

*Freed From the Shopkeeper's Prison*¹

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I. Introduction

American pastors are abandoning their posts, left and right, and at an alarming rate. They are not leaving their churches and getting other jobs. Congregations still pay their salaries. Their names remain on the church stationery and they continue to appear in pulpits on Sundays. But they are abandoning their posts, their *calling*. They have gone whoring after other gods. What they do with their time under the guise of pastoral ministry hasn't the remotest connection with what the church's pastors have done for most of twenty centuries.

A few of us are angry about it. We are angry because we have been deserted. Most of my colleagues who defined ministry for me, examined, ordained, and then installed me as a pastor in a congregation, a short while later walked off and left me, having, they said, more urgent things to do. The people I thought I would be working with disappeared when the work started. Being a pastor is difficult work; we want the companionship and counsel of allies. It is bitterly disappointing to enter a room full of people whom you have every reason to expect share the quest and commitments of pastoral work and find within ten minutes that they most definitely do not. They talk of images and statistics. They drop names. They discuss influence and status. Matters of God and the soul and Scripture are not grist for their mills.

The pastors of America have metamorphosed into a company of shopkeepers, and the shops they keep are churches. They are preoccupied with shopkeeper's concerns – how to keep the customers happy, how to lure customers away from competitors down the street, how to package the goods so that the customers will lay out more money.

Some of them are very good shopkeepers. They attract a lot of customers, pull in great sums of money, develop splendid reputations. Yet it is still shopkeeping: religious shopkeeping, to be sure, but shopkeeping all the same. The marketing strategies of the fast-food franchise occupy the waking minds of these entrepreneurs; while asleep they dream of the kind of success that will get the attention of journalists. . . .

The biblical fact is that there are no successful churches. There are, instead, communities of sinners, gathered before God week after week in towns and villages all over the world. . . . The pastors' responsibility is to keep the community attentive to God. It is this responsibility that is being abandoned in spades.

- Eugene Peterson, *Working the Angles*, pp. 1-2.

Peterson goes on to explain these shopkeepers concerns, and the prison they create for pastors, in greater detail and offer his own antidotes. They are good antidotes and I recommend the book, but something is missing in his diagnosis, there is a key Peterson does not quite bring fully to bear. That key is the Gospel. Peterson has rightly, powerfully, and poetically identified the problem and he has provided the right antidotes from the realm of the Law: a pastor should not be a shopkeeper, instead he should do this: study the Scriptures, pray, and give spiritual direction to his flock. Right: but why? Why do these good works? We Lutherans know that we must find an answer in the Gospel – that it is the

¹ I am indebted to my friend and colleague, Rev. Kevin Martin, for introducing me to several of the key concepts expressed in this paper.

glorious free Gospel of Christ that animates and drives us. Unless and until we get the Gospel right, it will not matter at all how poetically someone tells us the right things to do. We will not be able to do them unless freed by Christ – Christ must come with his Gospel and bust us out of the shopkeeper-pastor's prison.

This is the task I have set myself for our time together. I want to bring the Gospel to bear on the shopkeeper-pastor's prison. I want to break the bars asunder with the only weapon I have: the Gospel. Now, the Gospel is a many faceted jewel. There is the Christ-alone-ness of the Gospel and the outside-us-ness of the Gospel and the grace-aloneness of the Gospel and the faith-aloneness of the Gospel and so on. Each of these facets of the Gospel is vital and each has a role to play in putting us in the right place over against God. The facet that shall free us from the Shopkeeper Pastor's Prison is, I think, the from-eternity-ness of the Gospel.

Here is how we get put in the Shopkeeper's Prison. How often have you heard the following speech, “We are the living among the dying. We are those who know the cure to the world's ailment of sin. So it is up to us spread the message of our Lord Jesus Christ. Just think of how many will go down to hell this day. I wonder how many of them could have been saved if we had just done a little more. How many would be entering the pearly gates if each of our members had just told one more person about Jesus? How many could we save if we were willing to give up our sacred cows and make Sunday worship speak to the outsider a little more rather than just to the insider? How many people have needlessly been turned off of the Gospel because of stodgy Lutheran hymns and cushionless pews? If the lost shall be saved, then we must repent, rethink, and reform what worship in our midst has been. We must open the doors, both physically and metaphorically, so that the seeking unbeliever will be drawn in and hear the Gospel and perhaps be saved.”

