

# A Most Timely Essay on “The Spirit and the Publicly Engaged Church”

Colleagues,

For proof that the spirits abroad in the world are legion, one needs only to listen for five minutes to the current campaign for U.S. president. An astonishing business it's proving to be—astonishing in St. Mark's sense of something that befuddles and dismays. As it happens, the further we get into it, the more impressed I become with the timeliness and relevance of the papers we heard at the Crossings conference in January. I underscore that this timeliness was by no means intentional. When Steve Turnbull put together his thoughts on what a real mensch looks like through the eyes of St. John (see the last two posts), he could not have guessed that a presidential candidate would soon be doing on a public debate stage as boys will do in a locker room, measuring mensch-ness by the size of their penises. Today's writer is Robert C. Saler, Executive Director of the Center for Pastoral Excellence at ChristianTheological Seminary, Indianapolis. He'll reflect on what the church starts to look like in the public arena when the Holy Sprit rolls up the Spirit's sleeves and gets to work. Rob is ever so canny and culturally attuned, as you're sure to see. Still, I can't suppose that even he, when sitting down to write this, would have imagined the photo I saw some days ago. It was taken at a rally for The Donald. The crowd presses in. The faces are eager and joyous. A few feet from the stage a woman lofts her sign: “Thank you, Lord Jesus, for President Trump.”

One of these days I need to pound out some thoughts about that

sign. They're currently in gestation. They'll differ somewhat from the protests that the esteemed and evangelical likes of [Max Lucado](#) are finally inserting in the public conversation. See too the self-identified evangelical [Peter Wehner](#), who writes opinion pieces for the New York Times. Such protests are important, not to say essential; though if they carry no more weight with Trump fans than Mitt Romney's has, I won't be surprised. Driving that lack of surprise is the sign in the photo, and a suspicion about it that's niggling at me. I'm guessing that, like Caiaphas's famous pronouncement about Jesus ([John 11:49-52](#)), it's weirdly truthful in a bitter, ironic way.

But all this is by the by. What matters immediately is to deliver Rob's work to you, which, as with Turnbull's, I'll do in two pieces. In another unexpected serendipity, Part One dovetails perfectly with Steve's closing reflections of last week. Steve mused, you'll recall, about "Christian discipleship to Jesus as the Spirit-driven process of rehumanization." Rob launches with a stunning example of how rehumanized disciples can look and sound. The contrast with would-be Christians at a Trump rally could not be starker.

For some of you, a caveat: Rob writes as an academic theologian for other academic theologians. If you're not familiar with the specialized language, you'll find the slogging hard in places. Slog on anyway. The payoff is worth it, especially next week. Meanwhile, I've taken the editor's liberty of inserting a few stepping stones, links for the most part, to help you along.

Peace and Joy,

Jerry Burce

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## **The Spirit and the Publicly Engaged Church**

Robert C. Saler

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### **What it Looks Like When it Goes Right**

On May 24, 1996, a group of Islamic terrorists announced that they had “slit the throats” of seven French Trappist monks whom they had kidnapped from the monastery of Tibherine in Algeria and held as hostages for two months. Prior to the kidnapping, the superior of the monastery, Father Christian de Chergé, had left with his family this testament “to be opened in the event of my death.”

If it should happen one day—and it could be today—that I become a victim of the terrorism which now seems ready to encompass all the foreigners living in Algeria, I would like my community, my Church, my family, to remember that my life was given to God and to this country. I ask them to accept that the One Master of all life was not a stranger to this brutal departure. I ask them to pray for me: for how could I be found worthy of such an offering? I ask them to be able to associate such a death with the many other deaths that were just as violent, but forgotten through indifference and anonymity.

My life has no more value than any other. Nor any less value. In any case, it has not the innocence of childhood. I have lived long enough to know that I share in the evil which seems, alas, to prevail in the world, even in that which would strike me blindly. I should like, when the time comes, to have

a clear space which would allow me to beg forgiveness of God and of all my fellow human beings, and at the same time to forgive with all my heart the one who would strike me down.

