

FORUM LETTER

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Is it progress?



We ask whether there has been progress in the Church [since the Reformation]. There is no doubt that wherever the old Gospel is preached to hungry souls it is due to the Reformation. . . . But alas, Christendom today is in a sad state. The modern religionist claims to have progressed beyond the standards set up by Luther. He needs no longer in this enlightened era the inspiration of the Bible, the doctrine of the vicarious death of Jesus, the work of redemption. He rejects with proud disdain all the fundamentals for which Luther so valiantly contended and which formed the inspiration for his whole work. Men tell us that they have refashioned religion and made it suitable for our advanced age. But is it progress when divine authority is disputed and man is enthroned? Is it progress when no rule is recognized but that of the human mind? Is it progress when man can conceive of no higher aim in life than that of self-cultivation? Is it progress when militant atheists hail modern religionists as their chief allies; when churches stand empty because preachers philosophize and humanize and tickle human vanity with empty moral platitudes; when professors of theology drag Christ from the throne and ministers of the Gospel know no remedy for sin and no hope for man but human virtue? Neither is it progress when those who are in possession of the Word of God in all its purity take their possession as a matter of course; when custodians of the priceless truths of heaven are apathetic and lethargic, selfish, and self-centered, unmindful of their evangelistic obligations; when, with the light of eternal truth in their hands, they stick this light under a bushel; when they permit round about them innumerable souls to perish without stretching out a hand to save them. . . . Our great task is to warm our own souls at the same fires which enkindled the spirit of the great Reformer in order that we may become imbued with at least a portion of the divine passion that animated his heart and that made him an invincible prophet of divine mercies. — Paul Lindemann, “Four Centuries of Progress — or What?” in *Festival Days: Sermons for Special Occasions* (Augsburg, 1935), 90-91.

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O bishop, kumbaya



I am one of those pastors — we are legion — whose path into the ministry either originated in, or was strongly influenced by, summer camps. My experience may have been somewhat different than that of other Lutherans, since in my case the camps were sponsored by the United Methodist Church, but I suspect church camps are pretty much the same across denominational lines. The powerful singing (especially around a capti-

vating campfire), the testimonies of camp counselors or other campers, the emotions fueled by raging hormones and adolescent *angst*—all these things made the summer camp experience one that marks one's heart and spirit forever.

In the camp that I attended, the evening campfire was always the emotional high point. Each night there was a designated person who would give his or her testimony (though that wasn't the word used; "testimony" sounded much too churchy). Most of the time it was a college student or an older high schooler, someone on the leadership team for the camp. As I got into the leadership category, I realized how much drama really went into these testimonies. It was never announced publicly who would be speaking on any given night; the designated person would just sort of casually step forward and start talking when he or she sensed that the correct level of emotional fervor had been reached. But if you were on the leadership team, you knew who would be speaking and you knew just how agonizing the preparation had been. You could see that person struggling with it all week, until his or her turn came up.

Wrestling with the draft

The talks themselves varied in topic. Most of them weren't explicitly religious (in the "here's how I came to Jesus" sense—these were California Methodists, after all), but they dealt with that person's struggle to live faithfully in the face of all kinds of challenges. It was the 1960s, and you could pretty much count on at least one of the male speakers wrestling with the Vietnam War, the draft, perhaps conscientious objection. Others would talk about relationship struggles at home or at school, occasionally issues of alcohol or drug use. I don't remember any talks that focused on sexual issues, but there were probably a few and perhaps there should have been more.

As campers, we all looked forward to these talks, wondered who would be speaking, what would be the topic. At least three out of five would be emotionally wrenching, with the speaker sharing personal things that had never been shared before, certainly not in front of 125 fellow teenagers. It was cathartic—certainly for the speaker, often for the listeners. More than one speaker, especially later in the week, ended up saying things he or she hadn't really

planned on saying, or at least speaking in considerably more detail and with more emotional power than anticipated. In other cases, youth who hadn't actually planned on speaking at all were carried away—whether by the spirit or in the Spirit, who can say?—to make testimonies or confessions of their own. Then everyone would sing "Kumbaya," often with tears. It was quite a time.

Why now?

