

FORUM LETTER

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Self's glory road



“Theologians of glory are thus always driven to seek transcendent meaning, to try to see into the invisible things of God, to get a line on the logic of God. They look at the cross and ask, ‘What is it all about?’ They wonder what is ‘behind’ it all. There is a reason for this, of course. If we can see through the cross to what is supposed to be behind it, we don’t have to look at it! It is, finally, a matter of self-defense. He was ‘as one from whom men hide their faces’ (Isa. 53.3). If the cross can be neatly folded into the scheme of the self’s glory road, it will do no harm.” — Gerhard O. Forde, *On Being a Theologian of the Cross: Reflections on Luther’s Heidelberg Disputation, 1518* (Eerdmans, 1997)

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Prayer and the grass lizard



My nine-year-old, she’s an amateur herpetologist; amateur everything at her age, but she does like reptiles. A couple years back she caught a green anole. That’s a 7- to 9-inch member of the iguanid family and they range wild in the southern regions of America. Up here in Missouri pet stores sell them for \$7.95. In South Carolina, where we vacation annually, you can pick them up free, if you’re quick.

She has faithfully cared for this small thing ever since and even named it after her older sister, Liz, a development the older sister greeted with amused aplomb.

The nine-year-old made a recent addition to the herpetology habitat by purchasing a grass lizard, a native southeast Asia species. This creature is pencil-thin and twelve inches long, from head to tip of tail. The animal is arboreal and the tail is employed for curling around branches, and it will happily share the same space with an anole. You cannot miss it inside the habitat (the importance of this will become apparent).

She makes the purchase on a Saturday morning, while mother is away, and then eagerly awaits her mother’s return so she can show off the new lizard, named String. Mother, who has a tolerance for such things, is led to the habitat to view the new lizard.

Only there is no String.

The grass lizard — all twelve inches of it — has gone AWOL. This is not good.

Mother issues instructions. Daughter and I accordingly and thoroughly search the enclosure. We remove the climbing branch. No lizard. We remove and search the plant. No lizard. I tell the girl to rake the substrate; perhaps

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String has burrowed. No lizard. We shake the window curtains and check all the high points and places in her room. No lizard.

Uh, perhaps, I wonder aloud, we were misinformed as to the compatibility of green anoles and grass lizards? Well, no. The green anole didn't look any fatter than before. The girl scoffs at me, anyway. "How can a 7-inch anole eat a 12-inch grass lizard?" she demands.

The nine-year-old is visibly distraught. She loves her menagerie. Lizards are not the only small animals hanging out around our house, and all of them belong to her and all of them receive lavish attention.

We return from worship the next day and, together, the girl and I plan to check under the bed, move the book case and shake the curtains once more. And we would have done that, except there's String, contentedly basking under the habitat lamp, stretched out next to Liz (the anole, not the older sister).

The girl is ecstatic. "God did it!"

God did it? This is a wrinkle I hadn't thought of. She explains that when she finished her prayers after receiving Holy Communion that morning, she asked God to take care of the missing lizard.

I am intrigued. What, I asked, did you pray? Exactly?

Her post-communion prayer amounts to three thanksgivings. She thanks God, first, for being old enough to receive Holy Communion; second, for being an acolyte; and, most interestingly, she thanks God for letting her believe in Him. People have written whole books about that last one.

And to these prayers that Sunday she specifically added a request that God would show the lizard a way back to the habitat where it would be safe.

Seven years in hell

I know, I know. This sounds like the kind of happy-sappy junk that ends up in an e-mail inbox breathlessly titled "Our God is An Awesome God." And, oh, if you love Jesus you had better send it on to ten other friends and be careful not to break the chain or else, because the one guy who did ended up with seven really bad years in hell.

Let me say, however, my own anxiety over the missing lizard was instantly relieved. How bad, Wife asked, was that little thing going to stink once it died of starvation? I'll never know and I am duly grateful.

But I am left with more serious questions, the same irksome and bothersome and perhaps sophomoric ones I've always had with prayer.

