

# Thursday Theology: Pre-Christmas Notes

Co-missioners,

With three days left before Christmas dawns, we send another batch of observations from our editor. Our thanks to God for all who read this, and for everyone who makes our work at Crossings possible.

And a note that Crossings will not send out a Thursday Theology next week as the editor and team will be taking a small break to rest, recharge and spend time with family.

Merry Christmas!

Peace and Joy,  
The Crossings Community

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## Pre-Christmas Notes

by Jerome Burce

### Thought for the Week

From the wrap-up to last Sunday's sermon by Louis Moehlman, a seminary intern serving a five-point parish in North Dakota:

"We are joined to him in our baptism"—where "we" is Louis and his wife and "him" is their three-year-old son. "Our" baptism—as in the baptism the three of them in particular have been

blessedly subjected to.

And with this, Louis takes a piece of standard Lutheran piety and reifies it, as an egghead would say. In plainer language, he tugs it down to the patch of earth he and his family occupy. The Word becomes *their* flesh. It creates a second bond between them that calls for as much attention as the first one gets and invites even more thanksgiving. They are joined to each other by biology, yes, but more firmly still by their shared connection to Christ.

My kids and grandkids will be piling in for Christmas the day after tomorrow. I'll make a point along the way of thanking God that my wife and I are joined to them and they to us in baptism. So it is and always will be, come what may. For such a gift was Jesus born. Thanks for the reminder, Louis—the little “aha,” to tell the truth of it.

Comes a question: will learning to see near and dear ones in this Light improve our regard for baptized strangers? Will it help us recognize them more quickly as treasured flesh-and-blood-of-Christ relatives whom we have yet to meet and enjoy? May the Spirit grant such vision to God's stumbling, fractured church.

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**What Will They Hear this Christmas?**



*Candlelight Worship – From Canva*

By the time this reaches your inboxes lots of pastors will have spent the past few days in agony. Christmas Eve is upon them. They'll soon be looking at the second biggest crowd they've seen all year. (Easter still tops Christmas for church attendance, at least in America.) The pressure is on to deliver the best you've got. That's especially so when the pastor grasps what the preaching task is. Yours is the mouth God aims to use to get The Best News Ever into the ears of the people you're looking at, all of whom God's heart is set on.

It's an impossible task, made so not only by every preacher's limitations, but also by the plugged ears of the audience he or she will be talking to.

Richard Lischer made this point thirty-five years ago in

"Preaching and the Rhetoric of Promise," an article published in Luther Seminary's *Word and World* (Vol. 8, No. 1, pp. 67-79). In a marvelous passage toward the end he pushes preachers to heed the distinction between Law and Gospel, explaining why. Then he warns them against the dreadful yet common mistake of reducing the Gospel from an absolute promise to a conditional one, as happens when the preacher's operative grammar shifts from "Because God...therefore you" to "If you...then God." (Ed Schroeder described this in his usual pithy way as the error of turning Gospel into Gospel-plus, where "plus" denotes those things you've supposedly got to do to cash in on the goodies.)

No preacher worth their salt—yes, there some of these— will make this blunder on Christmas Eve of all times. They'll have seen how the texts they're working with forbid it; how, for example, there's no mention of purity tests that shepherds have to pass to gain entrance to the stable. Nor do angels limit their declaration of God's peace and good will to those portions of the earth where folks are behaving themselves. Good Christmas preachers will point this out. Even so, says Lischer, they'll face a problem. Here's how he described it in 1988 as a teacher at Duke Divinity School:

If language is at least fifty percent *hearing*, then law and gospel is also a method of listening. Every year in our university I lead a small seminar of residents in psychiatry on the subject of Christianity and psychiatry. Every year without fail the discussion turns to what the residents consider to be the elements of the Christian faith most toxic to the human spirit. "I grew up in the Lutheran church, and I never heard anything healthy about human nature, nothing about recreated humanity in Jesus Christ, but only 'don't do this and don't do that.'" Another doctor complained about the arrogance of Jesus in making claims beyond the Ten Commandments. As it turned out this year, each of the eight

psychiatrists was a disaffected Christian. So it was not that these residents had never heard the words, characters, metaphors, and stories that make up the gospel. But *to their ears* the components had invariably been assembled in a configuration that spelled “law.” They claimed to have never heard the message presented in any light other than obligation. The inheritors of Christendom, they had never heard the promise. (p. 77)

One safely supposes that these physicians Lischer describes attended their fair share of Christmas services growing up. If the point of God’s grace-beyond-reason was made there, they missed it.

