The Theology of President Bush's 2003 "State of the Union" Address

Colleagues,

Ever since the first ThTh posting after Sept. 11, 2001, repentance, America's need to repent, has been a frequent theme here.

There was no hint of anything like that in the "State of the Union" address Americans heard Tuesday evening from their president. Worse still, was the implicit message that America "had no need for repentance" – for anything. Radical change needed, of course, for total turn around [=the core meaning of the Biblical term] on the part of our enemies, the rogue state of the axis of evil. But not us. We are a nation of righteous people; when we act—even in an ever more imminent first-strike war on Iraq— it is a "just cause." Repentance? Not for us.

Jesus' use of those words in Luke 15 is his damning assessment of the Pharisees. Not just that they didn't DO repentance, but that they didn't THINK they needed it. They didn't KNOW they needed it. Their self-perception told them that they were not part of fallen humanity, "not like other people: thieves, rogues [sic!], adulterers, or even like this tax collector." [Luke 18:11]. They were stuck, as Jesus tells them in John 9, in their blindness. They couldn't change, even if they had wanted to. "Because you say 'We're not blind,' your sin persists."

The theological foundation of "no need to repent" is our national mythology of good guys vs.bad guys as the plot of human history. And we are never, never, the bad guys. How did we wind

up non-sinners? Granted, it's not through Jesus. It's just a given. We ARE different from all the others. We're simply more virtuous. Repentance? Not us. What's to repent of? Apparently by "divine providence" we've escaped original sin. Our national God-relationship is this: God does indeed "bless America" – in the past, present, and future. Not all of that blessing is by grace alone either. Much of it is deserved. We've got merit badges.

Of course, this is the exact portrait of the Pharisees in the NT Gospels. Paul too (in Phil. 3) describes his Pharisee past-history in exactly these terms. He was indeed superior to "other people." But then as a Christ-discipler he labels it his Pharisee-heresy.

That's one heresy in our national theology.

President Bush is an ardent apostle of this theology, its most fantastically effective preacher today. The presidency of the USA is indeed "a bully pulpit," and a formidable evangelist is in that pulpit today. Only trouble is his "evangel." It is an "other Gospel" to the one Christ authorizes. Bush, however, is not inventing this evangel and foisting it upon us. He's mostly articulating what Americans already believe and now making it "relevant" to our context today. That other Gospel is reenforced by the moralism that passes for Christianity in much of American church life today—not just in Bush's conservative evangelical born-again branch. And it's also grounded in the Cowboys and Indians, ranchers and rustlers, myth of our national psyche. But it's heresy still.

Couple months weeks ago a ThTh posting #223 (Sept. 19, 2002) looked at that "evangel" more closely and linked it to the ancient heresy called Manichaeanism, the first heresy condemned in the Augsburg Confession of 1530. This year's "State of the

Union” message was Manichaean throughout. Not just in the final segment dealing with Iraq, but also in the opening segments dealing with USA problems. With these and those legislative proposals and new programs, the president told us, we domestic good guys in the government will fix what the domestic bad guys have foisted upon us. The message was moralism throughout.

But some may ask: Shouldn’t a political leader deal with issues of what’s good and what’s bad for our nation? So at root it IS about how we live together, about our ethics and morals. Isn’t it Bush’s job (on assignment from God!) to see to it that “good” happens for the American people and “evil” is restrained? Yes. Yes, but . . . To diagnose domestic and international ills in behavioral, moral, terms and never get any deeper is band-aid therapy. If you are “preaching” anyhow from the Bully Pulpit, why not “preach” deeper? So that diseases be pin-pointed, and equally deep therapies proposed. Band-aid therapy does not fulfill God’s left-hand assignment to governmental leaders. It does not care for, preserve, a nation anymore than band-aids address heart disease. But can presidents address heart-disease, our national “habits of the heart”? That sounds pretty close to repentance talk. Yet if that is what a nation needs, why not have the nation’s president say so?

Bush did get explicitly preachy at the end. Facing our “sense of vulnerability . . . and placing our confidence in God . . . [we ask] may God continue to bless America.” If the God that blesses America is the God of the Bible, then that God also critiques America. We are no exception to the nations that have arisen After the Fall. If the president can get away with proclaiming divine providence—actually de rigueur for every U.S. president—why not preach God’s pin-prick to the pride at the center of our national mythology? Other nations see that “hybris” as our chronic hot-air balloon. Do they “see” us wrong? Who is blind? Jesus preached the graphic image of the blind

leading the blind. Lord, is it we?

An earlier ThTh passed on to you the story of Abraham Lincoln's "call for repentance" in the midst of our Civil War. He used the bully pulpit to articulate not merely God's providence, but God as prosecuting attorney in God's case against America. But he believed it was true. Where is such faith now? It's hard to find even in Sunday pulpits of American churches. Other theologies, other gospels, reign there. Also, alas, the gospel of America.

Another earlier ThTh reported Luther's "call for repentance" as the Muslim armies were terrorizing so-called Christian Europe in his day. He granted that his call wouldn't generate a mass movement, that repentance was not a popular word. When was it ever? But even so, some few who did believe it, Luther said, the "remnant," could and would repent, and God "just might" allow this repentant remnant "count" for everybody. God was known to have done so before.

Another heresy in the American gospel and preached last Tuesday evening is that humans run history. It is not God. With one exception: God blesses America. Thus it is consistent for America to bypass repentance—fixing up our God-relationship—since we really are the masters of our own destiny, and as good-guys we have no serious God-problem at all.