What does God do with the prayers of nine-year-old girls? To my daughter's mind, God answers those prayers and here is the proof of it, right there, lounging under the heat lamp. Obviously, somehow, we overlooked the little animal while searching the cage. Should I be the one to tell her that? I did mention that possibility. She looked at me like I had just told her I planned to shoot the Easter Bunny next rabbit season. She has never believed in the Easter Bunny of course, any more than she has ever believed in Santa Claus or the Tooth Fairy. In these matters, I raised all my children as steely-eyed rationalists. But she does believe God answered her prayer for a lizard, and she didn't very much like me raising an alternative explanation.

Prayerful questions

My problem is, I'm not certain prayer does much good for the externals of life. Remember those studies asserting the statistical probability that post-coronary patients have fewer complications when they are prayed for, even when unaware? In point of fact, it is now reported the patients did no better or worse than those who received no prayer at all.

That's what comes of trying to prove prayer "works."

Prayer, for me, is a means of sorting my way through the exigencies of existence; you know, asking for courage to face what will be faced, not asking to be snatched away from it. I didn't tell this to the nine-year-old. She'll encounter her own doubts on prayer soon enough without my help. But speculation of this sort is something of an occupational hazard for pastor-types. Probably, she'll learn that too. But this clearly wasn't the time to get into a theological discussion on the efficacy of prayer, so I dropped it.

Yet I'd honestly like to think that God did reach down to assuage the worry of a nine-year-

old girl, and, more particularly, my nine-year-old. But I am resistant to that notion; it creates even more mischief. Still, I must admit, in the larger scheme of creation, God works His will in the way He will regardless of whether the method employed meets any of my standards for divine behavior. And I cannot say that divine regard for a grass lizard is improbable. He who marks the sparrow's fall, and all that. This doesn't prevent me from checking the latch on the habitat, though.

Still, I am not bold in my prayer, but timid and cautious, careful of what I ask.

I sat in Charleston, SC during hurricane Hugo in 1989. Initially, Hugo headed for Savannah, GA but then jinked to the north. Some while after the storm I hauled the family to Savannah to escape the rubble for a weekend. There I saw a church sign reading, "Thank You God for Sparing Savannah." I was instantly livid. To me, the subtext was, "And Smashing Charleston Instead." This was like, "Thank You God for Sparing Barabbas." It hit me with just that kind of intensity. Yet, Barabbas had to be spared, yes?

If God did particularly and especially touch

this nine-year-old in this particular and special way, then I want to know why. Why this girl? Why this way? Was her heart pure? Was selflessness a determining factor? She prayed for a lizard, after all, not her own happiness. At the same time, I've never heard her pray for the crickets she coolly plops into that cage. They'd fit somewhere in with sparrows, wouldn't they?

See? I am inclined to strictly relegate the lizard to the realm of coincidence, and leave it there. Putting it there relieves me of thinking further of all the prayers offered by all the other nine-year-old children, children trying to grow up in places of poverty or violence or persecution or all three and worse. Dear God, I am sometimes overwhelmed with it, thinking of all the calamitous places we have made for children. Of what effect are these prayers?

I have no conclusion of course. Much better writers than I have puzzled all this before, and better ones yet will puzzle it all again.

No, where I come out is simply the command to pray. We pray because we are told to pray. Is there any other reason? — *by the editor*

A wearisome strategy



By the time you read this, if all goes as planned, rogue San Francisco Lutherans will have thumbed their noses yet once again at the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America by ordaining an openly gay and defiant woman and calling her for a special ministry among the homeless. The liturgy was scheduled for November 18 at — guess where — Ebenezer Lutheran Church, of "herchurch" notoriety (see "Raising an Ebenezer at the Church of Her" *Forum Letter*, March 2005; also available at www.alpb.org, *Forum Online* under "Selected Reprints").

The candidate is one Megan Rohrer, a South Dakotan who reluctantly withdrew from that synod's candidacy process and came under the care of the Extraordinary Candidacy Project (ECP). She did her seminary work at Pacific School of Religion in Berkeley — that's a different institution from Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary,

please note (though both are part of the Graduate Theological Union), and is an independent school though with strong UCC and Methodist ties. She did her internship at Christ Lutheran in San Francisco, where her supervisor was Steve Sabin, removed from the ELCA roster some years ago over sexuality issues but nonetheless called by this ELCA congregation with no apparent consequences.