I could not desire such a death. It seems to me important to state this. I do not see, in fact, how I could rejoice if this people I love were to be accused indiscriminately of my murder. It would be to pay too dearly for what will, perhaps, be called "the grace of martyrdom," to owe it to an Algerian, whoever he may be, especially if he says he is acting in fidelity to what he believes to be Islam. I know the scorn with which Algerians as a whole can be regarded. I know also the caricature of Islam which a certain kind of Islamism encourages. It is too easy to give oneself a good conscience by identifying this religious way with the fundamentalist ideologies of the extremists. For me, Algeria and Islam are something different; they are a body and a soul. I have proclaimed this often enough, I believe, in the sure knowledge of what I have received in Algeria, in the respect of believing Muslims—finding there so often that true strand of the Gospel I learned at my mother's knee, my very first Church.

My death, clearly, will appear to justify those who hastily judged me naive or idealistic: "Let him tell us now what he thinks of it!" But these people must realize that my most avid curiosity will then be satisfied. This is what I shall be able to do, if God wills—immerse my gaze in that of the Father, to contemplate with him his children of Islam just as he sees them, all shining with the glory of Christ, the fruit of his Passion, filled with the Gift of the Spirit, whose secret joy will always be to establish communion and to refashion the likeness, delighting in the differences.

For this life given up, totally mine and totally theirs, I

thank God who seems to have wished it entirely for the sake of that joy in everything and in spite of everything. In this “thank you,” which is said for everything in my life from now on, I certainly include you, friends of yesterday and today, and you my friends of this place, along with my mother and father, my brothers and sisters and their families—the hundredfold granted as was promised!

And you also, the friend of my final moment, who would not be aware of what you were doing. Yes, for you also I wish this “thank you”—and this *adieu*—to commend you to the God whose face I see in yours.

And may we find each other, happy “good thieves,” in Paradise, if it pleases God, the Father of us both. Amen. [\[i\]](#)

A good question for when Christians gather—including we Lutherans who operate in some ways in as much of an ecclesial remove from our Trappist brothers as the Trappists did from the Islamic Algerian villagers—might be framed as follows: what sort of life must be lived in order to produce such a remarkable document? Which raises the accompanying question: what must it mean for a Christian to have one’s life become such a masterwork of faith?

I should say that, as implied by my framing the question this way, I regard Fr. de Chergé’s statement as a near-perfect instance of how the Christian worldview, in genuinely incarnational rhetorical fashion (as Eric Auerbach noticed decades ago), blends the most eschatologically sublime understanding of the beatified vision characteristic of Christian hopes for heaven (*theoria* in the original sense) with an earthy, humane awareness of human fallibility and epistemological humility. In other words, it is a slam dunk, an act of Christian virtuosity that I would assert is indicative

not only of individual charisma, but of successful Christian formation. This is what it looks like when it all goes right, and it is both gratifying and humbling.

If the topic of this talk is a Publicly Engaged Church, then a Trappist monastery in a remote Algerian village might seem a strange place to start. Luther's critique of monasticism, of course, was predicated on what became his disdain for the problematic material AND theological economies which would regard a life of monastic separation from the world as the pinnacle of Christian living.

But the case of the monks of Tibherine, the case is more complex. As depicted movingly in the 2010 film *Of Gods and Men*, which tells the story of the monks, a major reason why they stayed was because the monks' medical training was the only means for the Algerian peasants in the nearby village to receive medical care. The village was their public; that is made clear by the film. What is also made clear by the film, though, is a kind of shadow curriculum regarding the day-to-day activities of the monks. The film is two hours long, but only about 30 minutes of that run time is given over to the plot by which the monks are threatened, decide to stay, and are eventually captured—in other words, only about  $\frac{1}{4}$  of the movie is “plot” per se. The rest of the film (in a manner akin to another excellent recent film about monastic life, *Into Great Silence*) is an extended lingering on the part of the camera over the daily lives and routines of the monks—washing dishes, laboring in gardens, praying, writing, etc. In a manner quite different from the standardized (and relatively didactic) tropes by which the average Hollywood film approaches “characterization,” in both films the interplay of monastic anonymity and almost uncomfortable perspectival intimacy allows for viewers to encounter a somewhat disorienting but ultimately rich combination of ritual space and deep humanity.