I wonder if something like that happened to Kevin Kanouse, bishop of the ELCA's Northern Texas—Northern Louisiana Synod. At the ELCA National Youth Gathering in Detroit in July, he "came out" as a gay man in a sermon preached to the high school youth and leaders from his synod who were in attendance. He explained that he had hidden his sexual orientation for decades from his family, from his wife and sons, from the church—that it had remained "a dark place in my life." He told how he had opposed the changes in the ELCA's policy on same-sex relationships in 2009, "feeling incredibly torn." "I was a coward," he later wrote to his synod pastors and other leaders, "another sin for which I needed forgiveness."

When he returned home, he wrote to synod leaders about what he had done, noting that the only people he had told about his sexuality prior to the Youth Gathering had been his counselor and his wife. A week later, no doubt in response to questions that were being raised, he wrote on his blog an entry entitled "Why Now? Why the Youth Gathering?" He had intended, he wrote, simply to speak to the youth about his own experience of call. But there was a time when various youth were invited to tell their own stories, and several did. "At some point in the midst of that," he wrote, "it hit me like a bolt of lightning. 'I have to tell my story today. Some of them need to hear it. It might make a difference for some.' I fought it for an hour. I rejected it in favor of my original sermon. I could talk about my journey in vague terms and be safe . . . or I could tell my own life story." And so he did.

The *kairos* moment

So yes, it seems it was something like those camp testimonies I remember from my youth. National Youth Gatherings are times of great emotional catharsis for the attendees, an experience they never

forget. Bishop Kanouse credits his spur of the moment decision to come out to the pushing of the Holy Spirit. It was, he said, the *kairos*, the “right time.” The response seemed to confirm it. “I want to be clear that I was not telling my story to receive pity or kudos from the kids,” he wrote, “although certainly that happened. Many were moved to tears; many were moved to affirm me personally. While that happened, it was not my intention.” I’m sure he believes all of that to be the case.

I love it when they cry

In my mature years, though, I’ve come to realize just what part was played in those campfire testimonies by the emotions and spirit of the moment – probably, at times, a greater part than was played by the Holy Spirit. I made a few of those talks myself, and I didn’t think I was telling my story to receive pity or kudos. But now I’m not so sure. I wouldn’t have said I was trying to move people to tears, but even then I loved it when they cried.

So I have to treat Bp. Kanouse’s testimony – both at the Youth Gathering and in his later explanations – with a certain amount of skepticism. After all, he was supposed to be one of the grown-ups in this setting, one of those who could keep his equilibrium and not get carried away by the moment. That’s a pretty important thing for a youth leader to do; the adult’s job is to guide, to keep things under some control without quenching the spirit. It’s an irresponsible adult leader who gets swept away into what can too easily become manipulation (intended or not) of the adolescents under one’s care.

Responsibility has many facets. “If I had pre-

pared a time table,” the bishop wrote, “I would have told my sons and their spouses first, then the Conference of Bishops, then my rostered and lay leaders along with the Synod Council, and then, if all seemed right, the youth.” Yes, that would have been a much more responsible time table. But to blame the abandonment of it on the movement of the Holy Spirit is highly suspect. The poor Holy Spirit gets the blame for so much that is really just throwing one’s responsibility to the wind.

Courage?

“Coming out” to a bunch of high school kids in this context was just the wrong decision, any way you look at it. Yet Kanouse is being hailed as “courageous” by many. I suppose it was courageous in the sense that diving headfirst off a rock into a river of unknown depth is courageous, but most sensible people would have a different word for it.

Yet what if we were to contemplate a different reality? What if the bishop’s approach had been to admit that he had struggled with same-sex attraction for his entire life, that he was nonetheless convinced that this was not what God intended for him, that he had been able to marry a woman whom he loved deeply, and to raise a family with her? What if he had said that the struggle had never gone away, but that by God’s grace he had been able to live a faithful Christian life in spite of the struggle? Now that would have been courageous.

But if he couldn’t do that with integrity and honesty, he would have done better just to keep his secret.

– by Richard O. Johnson, editor

Responding to my interlocutors

by Paul Hinlicky



[Editor’s note: Dr. Hinlicky’s article “After Schism” in the Summer issue of Lutheran Forum elicited considerable conversation, and in the last issue of Forum Letter we printed responses by Robert Benne, Charles Austin and Peter Speckhard. Here is Hinlicky’s reply.]