\$75 gala matching funds

The ordination celebration is billed as a gala — and it must be pretty gala, all right, since the liturgy is to be followed by an event raising money (as far as we can understand it) for "The Welcome Place," the ministry for which Ms. Rohrer will work. Cost is \$75 per ticket. Nice to know, too, that Thrivent is providing matching funds. We've always appreciated Thrivent's nonjudgmental inter-Lutheran emphasis.

Ms. Rohrer is something of a theologian, too, it seems. We followed the links to her web page and found posted several articles with titles like *Queering Lutheran Understandings of Salvation* and *Why Martin Luther Decided to Have Sex*. We were particularly struck with, and actually perused, *Word Alone Supports the Ordination of Non-Celibate GLBTQ Individuals in the Lutheran Church: Exegesis of 1 Corinthians 7:17-40*. (No, in spite of the title, Word Alone hasn't changed its position on this matter. But Ms. Rohrer thinks they should.)

A glass of courage

Of course in the Lutheran tradition ordination requires a call. Ebenezer provided it, this tiny neo-pagan, or maybe not so neo, congregation which offers the goddess rosary and other wonderful opportunities for spiritual growth. Ebenezer, the press release has it, was "willing to take the risk to call and ordain an ECP pastor" — though just exactly how much of a risk that is can be debated, since no disciplinary charges have been filed in the Sierra Pacific Synod for some fifteen years or so. At least two other ELCA congregations have apparently subsequently joined in signing on to the call, so Ebenezer in any event isn't out there all alone. Still, let's raise a glass to their courage. They're not going to be cowed by any churchwide assembly, nosiree.

But give Ms. Rohrer some credit, for she helps us understand just how things have gotten to this state in the ELCA. In a letter to her former bishop, Andrea DeGroot Nesdahl, she explained in some detail her struggles with the requirement to abide by *Vision & Expectations*, the ELCA document that sets some standards for pastors in all sorts of areas, including sexual behavior. Listen to part of the explanation in her own words:

During a candidacy retreat, I tried to talk to members of the candidacy committee in order to understand what the term "homosexual sexual relationship" means. Each person I talked to gave me a different answer. One person told me: "whatever you need it to mean, we want you to be a pastor." Others told me, that if I was single I could

say that I was in compliance "at this time." Some bishops (of other synods) have told me that they have a "don't ask, don't tell" policy. They know that there are non-celibate pastors in their synods, but they have decided that they do not have the judicial responsibility to act unless gay and lesbian pastors tell them they are non-celibate.

This, in a nutshell, describes the problem in the ELCA. The church has expectations of its ordained pastors. The churchwide assembly has declined to change those standards. Not just pastors, but synods and bishops who shepherd the candidacy process are expected to abide by them, to support them, to interpret them.

But what do we get? Advice — from candidacy committee members, no less — about how to skirt the issue. Interpretations which amount to "lie if you have to in order to get ordained." Bishops who tell candidates their own policy is "don't ask, don't tell," and who refuse to enforce the church's policies unless they are absolutely forced against the wall.

We would hope that Bp. DeGroot Nesdahl, having received this letter (though Ms. Rohrer acknowledges it has been "unanswered"), has had or will have a frank talk with her synod's candidacy committee. Any committee member giving a candidate this kind of advice should be invited to use their gifts elsewhere, seems to us.

Putting on the screws

But part of the strategy from the "change the policy" crowd is to put increasing heat on bishops and others. We observed (in "Synodical Silly Season," *Forum Letter* August, 2006) that the Sierra Pacific Synod Assembly tried to put the screws to Bp. David Mullen, a man not entirely unsympathetic to the "voices for change." The synod assembly passed a resolution pushing him to be more public in his support of the gay agenda. Synod voters did this by commending "the office of the Bishop of this Synod for its exercise of the discretion explicitly granted by the ELCA's governing documents," and encouraging "the Bishop's office [to] continue to be guided by restraint in the

administration of those policies only applicable to sexual minority rostered persons.”