There is much that could be said about the effect of such lingering, but for our Lutheran purposes, we can return to the tension around monasticism that is our inheritance and broaden the question a bit more: what are the modes by which the Spirit forms us now, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, such that we can engage the public and its diversity (including diversity that includes genuine otherness, and indeed otherness that wants to kill us) in ways that are true to the gospel, proper to the Lutheran understanding of the primacy of the spirit's work in creating holiness, and honoring of the tension between the historical sources that inform us and the contemporary worldviews that shape us in contested but indisputable ways? I want to be clear that when I talk about "honoring diversity," I do not mean that in a fuzzy, PC way, or even in the butterfly-collecting mode of trumpeting diversity ("some of this, some of that") that is so easy for our institutions to adopt. I mean instead the raw, gritty, human work of existing in a world of violence in ways that honor the Prince of Peace and the gospel's hold upon us.

## **Beyond the Dichotomy**

It is natural that these goals as stated would be framed both in terms of [pneumatology](#) and in terms of public church. As the work of Cheryl Peterson and others has shown, it no longer makes any sense to discuss ecclesiology without pneumatology. The two most significant forces within global Christianity—Roman Catholicism and global Pentecostalism—both have diverse construals of the work of the Spirit in shoring up the authority of the church at the heart of their [ecclesiologies](#). In Roman Catholicism, it is precisely pneumatology that undergirds the claim that the magisterium of the Catholic church, while not infallible in most instances, is nonetheless safeguarded from damnable error by the Holy Spirit's preservation of the *ecclesia docens* ["the teaching

church”]. And in global Pentecostalism (under whose rubric, from a sociological standpoint, I would even include such ostensibly Lutheran churches as Mekane Yesus in Ethiopia), it is precisely the odd combination of unpredictability and routinization that attends encounters with the Holy Spirit on the part of adherents that forms the uniquely adaptable communities by which Pentecostalism has thrived. Point being, this conference has it exactly right to presume (and assert) that there is no functional ecclesiology that does not at least imply a pneumatology, to the point that it’s good to be explicit about the connections every once in a while.

But meanwhile, if in this lecture I’m yielding to the temptation to highlight a literal monastery and its engagement with its surroundings as a model for a public church, then know that I absolutely mean for that image to strike you as odd, and I’ll be trading on that oddness for the rest of this talk. I don’t mean for us to backtrack from Luther’s fundamental insight that the monastic communities of his time had largely become caught up in spiritual and material economies that were theologically tendentious and politically exploitative. Less is it a kind of apologia for New Monasticism or even the sort of ecclesial sectarianism that one finds in such theological movements as [Hauerwasian](#) ethics, [MacIntyrean](#) “New Benedict” options, or Radical Orthodoxy (and yes, I’m aware that adherents of all these movements would deny that they are sectarian in precisely that sense, and yes, I am here registering my skepticism about that denial. But that’s a matter for another time).

However, I do want in this talk to revisit the question of ecclesiology and pneumatology from the uniquely Lutheran perspective represented at conferences like this one, and in so doing I want to lay my cards on the table, acknowledging how very, very easy it is to fall into the trap of thinking that public engagement is some kind of either/or between the church



digging into its own unique identity or the church conforming itself to the standards of relevance set by its cultural surroundings. So easy, in fact, that I have often let my own work on ecclesiology and pneumatology fall into this false dichotomy. In my recent book (which was actually finished in 2011, but it came out last year [\[iii\]](#)), I traded heavily on a distinction between what I called polis ecclesiology (i.e. the sort of Hauerwasian, MacIntyrean, community-centered model whereby the church is understood as a distinct public with its own authoritative and epistemological structures) and an ecclesiology of the church as diffusively spatialized event whereby the goal of theology and public engagement would be to discern where God's spirit is engaged in truth-telling within the world.

While I would be happy to have you still buy my book, and while I stand by that description of the dichotomy as one into which most contemporary construals of the relationship between ecclesiology and pneumatology do fall (particularly under the conditions of a divided church in which authority structures among churches remain contested), I will confess to everyone in this august setting that I am now at the point where I am no longer satisfied with allowing that dichotomy to stand as a normative (rather than a descriptive) account of the Spirit's formation of the church.