I am grateful to my interlocutors. Two of the three rise to insightful commentary on my essay,

“After Schism,” while the other illustrates, perhaps unwittingly, the chief point I was actually making. What is notable, however, is that all three are apologists for their denominations. I will not play that role. That is not my understanding of the theological vocation. In our state of mutual schism, no denomination can get it right. This is what a theologian is conscience bound to assert and argue. It is a lonely role, but in playing it, I assuredly do not rise above

the denominations, but rather stand in the midst of sinful recriminations. Schism is painful and awkward business for all involved.

Hearing the other side

Let me begin with my longtime friend Bob Benne's "remonstration." (Another response, previously written, to a shorter version of his piece will appear in the next *Lutheran Forum*, so I won't repeat here what will be printed there.) I recently learned directly from NALC Bishop Bradosky his side of the story about the LWF application, which in much corroborates Bob's account; I don't accept it without questions, but it does shed light and open up a possibility that I had not previously considered.

Bradosky avows, and assures me he has credible eyewitnesses who will corroborate, that the initial conversations with the LWF official explicitly assured the NALC leadership that frosty relations with the ELCA and the ELCiC would present no obstacle to its application. Bradosky named the LWF official to me, but I will not disclose it. He may wish to disclose it; that is his call. In any event, between the initial word of unconditional encouragement by the official despite the ice-cold relationships in North America and the "hold" later placed on the NALC's application, Bradosky infers that Geneva engineered a reversal of what was an unconditional invitation and invented, after the fact of the NALC application, the prerequisite of full communion with the would-be North American partner churches.

Not to parse words, but "full communion" in the LWF is itself some mix of good intention and institutional fiction. There are degrees of communion and *de facto* schism here as elsewhere in divided Christianity, as for example the Ethiopian Lutheran church's declaration that it is not in fellowship with the Church of Sweden and the ELCA. When the LWF adjudicates that internal schism *against* the Ethiopians, it will have the moral standing also *to exclude* the NALC on the foregoing grounds.

Holding my nose

Recalling David Yeago's judgment that we are in a state of "impaired communion," I wouldn't claim that I enjoy "full communion" even within the ELCA. For example, I would never commune at an altar where a liturgy had us intone:

Our Mother who is within us

We celebrate your many names.

Your wisdom come,

Your will be done,

Unfolding from the depths

Within us.

Each day you give us all we need.

You remind us of our limits

And we let go.

You support us in our power,

And we act in courage.

For you are the dwelling place within us,

And the celebration among us,

Now and forever, Amen.

[From the "Celebration of Holy Communion with the Rite of Reception" at St. Mark's Lutheran Church, San Francisco, July 25, 2010]

Truth be told, I have too often taken communion in the ELCA holding my nose from the stench lingering in the air from the alleged sermon just sounded. "Impaired communion" is simply our reality.

Messy shades of gray

Yet the question remains for the NALC as to whether they have simply wanted to make use of the status and legitimacy accorded by LWF membership, i.e., as Bob explicitly summarizes, for church political purposes of standing against the Swedes and the ELCA and to participate in global ecumenical dialogues. These may in part be apt motives, but Bob's account leaves begging a central, ecclesiological question whether the NALC understands and supports the *intention of communion* and wants actually to *commune* with the churches of the LWF, howsoever varying that would be in concrete cases. Messy shades of gray, then, not a black and white either/or, as befits an interim ecclesiology in divided Christianity.

Pressing that question for greater clarity, I might all the same agree empirically with Bob that "there is far more hostility to pulpit and altar fellowship in the ELCA than in the NALC." I had an extended conversation with a former assistant to the bishop in a western ELCA synod recently that provided a first-person account of the blacklisting of any and all pastors who hold to the more traditional positions supposedly respected by the "bound conscience" principle of the 2009 Social Statement. Moreover, a resolution is circulating in the ELCA

synods that would revoke the “bound conscience” principle (realizing officially, then, the fraud perpetuated in 2009) and another that would declare in principle “radical hospitality” at the altar. The self-identified theological “progressives” won’t rest until the ELCA catches up with the Unitarian Universalists.

