians’ encountering fellow worldlings from other world religions. Insofar as they are not culpable of the bad ethics that would activate the prophetic rubric, we are counselled to “recognize God’s surprising presence outside of our exclusively Christian parameters.” ... People joining us as “part of God’s life and God’s vision for the world.” (303) The premise is that God has only one regime operational in the world—and that regime consists of this: “God is a fountain of sending love.” (303) That mono-regime practices no hermeneutics of suspicion, never ever anything that might be called the wrath of God. And it surely is in no way critical of good people—of whatever religious persuasion. Never mind Jesus’ constant critique of the very ethical lives (Torah-faithfulness) of the Pharisees he encountered, or Paul’s post-Damascus critical survey of his own life as a Torah-faithful Hebrew.

The presupposition for meeting the noble believer of other religions is that the Augsburg descriptor does NOT apply to her—“not fearing God, not trusting God, and curved into oneself.” Thus she really is not a candidate for the forgiveness of sins. What’s to forgive? If forgiveness is the

alleged center of Christ's KoG as God's "regime-change," then for her Christ did indeed "die for nothing." (NRSV Gal 2:21).

We didn't succeed in Malaysia last year—despite all our hype about dialogue with people of other faiths—to have any dialogue among ourselves about these conflicting visions of the Gospel. And in, with, and alongside that, no dialogue about the reality of the human dilemma, a.k.a., sinners, for whom the Gospel is good news. We haven't succeeded in the American Society of Missiology either. Some say that's just not the place for it. I wonder why not?

But that is where dialogue is surely needed. In-house. S&R are clear in the type of Gospel of God's Kingdom that they want at the center of "a theology of mission for today." Mutatis mutandis, it is the same theology that elicited the prophetic "no" from the Lutheran reformers in the tortured "dialogue" of the early years of the Reformation. And here is where conflicting hermeneutics return. The ancient scholastic theological axiom, "grace does not displace nature, but brings it to perfection," was abandoned by the Augsburg Confessors, though it had been their theological heritage too. The main reason they did so, they said, was that theology done according to the nature/grace axiom invariably diminishes the reality of sin [it can't REALLY be that bad, can it?] and correlatively necessitates a much diminished Christ, surely not one crucified and risen. It results in both sin and Christ being reduced in dimensions.

In the nature/grace axiom sin is seen as a moral defect, a deficit. Granted, human "nature" IS imperfect, but what's still left there is OK. Needed basically is a repair job, not a full mortification and then vivification. Christ's role as God's perfect agent of grace (though not God's only grace-agent) is to supply what is lacking in defective/damaged sinners and thus

bring them to righteous perfection.

No way, said the Reformers. That's not the Biblical witness for either the bad news or the good news. And there, of course, we're back to hermeneutics: How do you read the Bible? Theologies of Mission cannot escape that sticky wicket either. Any claim about "constants" in Christian mission looks back to warrants in the Bible. Every looking back uses lenses, a.k.a., hermeneutics.

The scholastic hermeneutic derives from the nature/grace axiom above. The Lutherans rejected that axiom. It underdiagnosed the defect in "nature," they claimed, and correspondingly it needed a lesser Christ to supply the grace than is needed for healing. Their alternate axiom (you've heard it before in these postings) was the law/promise hermeneutic, which the Biblical writers themselves used. That's what they claimed. Here the law-lens let them see Scripture's own diagnosis of sin as "no fear of God, no trust in God, and incurvature into self." And the Gospel-lens exposed how radical, how Good and how New (how gosselly), Christ's regime-change with sinners really was. Too good not to be trusted.

Even with their modernity (Missio Dei, liberationist reign of God, and Christic universalism) S&R have not left the nature/grace axiom. Nor, I imagine, do they want to. As they spell out the "'six constants of Mission" in the three major sections of their own "prophetic dialogue" proposal in Part III-295ff, 317ff, 340ff-the scholastic/Lutheran standoff re-surfaces.

E.g., sin on p. 302-"humanity without the full understanding of the depths of God's love," a deficiency notion vs. the "activist" enmity toward God in the Augsburg description cited above.

E.g., Christ crucified on p. 317, "Jesus was handed over to death because of his convictions about the radical transformation of the religious and political world that the reign of God demanded" vs. the Reformers alternate proposal (quoting Paul in Romans 4): "He was handed over to death for our trespasses and raised again for our justification."