Sound familiar? You've heard one version or another of that speech from Synod and district officials from time immemorial. You probably wrote something along those lines in your seminary entrance essay explaining why you wanted to come. Go home after the conference and review your

answer to question number 1 on your SET form and you may just find a miniature version of that speech. No doubt you've heard that speech and felt a twinge of guilt: am I doing enough for the lost? How many more could be in heaven if I tried a little harder, did a little more, bent over a bit more backward?

Clang. You are stuck in the shopkeeper's prison of numbers and demographics and appealing to the desires and whims of unbelievers since they are your customers. Let's see if we can't pick the lock and let you out.

II. Functional Arminianism Explained

Back to that speech on missions you've heard so many times. The most recent rendition of this speech that came to my ears was in the context of natural disasters. Under discussion amongst a few pastors were natural disasters as a call to repentance – as Jesus talks of the tower of Siloam (this was soon after the Haiti earthquake). One brother, however, took the call to repentance in a novel direction: the call to repentance is really to us Christians. For when we see all those countless thousands die we should repent of not having shared the Gospel with them, we should remember that the time is short and the Word must get out before others go to hell.

This offers a good starting point for understanding what I'll call the Functional Arminianism. Full-throated Arminianism, all Lutherans know, is bad. Jacob Herman (Arminius) grew distraught with Calvinism's seeming insistence that God delights in damnation. Therefore, he posited that mankind possesses true free will in spiritual matters, that a man can decide whether or not to come to God. There is no mystery in this system. Why are some saved and not others? Some chose to follow God of their own free will, and some chose to reject him. There is no mystery in the Calvinist system either, by the way: God chooses to save some to display his grace and he chooses to damn some to display his justice. It's just that Calvinism raises some uncomfortable questions about good, evil, and God – Arminius wanted out from under those questions. Yet, Arminius also wanted no part in the pope's game of

progressive justification which entailed purgatory. Arminius wanted Grace-Alone-ness of the Gospel and he wanted responsibility for damnation not to reside in God and he wanted no uncomfortable unanswered questions. The system he developed will be familiar to anyone who has ever heard an American Evangelical preach. Your good works can't save you, your sins have damned you – but Christ has paid the bill. His blood covers all – so cast your lot with him! Make your decision for Christ today and be saved by his all-availing sacrifice.

The Lutheran (and Calvinist) critique of this system is that the pope's system is let in through the side door. It's only that in place of many and great good works, human salvation now hangs on a small and simple good work: deciding for Christ. Arminians are no Pelagians – they would whole heartedly agree that the work of the Holy Spirit is a necessity for a decision for Christ. But they would also assert that man's truly free will truly plays a vital role in the matter. Much hoop jumping ensues that they might convince themselves that this decision is not a “work” - and like most jumping of hoops, it frays the nerves after a short while.

Lutherans get that. No Lutheran is advocating full-throated Arminianism. It was Luther, after all, who wrote *The Bondage of the Will*; “I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ my Lord or come to him” and all that. Salvation really is by grace alone – God's work alone. Which makes the obverse of the salvation coin read, in bold letters: ELECTION. “You did not chose me, but I chose you.” “It depends not on man's will or exertion, but on God,” etc. If you want the Grace-Alone-ness facet of the Gospel, you will also have to take the From-Eternity-ness face. If you want salvation by grace, then you must have the doctrine of unconditional election. But you need not have Calvinism – you can leave it as a mystery. *Cur alii, alii non?* For us this is the *crux theologorum* – a mystery whose bottom we never quite reach. Indeed, according to Lutheran in the *Bondage of the Will* it looks as though God is a bully, damning folks who can do nothing else besides reject him and yet blaming them for it. That is where, for Luther, faith enters in. We trust God because of the cross of Christ. We trust that he is good based on that evidence and despite all evidence to the contrary. God wants all

men to be saved. Yet some are not – and it's their fault, not God's. Yet if any are saved it's all God's doing from beginning to end. That is a paradox, a mystery, an uncomfortable spot.