Along these same lines, Bob, who is certainly among the premier Lutheran ethicists of our times, was never invited as a guest lecturer at any of the ELCA seminaries in all his years of ELCA membership since leaving Lutheran School of Theology in Chicago. He, too, was informally but manifestly blacklisted. Anyone is self-deceived who dreams that those not in lockstep with the brave new world will nonetheless have a future in the ELCA, Bp. Eaton’s wishful thinking to the contrary. Bp. Eaton, incidentally, could prove me wrong about this by publically announcing opposition to the resolutions now circulating in the ELCA and instead seeking reconciliation with the NALC by declaring support for its application for LWF membership.

Denominational illusions

All that being said, I still disagree with Bob about his own set of denominational illusions, as if in the NALC we are given a chance finally to “get things right.” In a divided Christendom, none of us in the state of schism from all the others can “get things right.” The contrastive identity machinery is standard operating procedure.

For example, the recent NALC assembly is reported to have heard a bevy of speakers highlighting Muslim persecution of Christians. I don’t doubt for a minute that Muslims persecute Christians and that Christians ought to call out Islamic violence today and stand in solidarity with the persecuted saints. But with this summons at the NALC meeting apparently came an unnuanced series of denunciations of Islam as inherently and so inevitably violent. I worry that the NALC thus reveals itself as little other than a Republican Party version of the Democrat Party ELCA.

I wish that Bob had taken more seriously my reference to Peter Berger’s penetrating analysis in *The Heretical Imperative* of the doom of the church to partisan fractionalization under the hegemony of late capitalism with its commoditization of all things, religion too. Still, I hope for the best in the

NALC. The door to LWF membership remains open. I, at least, will practice what I preach by acts of public solidarity with the NALC, as I would do also with the LCMS, and even the ELCA. This for the present is admittedly a posture of hope against hope.

Peering across a chasm

I am grateful to Peter Speckhard for peering across a chasm to see my awkward posture in the ELCA, “lest the retreat turn into a rout.” I am also grateful for his penetrating questions, “Realignment with whom? Ecumenical with whom?” I don’t want to dodge such questions, but seriously, if they could be answered in a couple of paragraphs, we would long ago have solved the problem of how to be church after Christendom (other than by infinite schism). There would be no desperate need to pose the question as one of profound repentance and Christian soul-searching, also on the part of the righteous remnant. Speckhard discerns this to a degree.

Schism is a defeat for us all, going back to the Preus-Otten purges of the LCMS in 1972-3, which trauma catalyzed the formation of the ELCA. It is a defeat also for those in the relative right who have found intolerable, not this or that social posturing in our decadent identity politics, but the denial of Christ as God’s only Son and humanity’s only savior in varying shades and degrees. But this Christological confession, I hold, cuts in every direction. I have just published, as Benne mentioned, a work of systematic theology that probes these questions deeply and systematically to lay out the calling to Christological realignment and I can only refer the reader to such serious study.

That said, the problem, briefly put, lies in the very “chasm” Speckhard’s essay presupposes as if an immutable fact carved in granite, immune, then, from Christological critique. In any case, the level on which the very good questions Speckhard raises have to be discussed is serious theological scholarship, if genuine exchange and deliberation are to take place that might actually move old arguments forward. Otherwise, we are all reduced to partisan talking points in the sordid business of religion as usual. We can then be nothing but apologists for denominations posing as church.

Ironies and contradictions

Having said that, I appreciate Speckhard's logically sharp attempt to expose the ironies and indeed contradictions in which I seem to land by affirming the ordination of women but refusing ordination to those in same-sex unions. But readers of *Lutheran Forum* will recall that I don't hold that the ordination of women is a *status confessionis*; it is rather a matter of contextually appropriate modernization – a matter of discipline, not doctrine. Moreover, while I would not want to make my 2009 proposal about “the recognition, but not blessing” of same-sex unions in the church an issue in this forum, fuller appreciation of my case for monogamous same-sex unions as analogous, but not identical with Christian marriage would show that I am not quite in the self-contradiction that Speckhard alleges.

Have I misread Missouri? With the defrocking of Matthew Becker, not for advocating the ordination of women, mind you, but for rejecting the literalistic interpretation of a seven 24-hour day creation of the world about 7000 years ago, I don't think so. Who else campaigned for this relentlessly other than Otten's scandal-sheet? Who else capitulated to this pressure other than LCMS president Matthew Harrison? The Lutheran Church-Misery Synod evidently cannot cease demonizing others. But for that matter, neither can the *Erstwhile* Lutheran Church in America (as if CORE or the NALC were the source of its woes!) or, as I fear, the NALC with ham-handed branding of Islam as The Enemy. But perhaps Speckhard could better explain the LCMS to us on the outside.