From these a-theistic grounds we were told:
"If war is forced upon us . . . we will prevail." [That is doubly bizarre. 1. No "if God wills" needed. 2. A preemptive strike being "forced upon us."] "We will disarm him." "The course of this nation does not depend on the decisions of others"—not even God's decisions. And he continued: "I will defend the freedom and security of the American people." "We will make sure that 'that day' [earlier called "a day of horror like none we have ever known"] never comes." What are the

grounds for all this confidence? “You [our military forces now surrounding Iraq] believe in America and America believes in you.” Isn’t that a house built on sand?

The common denominator here, besides the God-absence, is the national mania for security. Our security measures “will MAKE SURE that that never happens.” We even bend God’s own law to do that. Example: A preemptive strike is murder. So said Luther, telling Emperor Charles V not to do it with “the Turks” in 1529. He said so, he claimed, because God said so. Yes, Luther might have been mistaken. But I think he made a good case. And if God would judge that to be murder, then even greater INsecurity follows, since God finally eliminates murderers. Or to use Bush’s own macabre words about our recent pre-emptive assassinations of alleged al-Quaida people who have been “otherwise dealt with”: “Many have met a different fate. . . . They’re no longer a problem for the United States, our friends and allies.” When I heard him say that I shuddered since the God who runs history practices equal justice. The live audience on Tuesday, however, was on its feet to cheer.

Though he decried the “Hitlerism” of terrorists, Bush’s own words in the paragraph above carbon-copy the Gestapo of the last century. They “took care” of problem people for Hitler. It is even more ominous. Bush proposes a new security agency—another one!—the Terrorist Threat Integration Center, with the “CIA in full control.” That CIA, now operating with its own army [see the cover-story in next week’s TIME], looks frightfully like the Gestapo [Geheim-Staats-Polizei] all over again to some of us goldie-oldies. For those of us who heard Hitler and Goebbels “live” on that new-fangled contraption called radio in those days, the hype to “get” Saddam before he gets us is hard to distinguish from what the Nazis were saying about Jews and communists and those they labelled perverts. Of course, the context is quite different, but the propagandist pitch is not.

Bush claimed that “the dictator of Iraq . . . is deceiving.” I don’t doubt it. Is he the only one? Propaganda, once a good word, now means intentional deceit. Christians remember that bearing deceit is still a no-no in the decalogue. On that one too God says: Vengeance is mine; I will repay.

Summa:
The “State of the Union” in America is not good. We are in trouble – with God. If no repentance, then no security. First and foremost no secure immunity from God the critic. Empires and their emperors think they “run” history—Pharaoh, Nebuchadnezzar, the Caesars of the Roman Empire, Napoleon, Stalin, Hitler. But they didn’t. Yet the strange “Christian” American Empire thinks so too. But we don’t either. To us too Psalm 2 says: “He who sits in the heavens laughs; the LORD has them [us] in derision. He will speak to them in his wrath, and terrify them in his fury.”

Here’s the deep diagnosis of “terrorism,” the root of the malady of America. But who believes it? No new security measures proposed by Bush can touch that Terrifier. Born-again evangelical that he is, he seems not to see that—and our nation’s vast majority supports him in that ostrich-theology.

Last Sunday’s lectionary Gospel for many of us included Mark 1:15, Jesus’ first words (Mark’s core kerygma)—two indicative sentences, two imperatives. All of them short, only 15 Greek words all told. “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the gospel.” [Marie and I heard a sermon on that text at the English-language Anglican service in St. Petersburg, Russia, 4 days ago. More about that in some future ThTh.]

If eyes are so blinded that repentance is impossible through the X-ray of God’s critique—i.e., the Pharisee heresy—then God’s

second attempt is to make the pitch via Gospel. The two INDICATIVES are Christ-focused throughout Mark's 16 chapters. Both "full time" and "God's kingdom" are found in what Jesus is doing: announcing and executing God's own mercy-management of sinners, and going all the way to the cross to make it happen. That's what it takes, Mark claims, to "fix" the God-problem, everybody's God-problem. From that foundation come the two IMPERATIVES: "Repent and trust this Good News just mentioned." In nickel words: "Because of what is doing in Christ, therefore turn away from whatever gods your heart hangs on, and hang it on the crucified and risen Messiah."

Will that give security? Not really. It offers something better. So said Luther in the very last of his 95 theses of 1517. Indulgences were the security system of the day for coping with The Terrorist of the day, God. At least they had the diagnosis right, but the therapy was wrong. It didn't work. Yet Luther's critique went deeper, to the interior yen to have security in the first place. That's the Old Adam's, Old Eve's, agenda: to do something so that I am safe, maybe even saved. But no humanly crafted system can secure me from THE critic, as our primal parents learned in Genesis 3. They had followed the counsel of the "other" voice in the garden and taken the security measures it proposed. And it made perfect sense. If "being like God" isn't security, what is? But then God came "walking in the garden at the time of the evening breeze," their home-made security measures turned into fig-leaves.

In thesis 95 Luther claims that the Gospel gives "confidence, not security." "Following Christ does not grant immunity to penalties, deaths, and hells." No such security. But it gives "confidence" that God is for us in the midst of all that may come against us—even from God. And note the root term in confidence. It's "fide," faith, Jesus' second imperative in Mark 1:15: "Believe/trust the Good News"—even in the face of Saddam,

even in the face of the bad, sad, state of the union in the USA.

In that Confidence, Peace and Joy!
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