Luther is no major player in this otherwise intentionally ecumenical book. He is mentioned six times. One citation even hypes him (quoting pioneer Lutheran missiologist James Scherer) as "a creative and original missionary thinker," but there is no follow-up on what that all might mean. Luther does get a bum rap, I think, in another reference to his "penal substitution" theory of the work of Christ. Which puts him in the Type A column of mission theologies on the S&R blueprint: "key word: law." That's a howler.

So they don't know Luther. That's evident even apart from this boo-boo. But the same is true of lots of Lutherans, also Lutherans talking about the KoG in missiology today. They too don't know. But they could, just by looking into Luther's Large Catechism with its explanation of the KoG petition of the Lord's Prayer.

"What is the kingdom of God? Answer: Simply what we heard above in the Creed [the immediately preceding section of his catechism], namely, that God sent his Son, Christ our Lord, into the world to redeem and deliver us from the power of the devil, to bring us to himself, and to rule us as a king of righteousness, life and salvation against sin, death, and an evil conscience. To this end he also gave his Holy Spirit to deliver this to us through his holy Gospel and to enlighten and strengthen us in faith by his power." Note the trinitarian theology in this KoG proposal.

Is that regime-change or what? But notice WHERE the regime changes—in our God-relationship, and that bi-laterally. First from God’s side in God’s “sending Christ . . . to bring us to himself,” and subsequently from our side in a “faith” that now trusts this rule-change “given” by the Holy Trinity.

In the next paragraph Luther signals the mission trajectory of this kingdom petition. “This we ask, both in order that we who have accepted it may remain faithful and grow daily in it and also in order that it may find approval and gain followers among other people and advance with power throughout the world. In this way many, led by the Holy Spirit, may come into the kingdom of grace and become partakers of redemption, so that we may all remain together eternally in this kingdom.”

Is there any connection here to the agenda being hyped in much of KoG theology today, the agendas of peace, justice and the integrity of creation? Not in this kingdom petition for Luther. That’s not the KoG agenda. “From this you see that we are not asking here for . . . a temporal, perishable blessing, but for an eternal, priceless treasure and for everything that God himself possesses. ”

Are then the this-worldly blessings of peace, justice and creation’s preservation not in the Lord’s Prayer? Yes indeed, they are, but they come in the fourth petition with what all comes under the umbrella of “daily bread.” God gives daily bread—“even to the godless and rogues”—thus apart from any Christ-component in the transaction. It’s God’s left-hand regime in action. It happens apart from the efforts of the One now sitting at God’s right hand. In short, all those daily bread goodies do not bring the super-goodies in the KoG package—“bring us to God and generate faith.”

Yet daily bread is big stuff. Just how big is that loaf?

“Everything that belongs to our entire life in this world. . . not only food and clothing and other necessities for our body, but also peace and concord in our daily activities, associations, and situations of every sort with the people among whom we live and with whom we interact—in short, in everything that pertains to the regulation of both our domestic and our civil or political affairs.” Never once does Christ’s name appear as Luther expounds on the daily-bread petition. Why not?

God has other agents assigned to these agendas. Hundreds of them! “Governments . . . rulers . . . the emperor, kings, and all estates, especially the princes of our land, all councilors, magistrates, and officials.” And even closer to home “spouse, children, and servants . . . faithful neighbors, and good friends, etc.” In Luther’s vocabulary these agents are all God’s left-handers—caring for and preserving God’s old creation and us within it.

But they—Christians included in their left-hand callings—are incapable of fabricating the New Creation. They do not have the wherewithal to bring on the KoG, the regime-change that reconciles sinners to God. Godly agents they indeed are. But not “God-ly enough” to carry out the task of the incarnate son of God—in his body on the tree. It’s that simple. God was in Christ attending to that agenda. Scripture never predicates this achievement to any other of God’s manifold agents throughout the world.

But after Easter—after Christ’s achievement—he does pass on this unique authority to his disciples—expressis verbis “to forgive sins.” So with those connections, they become agents for the regime-change that was once his and his alone. Themselves now re-created to have a right-hand in addition to their left, they become “little Christs” in the right-hand

regime called KoG. Of course, they get this clout, and the chutzpah to exercise it, only by virtue of God's original Right-Hander hanging on to them—and they to him.

