

# Looking at Resources Through a Lutheran Lens

A presentation by the Rev. Theodore W. Schroeder  
to "Lutheran Day" at the Ecumenical Resource  
Center Gathering, Tempe, Arizona, November 2004

## First Session:

### Why did God ... ?

What we're going to do for a while is have a conversation, because most of you can probably do this better than I can; you have lived through making choices about resources for a long time. What we want to do is think again and talk again about what it means to choose Lutheran resources -- how important that is, or how important it isn't -- and what we can do to support each other as we go about this kind of a task.

Focus activity based on Group's video "After the Fall: A Climber's True Story of Facing Death and Relying on God."

I want you to look at this video from the perspective of asking yourself the question, "Would I purchase this for my resource center?" After we look at it for a while, we'll talk about why you would or wouldn't. It's a resource from Group Publishers, and it's a story about a guy who was a photographer for Group who fell off a 100-foot-high ledge rock climbing, and survived. And so, there are some interesting kinds of issues -- it has an interesting take on this. (Several sections of the Group resource were played.)

Would you have purchased that for your resource center, or would you stock it, or would you have questions about it?

Q: I think it's good until it gets to the points where "God is getting my attention," and that's where I want it to end.

Q: I'd like to get the un-Christian, discovery version, where it's just the story of the fall and doesn't blame the person, and so on, and then sit down and work with the youth group or whatever on trying to figure out where can we intersect this in our faith life. I hate the usual moralizing trip that things go down or that make God the bad guy so that I can finally be a good guy.

Yes. That's a very strange theology that comes through there. Not strange -- I mean, you run into it all the time, and it's pretty common, I think, in the evangelical community to get this kind of simplistic view of things. And ultimately it turns into almost a fatalism, where you're living some kind of a blueprint, and God's doing these terrible things and throwing up these awful hurdles that you have to overcome somehow, and you have to do something -- you have to get over this somehow, and if you do that, then you're living according to God's will. It's a very complex kind of theological thing. But you hear that kind of comment often.

Q: I wonder if we might be more comfortable looking at it if he had said something like, "This horrible fall, a total accident, happened, and through the process of recovering from this I was able to focus more on God and get into a closer relationship with God." But not put the blame on God.

Yes. And all of us who are in ministry have dealt with people who came through situations like this. In fact, every time you go to the hospital people have the same questions: "Why has God done this to me?" is a pretty common question you get. When you have cancer -- and you know, I've had the privilege of having it twice -- you have questions like "Why me?" "Why did it come to me?" As I used to tell my confirmation class, "You can ask any question in this class as long as it doesn't start with 'Why.'" "Why" implies something that may be beyond us. Ultimately we don't know the answers to questions like "why."

It is true, as Paul says in Romans, that all things work together, and you can find good in even bad things like this, but you can't lay the blame on God and say "God did this to me" in some fashion or other.

Q: One of those chapters in that resource is "It happened for a reason." Is he inclined, then, that it was preordained?

It gets really close to that. I didn't listen to the whole thing, but this whole theological approach - it gives the sense that God is doing everything and we are just kind of encountering it or dealing with it or responding to it. It's really common in that whole outlook.

Q: Another concern with things that I noticed, and I didn't count how many times he referred to God as "he" and "him." And the friend, too. Numerous people in there used solely male pronouns to refer to God. I am concerned about perpetuating that.

Well, that's pretty common too.

## **Core Lutheran Doctrines**

(APPENDIX A)

These excellent drawings are courtesy of Bob Sitze. What we're going to do during this time is think through a little bit of what Lutheran theology means for choosing resources. This is a little sheet that will help us review some of the important aspects of Lutheran theology or Lutheran identity, and then we'll think about how those apply. Since you're such astute students, you can tell me what these mean, and we'll talk about it.

This, according to Bob, is what is singular in Lutheran doctrine or Lutheran theology, and what's important about Lutheranism. This is a sheet we use when we teach writers. If we have time tomorrow, we'll do actually a process of writing a lesson. Anyway, tell me what those mean; anybody want to take a shot?

Q: Is Yes/No the paradox?