The press release about this latest irregular ordination quotes that resolution, and then thunders that it “is unclear how the Bishop will respond to the congregations that are calling Rohrer and ordaining her. The Bishop may choose restraint,” it says, or on the other hand he may “follow the lead of Bishop Ron Warren of South-eastern Synod, who has filed formal charges against Pastor Bradley Schmeling” (see “The Atlanta Situation,” *Forum Letter* November 2006).

Translation: “Better keep your hands off this one, Bp. Mullen. We know where you live.”

Wearisome — that’s the word that comes to mind about all this. Of course that is exactly the strategy of the advocates for change, as we see it: keep coming at the church, keep defying its policies, keep ignoring, keep challenging, and eventually they’ll get tired and give up.

A pretty effective strategy, truth be told. But one wonders what will be left of the ELCA in the end. — *by Richard O. Johnson, associate editor*

Challenging translations



There has been quite a bit of unhappiness in some quarters over the version of the Psalter included in the new *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*. Go back, for instance, to Pr. Erma Wolf’s analysis in the May 2006 *Forum Letter*.

I call it a “version” rather than a translation, because I think that’s a more apt description — its connection to the original language being, shall I say, a trifle loose.

But this set me to thinking about the challenges of translation in general. It’s a tricky art, no doubt about it. It’s made more tricky when what is being translated is poetry, and one has to find the proper balance between meaning and aesthetics. And of course when it is Holy Scripture being translated, there is a whole different set of concerns that comes into play.

Happy blessing

I am not among those who insist on a slavish literalism, nor am I unsympathetic to contemporary canons regarding inclusive language for human beings. Psalm 1, for example, in the Revised Standard Version (RSV) begins “Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the ungodly.” The *Book of Common Prayer* Psalter used in the *LBW* renders this, “Happy are they who have not walked in the counsel of the wicked.” Truth be told, I object more to the use of “happy” instead of “blessed” than to the changing of the singular to the plural, but that’s another

issue, one on which I wouldn’t go to the mat.

The pluralizing, seems to me, is not a theological problem. It does not change the Psalmist’s meaning in any significant way. Nobody believes the Psalmist was talking about some specific male human being; he (or, I suppose, she) was speaking of human beings in general, and our conventions have changed for how to do that most adequately. So unless one makes a theological precept of absolute literal word for word translation (in which case one probably isn’t a Lutheran), there’s not a coherent reason for demanding that we maintain the singular “man.”

Pluralizing the singular

But sometimes even such an innocuous change can have theological import. I was recently perusing various translations of Psalm 24, with its poignant and searching question, “Who can ascend the hill of the Lord, and who can stand in his holy place?” Again the RSV gives a singular answer: “He who has clean hands and a pure heart.” The *LBW/BCP* version pluralizes: “Those who have clean hands and a pure heart.” Same principle, right?

Wrong. Here the translators have either ignored or consciously discarded a long tradition of Christian interpretation which reads this Psalm christologically — in other words, by seeing this as a kind of prophecy of Christ, the One with clean hands and pure heart who can indeed ascend the hill of the Lord and stand in his holy place.

Now scholars of some modern schools will immediately protest that this isn't at all what the Psalmist had in mind. The Psalmist was writing an entrance psalm, to be sung by pilgrims in Jerusalem, likely in a "call and response" setting — which the *LBW/BCP* version suggests by its use of quotation marks. To try to read christology into this is an inappropriate distortion of the text. What rational person would make this Psalm primarily about Christ?

Augustinian exposition

But there are others who, without eschewing the benefits of modern interpretive schools (and those benefits are many), would insist that a way of reading the Psalms that has been common in the church for, oh, 2,000 years or so, should not be so easily discarded. So what rational person would see Christ in this Psalm? Well, St. Augustine for one. Martin Luther, for another — and countless other expositors throughout the history of the church. Indeed, this Psalm is full of christological significance, moving, in its later verses, to its praise of "the King of glory." Liturgically, it has often been associated with the ascension of Christ, or sometimes with his presentation in the Temple.