That Lutheran answer is obviously antithetical to Arminianism and neither does it comport with Calvinism. Arminius' problem with Calvinism was that it appeared to make God the author of evil and damnation. In order to resolve this problem, yet keep grace alone, Arminius sneaked in just one teensy weensy work through the door of human choice. Lutheranism presents a different difficulty, similar to but distinct from Calvinism. It is most unsatisfying to have bold block letters reading I DON'T KNOW at the center of your theology of salvation. Why are some saved and not others? It's a mystery that has not been explained to us – *I don't know*.

But what if there were a side door also into Lutheranism? What could we do to retain grace alone yet also resolve this uncomfortable, illogical mystery? “I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ my Lord or come to Him, but the Holy Spirit has called me by the Gospel, enlightened me with his gifts, sanctified and kept me in the truth faith.” Ah – here is a path to Lutheranism's the side door. Salvation does not fall from the sky. God works through means. These means are the Word and the Sacraments. These gifts come through men – men to print Bibles, men to preach sermons, men to share the Gospel with their neighbors, and so forth. If men stop doing those things – then the Holy Spirit can't call people by the Gospel and enlighten people with his gifts.

Thus a new theology emerges that is not Arminianism, nor Calvinism, nor, as I will argue below, Lutheranism. Those theologies all keep their attention within the person being saved: it is this individual's will, choice, decision, works, that are under discussion. His will is free and he can choose salvation – or his will is not free and God alone must save him. The characters in the play are limited to two: God and the individual being saved. Lutheranism's discussion of the means of grace – I am convinced – does not mean to introduce other characters as efficient causal agents. That is, when Luther speaks of the means of grace as tools of the Holy Spirit that is exactly what he intends to say: the Holy Spirit uses these means as his tools, his instruments. The Holy Spirit is the efficient causal

agent.

But through that door of the means of grace other characters can be brought on to the stage: those men through whom the means of grace come. How shall they hear without someone preaching and how shall they preach unless they are sent – right? Now we can speak not only of the individual and God and argue whether the one the other or both are the efficient causal agents of salvation – now we can also speak of an almost limitless number of individuals who might be efficient causal agents of salvation – or at least cause damnation. If Grandma Schickelgrüber sends in her mission dollars and thereby a missionary goes to darkest Africa and preaches the Gospel – then the Holy Spirit can work and perhaps save Jean-Baptiste, the village blacksmith of Gadonga, Botswana. If Grandma Schickelgrüber, however, hordes her wealth in a Thrivent CD – no missionary goes to Gadonga and Jean-Baptiste goes to hell. The time is short for pauvre Jean-Baptiste, grand-mères: send in your mites!

And there is that familiar speech exhorting us to missionary endeavors. There is the theology of the brother who saw in the Haiti earthquake this question: how many of those people went to hell because you and I did nothing? We must repent – we must tell the Gospel – we must give our funds and send our missionaries because we are sending people to hell by our inaction.

If this theology sounds familiar to you it is not only because you have heard it from the district mission exec – is also because you have read about it in history books. This theology is, in fact, Roman Catholicism – the only other branch of Christianity that multiplies the possible causal agents of salvation beyond two. Rome does it through purgatory. In the final analysis, it is up to you and me and the Church on earth just how long grandma has to spend in purgation. Are you so selfish so as to horde your money, to cling to your bad habits, to be so lazy as not to pray, when those poor souls suffer without relief? At least with purgatory the elevator only goes up – the guilt trip is much more ponderous in the Functionally Arminian version where folks don't only languish a while longer, but go to hell if we fail to act.

Actually, Roman Catholicism and Arminianism, too, can use the full bore guilt trip when it

comes to missions – because once you allow in any human efficient cause in salvation you have allowed them all. If it's up to a human being's choice, then it can be up to other humans to convince them to choose. The Roman Catholic call for mission donations is identical to the Arminian call which is identical to the Functional Arminian-Lutheran version – almost. The savvy Lutheran practitioner of this call for missions will not dare to say that we are trying to convince people to make their decision for Jesus and convert themselves with their own will power. No, he will speak of the necessity to get the Word out so that the Holy Spirit can convert more men. Which is why I think the best name for its appearance in Lutheranism is Functional Arminianism: a bit of a different theory, but the same actions.