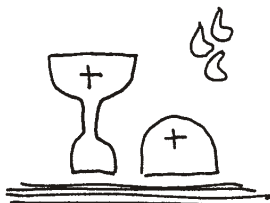
It's a paradox. That's a paradox, but it's the fundamental paradox: Law and Gospel. So, it's God's "no" and God's "yes." And one of the things that's singular about Lutheran theology is that we insist that the Scripture has a no/yes look to it – that God's revelation comes to us through the Word in "no," which is God's law, and "yes," which is Gospel. So, one of the characteristics that we look for in resources is, do I do that? You may, as Luther said, "rightly discern" the Scripture. You may rightly separate law and Gospel – and believe me, it's the hardest thing to do. Anybody who preaches, anybody who makes presentations, anybody who writes knows that it's the hardest thing to do, because it's so easy to turn the Gospel into law and the law into Gospel, or at least try to do that. As a man said at one of our assemblies once, "I agree," he said, "We need more Gospel, but we need the Gospel with teeth in it." You know, that's the problem that we have. And when we look at some of these resources tomorrow we'll look at how that works out.



What else is on here?

Q: The Sacraments.

Sacramental. And I guess that's what those little things there are: sacramentals. And one of the points I want to make, and we'll make it again tomorrow when we look at the Scripture, is that we are not sacramental in our teaching and in our ministry and in our discerning of the Word simply because we mention or emphasize the Sacraments. We are sacramental because, at the core of what we are discovering in Scripture or experiencing in worship is God at work toward us. The fundamental question of a biblical text is not "What is this person doing toward God," but "What is God doing in this person's life?" What is God acting that is causing a reaction? That's the fundamental question. So we are sacramental in our theology because the first question is "What is God doing?"

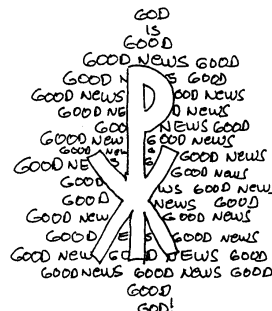


The first issue in worship for Lutherans is , "What is God doing?" Worship for us is not an activity that we do in order to keep God happy. It is a place where we come to encounter God acting toward us, and we respond. The other side of God's action is always our response. So, to say that Lutheran theology is sacramental is more than saying we emphasize the Sacrament.

What else is on here? Anything else?

Q: Christ is here.

This Good News here? Yes. I'm not sure exactly what he's drawing here, but two things I would emphasize: the Good News is Jesus Christ. Again, that's basic Lutheran teaching. The Good News is Jesus Christ. It's not that general, vague, "God loves us," "God is nice and you've got to take care of God." That's not Gospel. That may be comfortable, but it's not Gospel. Gospel is Jesus Christ. The other element that I would mention in this is, when we speak of the Christian life, we speak of the



theology of the cross as contrasted with the theology of glory, and we'll look at some examples of both as we have time. But, again, that's one place where it becomes very difficult in our culture, in our world, to maintain the theology of the cross, because the theology of glory, even as Luther said all those years ago, is so seductive, so heart-warming, so lovely and so tempting, that it's hard to maintain the theology of the cross. And I think that also is what he was driving at in this drawing.

The others are a little more obscure.

Sola Scriptura, Sola Gratia, Sola Fides -- Word alone, grace alone, faith alone -- is sort of a Luther claim for himself as being the core of his theology. It's the Word and faith and grace.



Q: I think the arrows indicate that the Word alone, grace alone, faith alone is not just for us, but empowering us into Christ-like service.

Yes, it's a sort of core of who we are, I think, as much as what we believe and what we teach. Yes, the priesthood of all believers is close here because I think they are connected to each other,. But fundamental to our understanding of what it means to be a Christian, or a disciple or a follower of Jesus, is that we are all in the "priesthood." You know, Luther has such a wonderful theology of what it means to be living the Christian life, and the whole sense of vocation -- you know, he said the woman cooking in the kitchen is more important than the clergy -- that whole sense of what it means to be in ministry is core to what we teach.

Something else?

Q: Liturgical, up in the top right corner? Or at least musical?

Lutherans are notoriously musical.

Is there something missing? What would you put in the (empty) box? Is there some characteristic of Lutheran theology or Lutheran teaching that's missing from this sheet?



Q: Are you talking about left- and right-hand kingdoms?