And the major reason for my growing discomfort (besides the fact, as my friend and mentor Paul Hinlicky has finally convinced me, that it represents a kind of ecumenical dead-end, albeit a newer and more interesting deadlock than the one currently facing the ecumenical movement) is that I think when we tackle what the Lutheran tradition has to say about life in the Spirit and the ecclesiological implications of that formation, then far more interesting possibilities emerge. Those immersed in Lutheran theology ought to be used to the idea that

following Luther into the depths of the incarnational logic inaugurated by the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ presents opportunities to overcome rigorous binaries between the life of the church and the life of the world. After all, for Luther the church as God's beloved community is, in Romans 8 style, the harbinger of God's redemption of all creation, all that God has made. Meanwhile, in Luther's radicalization of the [Tome of Leo's \*communicatio idiomatum\*](#) (shown most directly in the shockingly carnal, or rather in-carnal, implications of the third mode of Christ's presence as outlined in the 1528 treatise *Confession Concerning the Lord's Supper*), it becomes clear to us that in this "heavenly mode" of Christ's presence with God, Christ not only transcends creation as God does (think John 1) but is also as deeply embedded in creation as is God's sustaining providence (think Augustine, for whom God is closer to us than we are to ourselves).

## **Loving the World More than It Loves Itself**

This brings me to the main thesis of my paper, and it is twofold.

If we are to understand the role of the Spirit in forming the church as a publicly engaged body, then we should draw that picture within the parameters of the following two insights from the Lutheran tradition:

- 1). God's people are called to love the world precisely AS the world to a greater degree than the world loves itself.
- 2). Cultivating such love, paradoxically but inexorably, requires deep immersion in the particular gifts of the church—the word preached, the body and blood received, ongoing and rigorous catechesis in theology (both doctrinal and

speculative), art, aesthetics, spiritual disciplines, and so on.

In other words, I'm suggesting that the example of the brothers of Tibherine, precisely in its glorious strangeness, is iconic for a precisely Lutheran construal of the Spirit's formation of a publicly engaged church. It is precisely the act of going more deeply into the gifts of the church in a manner that is formative of baptismal subjectivity (to use a phrase employed by Hinlicky and others) that allows the church to be incarnationally engaged in the world.

I hope that you're skeptical about that, because I have about half an hour left to try and convince you that it is at least possible. To do that I will draw on Luther in dialogue with some other thinkers that I find helpful for this.

### **The Horizon of Need and the Thickness of the Christian Life**

The argument of Luther's famed 1520 treatise *On the Freedom of a Christian* has at its core a thesis that Luther knew would be counterintuitive both by the [synergistic soteriological](#) standards of his day and, more penetratingly, by the standards of what Luther took to be the epistemological "default setting" of the Old Adam when it considers the role of human effort both in salvation and in worldly ethics. Simply put, Luther's target is the notion that only a synergistic model of salvation—one in which human agency responds to God's initial donation of grace by doing those good works which are within them (*facere quod in se est*) to the benefit, not only of their own standing vis-à-vis God's judgment, but also to the neighbor—can produce ethical action. Pious doubt about one's salvation, so the argument goes, translates to pious action manifested most naturally in works of charity on behalf of one's neighbor. The parallels to calls for

a soteriology that replaces monergistic assurance with synergistic risk contingent on human agency in service to ethical care for the earth are fairly direct in this case.

What was behind Luther's rejection of this soteriology? At stake was not simply Luther's theological breakthrough vis-à-vis justification of the individual by grace through faith apart from works, but also his ethics. For Luther, far from it being the case that one needs a cooperative model of salvation in order to give sufficient theological grounding and impetus for charitable works on behalf of the neighbor, the exact opposite is in fact the case: ONLY under conditions of justification by grace through faith apart from works (that is, only under conditions whereby we do not NEED to do good works for our neighbor to be justified by God) are we free to do good works that are truly FOR the neighbor and not for ourselves.