Before going forward with a critique of Lutheran Functional Arminianism let me again summarize the case for it. We are saved by God's grace alone. We cannot work for our salvation because our wills are bound – we are born in sin and cannot pull ourselves up by our boot straps. Therefore, God must himself save us if we are to be saved. But God does not do this without means. The Holy Spirit converts us, turns our bound wills toward him and enlivens faith in our hearts – but he does this through the preaching of the Word and the administration of the Sacraments. For these things to take place, men must be called into ministry, the church must be supported by financial gifts, missionaries must be sent into foreign lands, individuals must share the Gospel with their neighbors, butts must be gotten in the pews. If every Christian tomorrow shut his mouth and refused to speak the Gospel, if every Christian tomorrow shut his wallet and refused to send in mission dollars: then many who otherwise might have been saved will be damned because the Holy Spirit does not work outside of these means. Likewise, if the Church puts up artificial barriers to hearing the Word – like a stodgy liturgy, bad parking, terrible music, etc – then men will go to hell because they could not hear the Word in those circumstances and thereby be converted by the Holy Spirit. Indeed, a pastor's crabby personality could prevent men from hearing the Gospel preached by him and thus prevent the Holy Spirit from saving some.

Given this theology, it is no surprise that many Lutheran churches look exactly like their

Shopkeeper Arminian neighbors and have the same Shopkeeper concerns. While the theory is slightly different, the practical implications overlap. The entrance of human agency into salvation simply comes at a different point – for the Arminian, in the will of the one to be saved, for the Functionally Arminian Lutheran in the will of those who can prevent the Holy Spirit from doing his work by refusing to give money for missions or tell their neighbor about Jesus. But once the human agency (as an efficient cause) is injected, the practice of the church flows naturally. The Arminian has a praise band because that is what a lot of people like, and they want to convince those people to make a decision for Christ. The Lutheran has a praise band because a lot of people won't come hear the Word (through which the Holy Spirit works) unless they have a praise band; in other words, the Lutheran has a praise band because that is what a lot of people like. The Arminian gives to missions because people can't make a decision for Christ unless they hear a preacher, and so folks might go to hell if they don't give. The Lutheran gives to missions because people can't be saved apart from the means of grace through which the Holy Spirit works, and so folks might go to hell if they don't give. A slightly different expression of theology, to be sure – but the same practice, the same church life emerges – hence, Functional Arminianism. Indeed, even the speech patterns end up being the same: “Father God, we just want to praise you....” Such diction resides not in the Scriptures, not in the historic Lutheran liturgy, and not in the Confessions. Lutherans who pray this way learned it from American evangelicalism – and why? Well, birds of a feather flock together. Churches with the same practice recognize each other for what they are and learn from one another – no matter the name on the sign that's out front.

III. Critique of Functional Arminianism

Doctor Nagel is fond of pointing out that every error in theology is pushing a truth a bit too far. Jesus is a man – push that too far and you get Arianism. Jesus is God – push that too far and you get Docetism. God works through means – push that too far and you get Functional Arminianism.

This is where our critique of this theology must begin: with what it gets right. God does work through means. The Holy Spirit converts men through the means of grace – the preaching of his Word and the administration of his Sacraments. This is both how God gives birth to new believers and how he strengthens those who are already his children. This truth is a great comfort to us: for we can look at objective acts to know that we are saved. Do you doubt whether God loves you? You don't have to wonder, like a Calvinist, if you are really one of his elect: you are baptized, God's promises are for you. You don't have to worry, like an Arminian, that your choosing of Jesus wasn't done in the right way or with your whole heart the first time: it's not your choice or power that matters, but God's actions. You don't have to fret, like a Roman Catholic, that you haven't quite done enough yet - you have been absolved by God's minister – so of course God loves you. He made promises to you in that Baptism and God does not lie. You heard God himself forgive you in Holy Absolution. You received Jesus' body and blood for the forgiveness of sins in the Supper. So never fear – God is really working through these means. And don't bother chasing after your feelings or anything else – for God has only promised to work through these means. Receive God's Word and Sacrament and know that you have God's blessing.