That's one possibility.

Q: The cross is not as obvious as the other symbols.

That's true. Any others that are really important?

Q: I guess the teaching in the family and in the church itself. The whole idea of catechism that Luther wanted to get to the kids, and that we continue to work on today.

I would agree. I think one of the real strengths of Lutheranism is our emphasis on passing on the faith, however that happens, and that whole educational core to who we are and what we're

about I think is really fundamental to what we are as a community of believers. We don't just own the faith; we give it away, and we give it as a gift to children and others. I would hate to see us lose that.

Q: We are saved by grace, not by works.

I think that's what he means by this "grace alone" phrase.

Q: That's been a little bit perverted by the Word Alone movement, so that when I hear it now that's an image that isn't very pleasing, and I think we sometimes forget the other two parts, but that's become such a visible definition for those who really are uneasy with ecumenism, but it's too bad that they did that with that phrase.

Q: I don't know how to draw it, but I also think that one of the pieces out of the catechism, one of the most rich is the Holy Spirit, who is to call, gather, enlighten and sanctify. Sort of works against that Word Alone movement.

We've been accused of being Second Article Christians, and kind of ignoring the other parts of the Creed. But I think when we have a balanced trinitarian theology, which I think is also core to who we are, we see that all parts of the Creed work together, hopefully.

How important is Lutheran identity to now? How important is it to the average person?

Q: My take on the people who move to town? Zero. Almost zero. The closest church with the most pleasing needs-meeting thing is where they will join. That is not what they were before. It might be a Lutheran church, it might be a Baptist church, it might be the house church down the street; it does not matter.

Which is a feature of our pluralistic culture. One of the things that militates against having identity is a pluralistic culture that says "join a club" -- and, you know, there are more things that are going to militate against having a strong sense of identity. It becomes increasingly clear as national church offices and organizations are de-emphasized, as they are being. The church becomes more local. And I think that's one of the things that's happening in our culture. The Christian Church is becoming more local. That means that the people in your community -- those Protestant congregations are more like each other than your congregation may be like a Lutheran congregation in New Mexico or California, or wherever.

Q: Let me define a bit more closely what I perceive the problem to be -- where I think we fit in as resource center directors in a hugely powerful way. As we talk with pastors who have been in the field a long time -- or relatively new pastors of any age -- they abdicate the role you're asking us to take by simply saying to whichever lay person is willing to be the Sunday school coordinator or educational chair, "I don't care what you get, and I give you no help doing it -- just make sure the kids don't destroy the building, and if the teachers like it, use it." And there's absolutely no direction given. It is abysmal. I'm talking about my fellow clergy; I'm one of them, you know? So, when we go in there and talk about, "well, if you look at the variety of Lutheran material, you can use various styles," and so on, it's like "Why would we ask that question?" It makes no sense to them, because their pastoral leadership has done zip in helping them even to ask the

question. That's a little bit harsh, but it's about 85 percent true.

Yes, it's true.

Q: What about pluralism and the effect of that? I'm seeing this because we are an ecumenical center but we have a lot of Lutheran congregations, so I'm always walking that line. But some of the denominations that don't have a strong history of doctrine or a confessional stance will come in and will say, "I don't know why people get all hung up on this stuff," like Christ is truly present in the Sacrament. But they really don't see what the big deal is, and, like Greg said, if they have to move to another town they just walk into whatever church they go into, and then, because they have experience teaching Sunday school someplace else, they're now the Christian education director of a Lutheran church.

We are suffering from the great American religion, which is not Christian; it's something else. We just had an opportunity this summer to go to Germany. I'm sure many of you have gone there, but we spent some time with some of the clergy there and talked with them about what's happening in the religious community in Germany and in Europe in general. And it's kind of frightening.

Q: East or West?

We were mostly in East Germany. But they're both suffering from the same kind of stagnation. The state is essentially taxing the church out of business. Over there they talk in terms of the *Volksreligion*. Several of the pastors talked about the *Volksreligion*, which is sort of what Christianity in the culture has become. And in that you observe the holidays and you do some of the -- you know, go to church on some of the important event days -- but other than that it doesn't really have much significance. And I think that what they call *Volksreligion* is our cultural religion, and I think that's what we're dealing with as much as anything else. And in the cultural religion you are judged by how good you are, so that, in our latest research with Lutherans, more than 60 percent said God judges you by what you do. And if you're good enough, you're going to make it. That's the American folk religion.