So is that the "meaning" of the Psalm?

No, certainly not exclusively. I don't doubt that the Psalmist "intended" this to refer to human beings (though whether that is what the Holy Spirit intended is, of course, another question). Our current lectionary appoints the Psalm for use on All Saints, perhaps because it is echoed in the

Beatitudes, the traditional text for that day. When interpreted in that context, one might naturally read the line about "pure hearts" as referring to human beings, and one would not be wrong.

But the translators have virtually demanded that we decline a christological interpretation by swapping out the singular references for the plural. Who, upon reading "those who have clean hands and a pure heart," will think first of Christ? And yet that is precisely what the strongest tradition of interpretation suggests.

Interpretative pushers

The point, of course, is that often the words translators choose in fact push interpretation in one direction or another. No principle of translation is really "interpretively neutral." Psalm 24 is a good example of this, showing how a seemingly innocuous choice to use the plural to express what appears to be generic language about human beings in fact obscures and even distorts the way the Psalm has most often been interpreted in Christian history.

Again, I hasten to add, that does not mean that the principle of "inclusive language for human beings" should be ignored or discarded. But translators must not be tone deaf to the theological mischief that may occur by the use of such a principle in a particular case. Here in Psalm 24, it seems to me that most contemporary translators have done us a disservice. — *by Richard O. Johnson, associate editor*

Nice letters and others



Most letters to the editor are getting posted at *Forum Online* these days (www.alpb.org). But the sort that are written on paper still arrive, as well. Sometimes we get very nice ones, indeed. "Thank you for these *wonderful* publications. Each one lifts my spirits and I thank God for the editors and their selections each issue." That's from New Jersey. There was one from Japan not long ago. The writer said that without *Forum Letter*, he wouldn't know what was happening on the Lutheran scene in America. I think there are other publications that

might help to inform him, possibly, but I am not of a mind in the moment to dispute his contention.

Cynical, mean-spirited and slanted

I tend to distinguish these notes from the other kind. Typically, this isn't hard. When we write something someone doesn't like, there's no mistaking their unhappiness.

One fellow out of Inver Grove Heights, MN was distinctly unappreciative of our coverage of the lawsuit that fumbled its way through the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod. He especially

did not like our view that the effort to overturn the convention election results was the “dumbest thing since unsliced bread.” Our September 2006 coverage was “cynical,” “mean-spirited,” “slanted,” and gave “no hint that these conflicts may, just possibly, be rooted in completely sincere conflicts in doctrine.”

I think he captured things well enough. I would dispute “mean-spirited,” though. I didn’t feel especially mean while writing it. I’ll admit to projecting a kind of contemptuously off-handed dismissiveness, sure, but that shouldn’t be regarded as mean-spiritedness. That leaves “cynical” and “slanted.” That last one is a given in *Forum Letter*. We have a slant. I get paid for giving my slant. Charitable friends are apt to use a more generous phrase, say, “informed opinion,” but slant works. I can live with slant.

Cynical? On the character of the on-going LCMS conflict related to the re-election of Gerald Kieschnick as LCMS president? Well, duh. And not

merely the common variety kind of cynicism, either. No, I’m talking highly refined cynicism here. So, yes, the guy’s right. I do not believe the present nature of the LCMS fight contains any hint that it is at all rooted to “sincere conflicts in doctrine.” Not anymore.

Instead, these opponents of Kieschnick can be charged with poor judgment and an even poorer sense of “church.” Governed by their distaste of “moderates,” they cynically sought to reverse the locus of power in the LCMS to their advantage. Doctrine has nothing to do with it, not to this outside observer.

There are plenty of LCMS “conservatives” I admire, and plenty of “moderates,” too. But I have little patience with the “foamy-mouthed” sort in either camp.