The logic should be familiar to Lutherans: if I must somehow do good works—however praiseworthy and even necessary for the neighbor's well-being—in order to merit justification, then those works are inescapably bound up in an economy of merit and reward that is not only existentially intolerable (how can I possibly know when I have done enough, and how can I possibly remain in any sort of pious doubt about that when the stakes are so high?) but also fully lacking in genuine *caritas*. The motive of care in such cases can never purely be the desired good of the neighbor. The horizon of need being addressed is not the neighbor's, but mine; or, at least, when push comes to shove, if the two horizons contradict each other at all, mine must needs win out over the neighbor's. The high school senior who realizes that she needs more "community service" lines on her college application and thus walks down to the soup kitchen may well do some proximate good for the homeless there, but the dominant horizon of need is hers and not the suffering neighbors ostensibly being served.

However, to the extent that the Word is received that we are justified by grace through faith entirely apart from our own works, then the soteriological and ethical framework is secured by which the horizon of the neighbor's need can take precedence over my own and thus shape the framework of the ethical response. As Luther puts it, the Christian:

"needs none of these things for his righteousness and salvation. Therefore he should be guided in all his works by this thought and contemplate this one thing alone, that he may serve and benefit others in all that he does, considering nothing except the need and the advantage of his neighbor. Accordingly the Apostle commands us to work with our hands so that we may give to the needy, although he might have said that we should work to support ourselves. He says, however, "that he may be able to give to those in need" [Eph. 4:28]. This is what makes caring for the body a Christian work, that through its health and comfort we may be able to work, to acquire, and lay by funds with which to aid those who are in need, that in this way the strong member may serve the weaker, and we may be sons of God, each caring for and working for the other, bearing one another's burdens and so fulfilling the law of Christ [Gal. 6:2]. This is a truly Christian life. Here faith is truly active through love [Gal 5:6], that is, it finds expression in works of the freest service, cheerfully and lovingly done, with which a man willingly serves another without hope of reward; and for himself is satisfied with the fullness and wealth of his faith.<sup>[\[iii\]](#)</sup>

When we are freed of the existential burden of a soteriology that requires our good works for righteousness, we are entered into a more kenotic ethical economy whereby the horizon of the neighbor's need overtakes the need for us to preserve our own righteousness. It is liberating to do something purely for its own delight and goodness, without having to expect that one will

gain something by it. What's more, when our focus is reoriented away from our own need and toward the horizon of the neighbor, that which we do inevitably becomes more helpful and more just simply by the changed motivation and "economy" of activity.

So what emerges here, to repeat, is a situation in which, perhaps to a scandalous degree, Luther is understanding the public vocation of the Christian (and, by extension, the church) as kenotically emptying out its own "Old Adam" perceptions of how to be theologically righteous (i.e. sufficiently pure, religious, "churchy," etc.) in order to address the horizon of need of the neighbor—with all the messiness, "secularity," and gritty immersion into the blood, sweat, and tears of our world that that implies. Such a kenotic engagement IS the work of the Spirit in our world, and ecclesiology should take its cue from that.

Now, I'm fully aware that, on the surface, that could be heard as fairly standard, even cliché' stuff—such as in the ill-fated 1968 World Council of Churches slogan, "the world sets the agenda for the church." But when placed within the context of Luther's writings as a whole, something far more interesting emerges. Indeed, even within *Freedom of a Christian*, it is clear—the ONLY way that the sinful Christian can be freed to engage the neighbor within the messy horizon of the neighbor's need (think Algerian monks giving medical care to Muslim villagers as other Muslims threaten to kill them) is for the Christian to engage in substantive, ritualized, and ongoing immersion into the thickness of the church's own unique practices—again, hearing the gospel that we are freed from the demands of law and the demands of self-justification, receiving God's own self at the Eucharist, and—and here is the challenge even to gatherings such as this one where proper distinction between law and gospel is at the heart of your work—ongoing spiritual formation that allows this gospel to discipline for

Christians the formation that we receive elsewhere (particularly from the forces of neoliberal capitalism).

A word about that.... *(to be continued)*

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***Endnotes–***

[i] <http://www.firstthings.com/article/1996/08/006-last-testament>

[ii] Robert Saler, *Between Magisterium and Marketplace: A Constructive Account of Theology and the Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2014).

[iii] Luther, *On the Freedom of a Christian*, LW 31:365.