Q: In the current political election, whether local or national, the people running the various campaigns knew that. If you look at rhetoric from any political perspective, they knew which civil moral buttons to try to defend or try to wriggle out of, one way or the other, and they got it figured out. We're kidding ourselves if we don't think it's happening.

Q: The questions we are asking are, I think, good questions, but I'd like to add another lens to that. It seems to me that the conversation we're having is about those who are already on our campuses. What does it mean to have a Lutheran perspective with those who are outside our walls -- not members? Five of the 10 fastest growing cities in the United States are within our synod, in Arizona and Las Vegas. And 45-65 percent, according to all the demographics, are unchurched. As we establish new congregations and revitalize the old, the challenge is to go outside ourselves. The neighborhoods that surround our congregations have people who are not identified with any religion. So then in that context we ask "What does it mean to be Lutheran?" The greatest challenge we have is for congregations to examine themselves from the perspective of those who are not

already on our campus. How do we remain "Lutheran" and claim who we are and then go out into the neighborhood? And that's very hard for established Lutherans. Here in the Southwest we're not giving birth to more Lutherans, and often 35 to 45 percent, up to 60 percent of our neighborhoods are Latino. So that means what we need to do is a very different thing.

Yes. And that's going on.

Q: Yes. You've got the people who come where they don't care about what church it is, but you still have the people who also want to hang on to every tradition that they've ever known in Lutheranism — not that it's not good to have some, but they are not willing to open up to anything new and perhaps are not willing to really embrace any idea completely, or want to go out and get new people, they are so stuck in that "We've always done it this way" mode.

Yes. We'll be glad to have you join our church if you be like us. But that's not just Lutheran either.

Q: I worry, though, about us framing our attitude with a good or bad label. In my mind, people simply are people, and there are times to go on. Right now the trend, I think, externally, is not for us to hang our hats or our success on whether or not we put Lutheran on our sign, but I think it's even more critical than ever for us internally in our leadership to utilize a Lutheran perspective -- a Lutheran lens -- on how we interpret our work, because I think it's got the best set of tools for being able to understand and critique our culture in a way that provides for faithful, meaningful living.

Just to follow up on what you are saying -- and I agree with you entirely -- I have an article here done by Martha Stortz (APPENDIX B), and she's saying let's be careful how we talk about Lutheran identity, because there's a danger. And this is a danger that exists in the Christian community, but particularly in Lutheranism. There's a danger that when you have established your identity there is a sense of superiority. But looking down on people is not helpful. To say, you know, we've finally got this together, and we know who we are and we know what we're doing, you poor people out there. So, that kind of sense of identity is not helpful.

So, Stortz's contention is that, rather than talk about identification or identity, we should be talking about charisms -- she calls them charisms -- but this: understanding that the Lutheran community has been entrusted with these gifts, and if we are not there they won't be there. So it's our responsibility -- more than that; it's our opportunity -- to take not only to the world but to the Christian community these important gifts. And if we don't represent these, if we don't understand them, and if we don't say this is who we are, they're not going to be there. They're going to be lost; they're going to be gone. And we don't do it from a position of superiority, but we do it from a sense of "Here. Look what we have for you. Look at these gifts we have for you, that we're willing to share with you, gifts we treasure and we're willing to give you." And that sense, I think, is a lot healthier way to go about what we're doing than to say we are the ones who have Scripture right and we have theology right and we have ...

Q: Coupled with that, Ted, you said it before, Lutherans have gifts to offer, particularly around the second article of the Creed. I think also some would say the third article. We

don't do really very well on the first article, and there are other communities who have a lot to teach us about that, and those are their gifts that they are bringing into this larger Christian community and perspective. And you have those ecumenical centers for congregations and communities. We've grown away from that.

Yes. I agree with you.

Q: And I've learned from some of our ecumenical partners who have such appreciation for the work that we do. I remember talking to someone who got transferred; he was a UCC pastor, who said, "Oh, I order your work all the time; you guys have this really sound stuff, and I just trust what you're putting out." And I've heard that from others at this conference and while traveling. You know, "We look to the ELCA Web site when we're looking for a resource on peace and war." It's in the Top Ten for them; they recognize it.