Passive aggression

Finally, I am touched to the quick by professed “ELCA loyalist” Charles Austin's evident concern for my “unhappiness” at being stuck in the ELCA, even as he avers that he is “glad,” well, “sort of,” that I am staying. I am pleased also to read that he shares so many of my criticisms of our bleeding denomination, as lavishly enumerated. He went so far as to express the hope that I can come to an attitude adjustment, so that I am not further “marginalized.”

Frankly, the ELCA needs me a lot more than I need the ELCA. In a classic instance of passive aggression, loyalist Austin makes a nasty point in reporting the opinion of his “thoughtful colleague”

that the ELCA today is better off without people like me. Speaking for himself, as mentioned, Austin is “sort of glad” that my being stuck with him in the same tent would mean that the ELCA will have the “benefit of my care and scholarship.” That is sort of like the benefit of a saboteur poking a stick into the spokes of the wheel, but I will take what I can get.

A lame attempt

With a few complaints about hyperbole and a snide remark about not being among the intelligent who abandoned the sinking ship, Austin's entire essay is but a lame attempt to spin the bad facts about the ELCA nosedive by taking a “wider focus.” Spin aside, the bad facts remain. I could add to them a recent statistic that 6000 of the ELCA's 9400 surviving congregations are in mortal danger of collapse because of declining membership, declining worship attendance and declining revenue. “What, me worry? All that saleable property on which survivors will feed!”

What is truly astonishing, however, is that an entirely political argument is offered, which evades theology, and so simply ignores the theological criticism executed in my article of the ELCA's pathetic dive into congregationalism, as Bishop Eaton in fact acknowledged in her statement following the Supreme Court decision on same-sex marriage. I thus ditto my remarks to Speckhard above in response to the complaint that I did not make clear what I would put in place of the bleeding corpse: read some bracing theology. The Lord is working a purge and purification in His own household, where the one and only question is this: Who is Jesus Christ for us today?

The *Zeitgeist*

Does the ELCA need to ask itself this question? Austin unwittingly concedes my main point that the spirit of the ELCA is that of the *Zeitgeist* – after all, it's “not 1942, 1958, or 1963” – even as he acknowledges in passing my contention that the *false* spirit at work in the ELCA treats history, and being on its right side, as God and Lord. With apologists like this, the ELCA does not need critics like me. The idolatry is manifest to all who have eyes to see and ears to hear.

I will by the grace of God, however, continue “narrowly” to focus in the Spirit on Jesus as the Son

of His heavenly Father, treating the gospel of cheap grace that today prevails in the ELCA as the distraction from the cause of the gospel that it has become, so help me God.

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Omnium gatherum



Call the bishop? • There's an "ELCA Clergy" group on Facebook that makes for interesting (if often discouraging)

reading. A recent post from a person serving as a part-time interim pastor asked for advice about what to do. It seems some folks in the congregation want to leave the ELCA, and without his knowledge they called a meeting and invited some NALC representatives to come and talk about the NALC. The majority of responders gave what I would say is the correct answer, which is to immediately notify the synod office about what is happening. But there were also quite a number of tirades against the NALC and its "tactics." I live quite a distance from areas where NALC is strong, so I can't offer an informed opinion about their opinions. No doubt there have been some inappropriate actions by NALC folks, just as there have been some instances of really nasty ELCA responses to individual pastors and congregations wanting to leave over the past several years. What I couldn't quite understand, though, was the response by Guy Erwin, bishop of the ELCA's Southwest California Synod. He wrote: "Call the bishop now! He/she and/or synod staff have the right and need to be present. There are lots of rules around this, but the NALC people often ignore or distort them." In what sense, I wonder, are "NALC people" either expected or required to follow "ELCA rules"? Maybe the wisdom of calling the synod bishop in a situation like this actually depends on the wisdom of the synod bishop.

