

THE LUTHERAN surrenders

An Open Letter to David L. Miller Editor, THE LUTHERAN, “the magazine of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America”

Dear David, This one is serious. Seriously wrong. To wit, your plea [p. 58, THE LUTHERAN, September 2004] for “the beauty of surrender . . . holy surrender . . . surrendered lives” as central to Christian faith.

Not so. Couldn't be more wrong.

- 1. Doubtless you know that “surrender” is the meaning of the Arabic root “s-l-m,” central to the terms Islam and Muslim. The Quran calls for surrender, surrender to the will of Allah as revealed in the Quran. It is the center of that faith. Not so faith in the Christian Gospel. A pitch for “surrender to an inscrutable love” is a pitch for faith in deus absconditus (God with Christ's mercy hidden). The Quran hypes that sort of faith. Christian scriptures never.*
- 2. Apropos of those scriptures—I just checked my old KJV concordance from seminary days half a century ago. NOT ONE (!) listing for surrender either as verb or noun. Doesn't that say something? Sure does. Surrender is unknown, never mentioned, in “our” Holy Scriptures. It surfaces 7 times as you commend it on your editorial page.*
- 3. Our Lutheran heritage says that the distinction between God-with-mercy-hidden (“inscrutable”) and God-in-Christ-with-mercy-revealed is fundamental to all God-talk, and thus to all faith-talk. Your editorial fudges on that distinction, that arch Lutheran theologoumenon. Does it have a place anywhere in THE LUTHERAN, let alone as the last word in the issue? Don't think so.*

4. Beneath that distinction of God-hidden-and-revealed, of course, is THE Lutheran cornerstone, the hermeneutics of distinctin about God's Law and God's Gospel. [In one table-talk Luther says: "When I discovered THAT distinction—that God's law is one thing, but God's Gospel something else—da riss ich herdurch." I.e., that was my breakthrough.]
5. "Surrender-faith" correlates to God's law-lingo and God's law-actions. No wonder surrender is so at home in Islam. And in the manifold versions of sub-Islam peddled today as "real" Christianity. But faith in the Gospel, like the Gospel itself, is "something else."
6. Because Christian faith is always "faith in the Gospel," you've got to go to the Gospel to learn what this faith is. And it is not surrender. The Gospel is a promise (St. Paul's favorite definition), God's promise of mercy-forgiveness in Christ crucified and risen. Promises—even among humans—do NOT call for surrender. They call for the promisee to trust the promisor.
7. Or again, Melanchthon's favorite, the Gospel-promise is an "offer." You do not "surrender" to offers. You either take 'em or leave 'em. In Jesus' words [Mt.6:24], you either cling to the offer or despise it.
8. Surrender probably doesn't have to sound doleful, but it is a tad difficult to get any hoopla into surrender, even "surrender to God's beauty." By contrast Luther couldn't resist regularly linking "froehlich" with Christian faith. "Froehlich" in German is not merely "joyful," but "jumping-for-joy." Even if the word surrender did occur in the Bible—and remember it does not—jumping-for-joy does not immediately come to mind.
9. Your opening paragraph, David, marvelously crafted prose, signalled for me where the editorial was going. "Beauty converts the heart this day . . . and every day, saving

my soul, again. The roses' ecstatic explosion of pink and red in front of the house sing psalms of morning praise to the inexpressible Beauty from which they spring. Can it be that this One is not gracious?" That's great Romanticist philosophy, but it's not Reformation theology.

10. Luther did not think that the Beauty you so beautifully celebrate was sufficient to document that "this One" was indeed gracious to folks like us. Not because Luther was an old grump. He too can revel in the sheer gift – and beauty – of creation. Even with ecstasy. But he was unable to conclude from that that "this One" is gracious to him. For the roses too are mortal. Their final witness is "memento mori." [Remember that you too shall die.] After all the ecstatic explosion of the lilies, they are, as Jesus reminds his disciples, "alive today and tomorrow are thrown into the fire." To conclude from roses or lilies that "this One is gracious," is a non sequitur.
11. Your opening sentence teases us to think about "Beauty saving your soul." We can probably let that one go as poetic license. For you know that we all need—and have—a better Savior than that. If you're interested in seeing how the "Beauty of the World" can be linked to the Christian Gospel (and not just God inscrutable), go to the chapter by that name in Elert's "The Christian Ethos." It's the only Christian ethics book I know of that has such a chapter.
12. Summa. THE LUTHERAN has got to BE Lutheran to deserve its name. God-hidden, God-revealed—God's law, God's Gospel—this is the primal Lutheran sieve for theology and preaching. "At every point of Christian theology," said Martin Chemnitz, Lutherans "sift" theology thus. Your surrender editorial doesn't do so. Why not "sift" surrender and beauty once more according to these

*Lutheran specs in a future editorial and tell us what you
come up with. We'd all be edified.*

Peace & Joy!

Ed Schroeder