I used to be involved with the ecumenical educators, and the Episcopalians were strong in that. We used to have some of these events, and I remember one Episcopal priest saying to us Lutherans, "I envy you. We have the right process, and we get people into groups, and we don't have anything to teach them. You have something to teach." And he was envious of the confessions. The confessional position gives us a strength, so that when we come together to study the Word we have something to say. His sense of where he was in the Episcopal community -- and certainly the Episcopal community is such a diverse thing that you could find anything in there -- but his sense was that they were emphasizing so much on form that they had lost the content.

Q: You know, Ted, I'm about as deeply rooted in Lutheranism as you can get, but I still chafe a little bit at "Lutheran doctrine," and I think of a picture that Gail Ramshaw, who is about as staked in Lutheranism as you can get, draws of this Mason jar. And she talks about doctrine and how the Lutherans want to keep that lid on because, if you ever let that lid off, then it gets reexamined, or thought about in new ways. Uh-oh! You know, who knows what might happen? And as we talk about these things, I think, like Scripture, we need to be revisiting these carved-in-stone notions for a new time and a new place, without compromising God's grace that comes to us in these means. But we can't hold on to the same words, the same academic sort of delineation of what it means to be true-blue, or we're going to put ourselves in little corner somewhere. And you know I'm not -- I mean, I like that corner, but we've got to be darned careful about that. All of this stuff that is about being Lutheran I hold onto for dear life, but I also find great riches in the other sacramental churches, and my sense is that we are moving into a century where the church is going to go two directions: one is the kind of non-denominational community -- individualized religion -- and then those around the church that will be more focused on sacramental life and the ways in which God comes to us, on questions rather than answers, on wrestling with a Scripture that is alive and has to be reinterpreted and speaks in a new way in a new time, and doctrine that has to be reexamined and reexamined. I hope I don't sound like a heretic, but I always have that image.

You sound like a Lutheran who is saying reformation is ongoing, and I really think it needs to be. And, with everything there is a down side or danger. For example, you say the strength of Lutheran communities is they are family-like communities. But you can say that the weakness of Lutheran communities is that they are family-like communities, because that's by definition a



closed operation. So, you know, everything has a down side. The down side of a confessional system is that it becomes an end in itself. As soon as it does, you close it up and put it on a shelf. Just like when you write a mission statement, you know; you post it on the wall and that's it. You never look at it again. All those things have a down side to them, and what I think part of our responsibility as church leaders is, is to say exactly what you're saying: The church is never finished. We're never there. We're in a process of becoming. But we don't want to lose our heritage or our traditions as we go about challenging ourselves in terms of what does this mean for now -- for today -- for the way we're dealing with the world?

Q: I hear all this, and I keep going back to a curriculum that I've used, and that was very successful both in retreat format and on Sundays, and that was the thing that Norma Cook Everist wrote called "Feasting at Katie's Table." (Augsburg Fortress, Item # 0000111517, \$49.95) And she defines what the elements of the doctrine are, and then you apply them to a modern-day "What's going on with you" in your snapshot: "How does this theology fit with this?" And then the next discussion is, how does doctrine fit? That just keeps coming back to me as I hear all these comments. Our responsibility as Christian educators and our responsibility as resource people is to get something in people's hands, where they can tell people what "faith alone" means. "How does that work?" "Here, let me show you." And I think that's one of the few curricula I've seen come out that really says "Here's what it is; here's how to use it." And let me tell you, it doesn't stop; it keeps going.

Q: One of the gifts we have nowadays is the gift of companion synods, and if we treat these folks as true partners they are looking at Scripture and our classic professional writings through different cultural eyes. And they obviously speak to us and challenge us to speak in new ways about what it means to be Lutheran Christians in the world.

And if we ever get to a point where we say we have arrived ... You know, I came out of the Missouri Synod, and I think that's the most deadly sin in the Missouri Synod is that there are many who feel they have arrived -- that they're there.

Q: When we teach Scripture today, for example, we have a potential to teach Scripture in a way that causes people to read it with honesty and integrity and wrestle with it. Or, you give them the alternative of they're supposed to read it and it somehow either applies, or they toss it out or blindly follow it. I think people are looking for a way to get a handle on instructions.