Summa. The agenda of peace, justice and the integrity of creation is the stuff of the daily bread of human life; it is not the stuff of the KoG, God's reconciling regime-change with sinners. The fourth petition is distinct from the second. In both we are still petitioners. It is still the same deity, with two different agendas. One cares for creation, the other redeems it. The scripture's own anthropomorphic image of an ambidextrous deity helped Luther get a hold of it.

One fundamental "creative and original" element in Brother Martin's missiology is that the mission of God's regime-change (a.k.a. the KoG) has a constant venue *INSIDE* the existing church. The church itself is a constant mission field, because "other" Gospels regularly find home there, just as they do in the non-church world. So the baptized, when they get hooked on these other gospels, become a mission field. Right from the first generation of church history it was so. The Galatian church became a mission field again *AFTER* Paul had evangelized there. Already within his lifetime an "other" Gospel came there to roost. Ditto for the Corinthian congregation, where a Gospel of pneumatic ecstasy moved in to supplant the one the apostle had planted there.

That might be called one of Luther's mission axioms: Wherever an "other" Gospel is the one people trust, there is the mission field. The semi-Pelagian preaching and practice of the medieval Latin church was an "other" Gospel. The "Platzregen" [cloudburst] of *THE* Gospel was passing away. Thus, by definition, the Holy Roman Empire and the Holy Roman Church—even with nearly 100% of its citizens baptized—became a mission field. That was Luther's mission field. He acknowledged

that outside Europe there were mission fields aplenty. But inside the Holy Roman Empire was where God had put him to promote the Platzregen. Luther found the Platzregen image in the OT prophets (Amos 8 for one) where God's cloudburst has ceased. Drought prevails with people "running to and fro to seek the word of the LORD, but they shall not find it." And why? Because God has had enough of their infidelity and has moved the Platzregen elsewhere. Though the downpour is a refreshing image, it has a critical edge. If/when God's refreshing rain (his reign of mercy) is scorned, God moves the Platzregen to new mission fields. Note who is the prime mover in mission movements.

Luther's definition of mission in action could be as simple as "turning on the faucet" to let this cloudburst happen. Whether or not "Christianity" has arrived in any given place does not yet verify that the Platzregen is happening. You need to check the rain-gauge and see what's in it. It's not enough that there is something in the rain-gauge. You have to sample the contents: is it Gospel or isn't it? As with the wine and wineskins Jesus spoke of, other liquids also show up to mimic the real stuff. ABSENCE of Gospel in the rain-gauge = ABSENCE of the Platzregen = PRESENCE of the mission field. That may be just as true in any American congregation of whatever denomination as it is in the streets of majority Buddhist Bangkok. Check the rain-gauge.

Summa. S&R's mission theology of "prophetic dialogue" has its hand on a different faucet. It's the faucet of the Fourth Petition of the Lord's Prayer, from which God's blessings do indeed flow. They put it under the rubric of the Kingdom petition. But it doesn't fit there. That's a different faucet. Peace, justice, integrity of creation shower upon the earth because God is God. The KoG cloudburst comes only because Jesus is the Christ.

S&R have produced a powerful case for the mission theology they propose. One signal of its power is that at last month's annual meeting of the ASM, a new member of the society, a Mennonite, I believe, seeing Schroeder on my name-tag, came to thank and praise me for producing Constants in Context. It took me a few seconds to catch on that he thought I was Roger Schroeder. As a newcomer he hadn't met either of us before. But he had read the book and he was euphoric. I led him to Roger, who was just across the way, introduced him, and then heard his thanks and praise repeated as I faded away.

"Everybody" sees S&R's work as the successor to what has been the modern classic text, David Bosch's TRANSFORMING MISSION, his magnum opus, his life's work (1991). Bosch was tragically killed in his native South Africa in an auto accident just as his book was coming off the press. His own hermeneutic lenses were those of Dutch Reformed Calvinism. Though Luther gets more page-space and more knowledgeable appreciation in Bosch's book, the notion of Kingdom of God that glues his work together is not Luther's. It's Calvin's unitary notion of God's one and only one regime. Jesus does not constitute a "regime-change" on God's part, but a fulfillment of what God has already been doing from eternity. We humans are the ones who do the changing—in ourselves and in our world—once we have encountered God's one consistent regime. But God doesn't change. Ditto for God's regime.