The point will be massively missed this year too, and for the reason Lischer underscores. Luther’s term for it is *opinio legis*, by which he means every person’s born-and-bred assumption that Law is the main thing. It’s how the world operates. It’s how the world’s God must operate too, whether as prescriber or enforcer. When going to church we hear what we expect to hear—more rules, more expectations. To many, the sweetness of a Christmas Eve service is, like Santa and the reindeers, mere icing to help us tolerate the bitterness of the reality we’ll face all over again when the trees and lights come down. “Thanks for nothing, God!”



By Govert Flinck - 1639, Public Domain,

<https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=480149>

However much those preachers with a clue will try to counter this three nights from now, they'll fail with half the people they're talking to. Probably more. Stalwarts of the congregations they serve will be among them. It is as it is. The best batters in baseball fail two out of every three times they come to the plate. The success rate for preachers in pulpits is woefully less, I'll bet. Let these preachers recall two things. First, how the company they keep in their failure is that baby they'll soon be talking about, the one who wound up as a failed preacher tacked to a cross. Second, it's also for them that he lives and reigns today enduring *their* failure with the unfailing compassion he's famous for.

(Do you know of a preacher who needs to hear this? Pass it along.)

One last quick thought about Lischer's observation of how ears are configured. Perhaps it clarifies our job at Crossings today, especially where the laity is concerned. Suppose we were to put some major effort into helping everyday folks catch the

difference between Law and Promise and notice how God-in-Christ is all about the latter. This is something our Board will be talking about in coming months, I think.

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## **Learning from Dr. Bach**

The talk turned at a pericope study some weeks ago to the frequent reluctance of preachers to tackle the task of diagnosis. It's one thing to gripe about the problems in a fallen world out there. It's quite another to poke at the fallen, struggling hearts of the people you're talking to. One doesn't want them taking umbrage, I suppose. Too many are the preachers who wouldn't know what to do were the umbrage to leak out. So they leave it alone to pool and fester. People head home still grumbling about God.

With this in mind I point you to a gift for a quiet hour or two when Christmas is done and you're catching your breath. It's a You Tube discussion of one of J.S. Bach's church cantatas, "Herr, wie du willst, so schick's mit mir" (BWV 73). Roughly translated, "Lord, do with me as you wish," or "Have your way with me." Behind this lurks the Third Petition: "Your will be done."

I grew up assuming that this is a prayer one is supposed to embrace with happy confidence. Standard piety demands it, so we pretend this is so also with us. Comes the astonishment of this cantata. Whether in text or in music, it tears through that crust of pretense to expose what's really going in lots of Christian minds and hearts when these words pop up. Bach emerges as a master diagnostician, using melody as a probe and harmony as a scalpel. He preaches Law. He delivers the promise.

For more on this, see that [You Tube discussion](#). It's in German

overlaid with English. (There's a [German-only version](#) too.) For the cantata itself, go to You Tube and search on BWV 73.

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### **A Fast Note for English-Only Christmas Preachers**

I just discovered this. "The angel of the Lord came upon them, and the *doxa* of the Lord shone around about them..." *Doxa* is Greek. In English, "glory." In Luther's German the word is "Klarheit"—clarity. When *doxa* pops up again in the angels' song, Luther shifts to "Ehre," as in honor. There are two or three sermons lurking in that initial "Klarheit," or so it seems to me. More on this next year, perhaps.

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**Thursday Theology: that the benefits of Christ be put to use**

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