Q: You know, where I live there are a bunch of conservative people. So, especially in the last couple of weeks as I've tried to think about all this, and I've gone back to my little Christian education class in college, and I wonder about the faith stages. Is there anything to that that intersects with what we try to do? It just says that some people just need to be where they are, and even though I want to be able, on the one hand, to provide something for them if they're ready to be thinking. But would it be possible if there are people who just can't be beyond where they are?

Q: One of the things that scares me is having congregations say they want to do the Purpose-driven Life program, and then they do it without even looking at it through the lens of *sola gratia*. So, you know, it's like, "Okay, but let me tell you, you're not talking

about Lutheranism here." I can't tell you how many people in our synod are using Purpose-driven Life.

Q: That goes right to the point.

One of the interesting things about faith stages is that I believe people get arrested at certain places and can't move past that. I don't think they can; I don't think their personality will let them. That's true. But the most important thing, I think, for leaders in congregations -- and all of us are aware of this, is you have to start where people are. My favorite story is -- and this is true -- I came out of seminary and went to a little church in Illinois. And, you know, on the first

Sunday I was going to do Bible class. I said, "Well, I'll do Jeremiah." So I got out Norm Habel -- remember Norm Habel? -- I got his notes and I got up there in front, with about six people in the pews, and I went through something about Jeremiah. The whole hour I talked about this obtuse stuff from Jeremiah. And after I was done, one of the ladies there, who apparently was visiting, came up and said, "Pastor, what are these little numbers in the side of the page?" She didn't know what a verse was! And I was launching into this philosophical whatever. It suddenly came to me -- two things. One, you really have to find out where folks are before you start. The other is, I need to know something about education. And that's really where I got started.

Q: As part of my job I do a lot of screening for mission developers and groups, and stuff like that. One of the most frightening things -- these are supposed to be some of our most exemplary people, and we have 16 categories of stuff that we're looking for in that -- is when it comes to faith formation, I have yet to interview a pastor that I thought really scored strongly in understanding how you evaluate and develop the faith of members. It just currently doesn't seem to be on the radar screen for most of the folks. I think that is one of the most frightening parts of what we don't have to offer. An area where maybe a lot of you folks can help.

Yes. I think one of the great -- I can't say where seminaries are now, but when I came through my seminary, I went out into the parish and I didn't know anything about education. I had not a clue about education, and I suddenly realized that about 80 percent of what I was doing was education. And I said, "You know, I really probably should know something about this." But I don't know if that's changed much.

Q: There are some areas they are paying attention to, and it has to do with evangelism. But in terms of once you present the Word, how do you mature the faith in people. The seminaries are doing nothing.

I did a workshop in Iowa, and I had about 100 people there, and the subject was assimilating new members. And I asked this group of pastors and lay people "What do you do for assimilating new members?" and there was dead silence.

Q: One of the things that our congregation wanted was familiarization with the Bible. So I wrote a two-year program, the first year the Old Testament and the second year the New Testament. And we went book by book by book. And it was just such an overview: who's in it, what did they do, what are the main parts of the story. And that was very,

very popular, especially the Old Testament. They didn't know what the Old Testament was.

I once did a sermon series called "Favorite Bible Stories You Should Have Learned in Sunday School." Not many people remembered those any more.

I have a couple of hand-outs. I'm going to stop early because I'm going to give you some hand-outs and I'd like you to be able to read these before tomorrow. Take a chance to read through them. I'm going to start with a little conversation about this, and then we're going to go and look at some actual resources and do some evaluation. I'll do a process of developing a lesson with you, just so you have some concept of how that goes. And we'll do something on the theology of the cross, because I think that's probably the most challenging one to get clear. So, that's what we plan for tomorrow.

Hand-outs:

"Lutheran Identity or Lutheran Charism?" by Martha Ellen Stortz, Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary (APPENDIX B)

"November 2003 Letter to Rostered Leaders" from Presiding Bishop Mark S. Hanson (APPENDIX C)

"Lutheran Identity in a 'Pluralistic' Context" by Robert A. Kelly of Waterloo Lutheran Seminary (APPENDIX D)