Conclusion

The controversy about the KoG is a controversy about how to read the NT texts where the term occurs. It is also a controversy about Christology—both the work and the person of Christ: what was "God in Christ" doing? and what sort of person does Christ have to be in order for this work to happen? The KoG, when it arrived in Jesus, was a conflict-concept from the very first pages of the NT. Starting with King Herod's bloody

response at Bethlehem, to the kingdom cross-examinations in the courtrooms of the Sanhedrin and of Pilate, to the disciples' own "dumb" question seconds before Jesus' ascension—"Lord will you at this time restore the kingdom?"—they don't get it. It's perceived as a new way to manage the world, not God's new way to "manage"—mercy-manage-sinners. You might write an entire church history—all 2 millennia of it—using that controverted theme, the KoG, as the *cantus firmus*. It was the fight between the Holy Roman Emperor and the Holy Roman Pontiff throughout the Middle Ages, it was Luther and his opponents both to the left and to the right, it's in today's ecumenical theology—not just missiology—across the board. It's in, with, under large chunks of America's global Messianism today.

The alternate perspective proposed above, in a few theses—

1. Law/promise lenses are the Lutheran proposal for reading the Scriptures.
2. Those lenses let us see the ambidextrous word and work of God—left and right—in Scriptures.
3. Two distinct regimes (from the same God) are illuminated by such Scripture reading.
4. Bi-focal reading of these regimes exposes the KoG in Jesus as God's regime-change with sinners.
5. This KoG is a change "*coram deo*," where God and human sinners interface and interact, not "*coram hominibus*," where human sinners interface and interact.
6. "*Coram deo*" does not relegate KoG to some "spiritual" unreal world, but focuses it at the center of human lives—what we fear, love and trust. Or don't fear, love, and trust.
7. God's manifold agents in God's old regime are powerless to alter the realities of human life "*coram deo*." Their turf and competence is *coram hominibus*. No more.
8. By definition "*coram deo*" regime-change happens only when

Deus (e.g., in his beloved Son) takes the initiative. So a particular “person” is necessary for the “work” of regime-change to happen at all.

- 9. Human beings, even with “image-of-God” heredity, aren’t person-enough to do it. However, after their Christ-encounter, it’s a different story.*
- 10. And how long will it last? How long will either regime last? In Matthew 24 Jesus gives a clue: “Heaven and earth (including God’s providential care and preservation regime therein) will pass away, but my words (e.g., Son, be of good cheer. Your sins are forgiven.) will never pass away.” Seems clear. One of God’s regimes is terminal. The other (hallelujah!) isn’t. We have his word for it.*
- 11. KoG mission theology is grounded in the one that lasts.*

Epilogue—

A Lutheran “theology of mission for today” is what those folks at Luther (sic!) Seminary should be confecting in their fall conference. My counsel—too late, of course, since the program is printed, the topics assigned (and besides, they didn’t ask me)—is to scrub the focus on social-cultural contexts, and be REALLY RELEVANT to the American THEOLOGICAL context we live in. And do so by . . .

- 1. spelling out “regime-change” as the distinct Lutheran claim for what the NT says about Christian mission, and doing so contra the mono-regime theology that has hijacked the Kingdom of God in America’s mainline churches;*
- 2. getting mono-regime theologians—starting with S&R—onto the program as presenters of their convictions, and then letting real dialogue ensue. Paul on Mars Hill once*

- more—possibly even Luther's Leipzig debate revisited;*
- 3. tossing up this regime-change Gospel against some of the other gospels deceiving American Christians today and supplanting the real one—e.g., rapture religion, folk piety of God Bless America, purpose-driven lives. Once more having those very folks on the program so genuine dialogue could occur. Areopagus again;*
 - 4. inviting a Muslim, Hindu or Jewish theologian to dialogue with one of Luther Seminary's profs about God himself engineering a regime-change with sinners. Why Christians hear that as super Good News, and then listen and learn (maybe/maybe not) why the dialogue partner doesn't hear it as such;*
 - 5. inviting President Bush to come for a conversation among Christians on regime-change in today's world. He came to CALVIN College a few weeks ago. Why not LUTHER Seminary?*

Those are surely some of the "constants in our American context" these days. A mission theology engaging these realities in our context would be a contribution to the concern about the Gospel in our Culture, as nobody else is doing, so far as I know.

Even if Luther Seminary did just one of these, I might sign up. But would they accept my registration?

EHS