The subscriber cancelled his subscription and demanded a refund of the balance. We sent him \$11.22 and did not deduct the postage required to mail it to him. — *by the editor*

Omnium gatherum



A cup divided ● We never cease to be amazed at the kinds of things that come in the mail. Here is a flyer from someone who has invented a “Divided Intinction Chalice.” In one easy vessel, we have a space for wine, and a space for grape juice — “the most convenient way to offer communion by intinction,” the inventor explains. Only works with intinction, of course; otherwise all those liquids would slosh together. We wondered whether they could inscribe a Scripture verse on it, like maybe I Corinthians 1:13a. As for our opinion (oh, okay, call it a slant) on this innovation, well, don’t call and ask for the address, we’ve thrown out the flyer.

The red books of Augsburg ● A retired pastor of our acquaintance recently noticed that he hadn’t received his annual “little red book” from Augsburg Fortress. So he telephoned them. He was told that, in the first place, the books would be sent in December, but in the second place, retired pastors were no longer getting them routinely,

though they’d be happy to send him one “by request.” This is irritating. The 2006 book only goes up to January 6, and we’ve already filled up the little one-inch “January 2007” box to the brim. We really need that new book, and we need it sooner than December. And honestly, retired pastors in this church are so ignored in so many ways, wouldn’t you think — Augsburg budget restraints notwithstanding — they could at least keep sending them the little red book?

Corrections ● An article in the October *Forum Letter* refers to Reginald H. Fuller as “the now-departed British biblical scholar and bishop.” Turns out some of this is right, some only partly right, some all wrong. The all wrong part is “departed” (Fuller, though aged, is alive and well and living in retirement in Virginia) and “bishop” (which he never was). Partly right is the “British” (he was ordained in the Church of England, though he spent most of his career teaching in the U.S.). That leaves “biblical scholar” as spot on.

This information is from an Episcopalian, by the way, one of our more avid readers who was Fuller's student at Virginia Theological Seminary. That this reader is one of those thousands who don't actually pay for a *Forum Letter* subscription — being avidly attached to purloined copies — doesn't necessarily call his credibility into question.

Additionally, in our November 2006 account of charges being filed against Atlanta ELCA pastor Bradley Schmeling, we inadvertently though consistently misspelled the name of his gay partner. The correct spelling is "Easler." This information did come from a paid subscriber.

Lutheran improvements ● Daniel J. Lehmann is the new editor of *The Lutheran*, the ELCA national publication. And so far, so good. I've been impressed. A recent Pauline study offered some challenging reading and set our "Lutheran thing" in good perspective. *Looking for God in Creation* was a very good bit of work. The issue on ELCA dissidents, though, lacked a little something. That may be my own bias at work, inasmuch as I am one, but I think the article and related pieces might have represented fairer treatment had they explored in greater depth the real theological questions that animate most of the dissident reaction (at least that part of the dissident movement with which I am best acquainted). I know that Mark Chavez, Word Alone executive director, regards his remarks as having been distorted. Having myself been 1) flat-out misquoted once in *The*

Lutheran and 2) having my remarks "rearranged" another time, I can sympathize with Pr. Chavez. But on the whole, I think readers will see many good things coming.

Whatever you do ● I had occasion some little while back to talk privately with Michael Clark, pastor of Christ Lutheran Church out of Wichita, KS in whose congregation the BTK serial killer, Dennis Rader, held membership. I openly admired the way Pr. Clark had handled himself with the media and I told him so. Turns out he was well coached, and coached well, by one no less than John Brooks, press guy for the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. The coaching, should you wonder, wasn't what to say, but how to say what needed to be said. In saying what he did, Pr. Clark made a memorable impression, not least upon me. In our conversation, he was unstinting in his praise of and deep gratitude for Brooks' practical advice and counsel in dealing with the press during that sad episode. But what Pr. Clark remembers most distinctly was Brooks' firm instruction, "Whatever you do, proclaim the gospel."

Sometimes slick PR denominational mouth-pieces fail to get full credit for doing good work (or for any work much). But I was glad to hear full credit given to Brooks for the support and encouragement he rendered. Pr. Clark was able to meet the press well, and his ability in doing it belongs in some sure part to the advice he received from John Brooks.

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