Ethnic diversity • A Pew Research Center analysis reveals that the ELCA is the least racially diverse church in the United States, after all these years of making a big deal of wanting to increase the numbers of "persons of color or language other than English." (Well, that's not quite right; the National Baptist Convention is actually the least diverse—but

they are 99% African American. The Missouri Synod comes in just marginally more diverse than the ELCA.) James Gale has a theory about how this can be. "I attribute [it] to the adverse and unintended consequences of the ELCA's quota system," he writes in *Forum Online*. "You see, in order to satisfy these quotas, every non-European member of an ELCA congregation is obligated to attend his or her synod assembly and the churchwide assembly. Like anyone else, people of color do whatever they can to avoid this horror. Rumor has it that a group of non-European ELCA members is considering legal action against the ELCA, arguing that the quota amounts to racial discrimination, imposing the cruel hardship of assembly attendance upon a much higher percentage of racial minorities than of whites." I just recently attended my first synod assembly in several years, and I think he may be on to something here. In case you're wondering, the most diverse church is the Seventh-day Adventists—37% white, 32% black, 15% Hispanic, 16% other.

American religiosity • I was browsing through the greeting card section of a local store and found a card filed in the category "Birthday: Religious" which began, "Today Is All About You." Then it quoted Matthew 7.7 ("Ask and it will be given to you, seek and you will find . . ."), which I guess was the religious part.

Ten-second nonsense • It seems that on the Facebook page of Women of the ELCA there's a recurring feature called "ten second sermon." A recent installment had to do with the story of Jesus and the Syro-Phoenecian woman (the gospel text for Sept. 6). Here's the "sermon": "If our Lord Jesus can make an error in judgment, we mere humans certainly will. The problem is not in the mistake, the problem is in failing to acknowledge it. Jesus said he was sorry by healing a precious daughter. How will

you say it?" One wag called it "ten-second heresy"; I'm not sure it rises (or sinks) to that level, but I'd just call it ten-second nonsense. The author of this piece, one Terri Lackey, felt the necessity to respond to several negative comments and elaborate what she meant: "If Jesus could move beyond his narrow vision of his mission and heal her daughter, we should be able to move beyond ours. This is not meant as an indictment on Jesus, but an indictment on all who refuse to rethink their positions when presented with a superior argument." Hmm . . . not much better, seems to me; either way, Jesus comes out looking pretty erroneous. Of course the whole concept of a "ten-second sermon" is a little weird; someone quoted George Hoyer: "Sermonettes are for Christianettes." On the other hand, if you're going to preach nonsense, perhaps shorter is better. If I were to boil down to ten seconds the sermon I heard that Sunday (in an Episcopal church we visited in an East coast city), it would be this: "Jesus verbally abused this woman because he was having a bad day, but fortunately his disciples got him back on the right track." Unfortunately, that sermon lasted longer than ten seconds. A lot longer.

Transgender pastors • I must have missed the memo somewhere along the line. As far as I can recall, the ELCA has never had an official conversation about transgenderism. There wasn't anything in the 2009 statement on sexuality, and subsequent churchwide assemblies have not addressed the issue. One would think that the issues about this phenomenon are rather different from questions about sexual orientation — at least that always seemed to

be the party line until the "T" got added to LGB (along with a constantly shifting constellation of other initials). Then, working my way through a stack of magazines that had accumulated while I was out of town, I saw the September issue of *The Lutheran*, with a feature article about Megan Rohrer, "believed to be the first openly transgender pastor on the ELCA roster," and then the August 5 *Christian Century* with a Religion News Service article about Nicole Garcia, "on her way to being the [ELCA's] first transgender clergy person of color." Truth be told, I don't quite know what to make of transgenderism; my gut feeling is that it raises the theological question of in what sense we humans are "fearfully and wonderfully made" by God, as well as a whole host of questions from the realm of psychology. Shouldn't there at least have been some study and conversation before somebody just unilaterally decided that the ELCA is perfectly fine with transgender pastors?

Such a deal • Doing a little browsing of some online booksellers, I recently discovered that one can purchase the four-volume set of *For All the Saints*, ALPB's fine prayer book with complete readings for the daily lectionary and much more, for a mere \$400 on a couple of different sites. Or you could go to alpb.org and buy the set for \$130. If you don't own the set, you should, and obviously it's a steal at alpb.org. While you're there, check out some of the other fine ALPB resources — even some freebies, like links to YouTube videos of presentations at ALPB-sponsored events. — roj

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