That is the comfort of the Lutheran means of grace theology – we have objective, tangible proof that God has blessed us and is saving us. But it is the grossest perversion of the sacred truth to take what is meant for our comfort and turn it into a basis for doubt, spiritual blackmail, and placing human action at the center of salvation. But this is what Functional Arminianism does. It takes a word of comfort – God works through Word and Sacrament to save you – and turns it into a word of doubt and extortion. Indeed, more than this, Functional Arminianism makes the Creator subject to the created. For take that statement from my Winkel brother – about all the people in Haiti we sent to hell by not getting them the Gospel quicker. What does that statement say and what does it imply? Let us really think it through. God was prevented from saving the people of Haiti because of our inaction. The number of saved on the last day would have been larger than it now will be had we acted differently.

The Holy Spirit was powerless to do anything because he had (it seems foolishly) promised only to work through the means of grace which we prevented from going to Haiti. God wanted to save those poor people, but we stopped him from doing so.

There is the temptation in this theology – the same temptation that has always been front and center since the garden – pride and power. While my salvation is not up to me – I do have the power to prevent or allow others into heaven. What a head trip! Truly, on the day that we eat of this fruit we shall be as gods! Is it any wonder that this theology is so popular? What a sense of purpose and accomplishment comes with it – and what a powerful incentive guilt can be as well. For not only may I save, but my inaction may damn those who otherwise might have been saved. Such guilt can be wielded by skillful practitioners of the preaching arts to guarantee a steady income for life: every time a coin in the coffer rings, a missionary to darkest Africa springs.

But think a little more deeply on the subject. If someone else's salvation is dependent on your works – isn't your salvation dependent on someone else's work? If your inaction can damn another – can't someone else's inaction damn you? Well then, it is not really true that neither life nor death nor angels nor powers can separate you from the love of God in Christ Jesus – all it takes is a selfish and lazy human being.

But this is madness. God does not make himself hostage to us when he promises to save us through the means of grace. But that is exactly what Functional Arminianism teaches, wittingly or not. This is why it is Functional *Arminianism*: the doctrine of election, the from-eternity-ness of the Gospel, is completely denied. If it is true that the number of souls, X , that will be in God's kingdom on the last day is a function of human exertion, Y , then there is no doctrine of election at all; in the final analysis everything depends on man's free will. And this is what happens to every scheme that tries to have the doctrine of salvation by grace alone without the doctrine of unconditional election. But you can't have one without the other. It's grace alone, or it's works – whether your own or another's works, it does not matter. And if it is not by human works – then your salvation is secure because it is all in God's hands.

No one can snatch you out of God's hands.

And, conversely, you cannot snatch any of the elect out of God's hands. If you refuse to preach the Gospel from this day out – God's purpose in election will stand. If you attack and persecute the Church, none of the elect shall be lost. If you hoard your money and refuse to pray for missionaries on their dangerous way, Christ's little lambs will still be in his fold. He has lost none and he will lose none of those his Father has given him. Do nothing – and the number of souls in God's kingdom on the last day will be just the same as if you had given all you had to missions and dedicated your every waking moment to preaching. Start a praise band and stroll the aisle while preaching in your polo shirt and shorts – and the number of souls in God's kingdom on the last day will be just the same as if you chanted TLH p. 15 week in and week out rather poorly in an ill-fitting cassock alb and mismatched socks.

IV. But...

But if this is the case, then why preach at all? If this is the case, then why give at all? If this is the case, then why pray at all? If this is the case, then why give any thought to how worship is conducted or the church administered? I can sit around and do nothing and everything will be fine, so why bother?

Aha! Can you now see that we are talking, at last, about the Gospel? Aren't these the questions that the Gospel always elicits? In Romans 6, after three chapters of pounding away at salvation by works, St. Paul must say, “Well then, if it's not our works shall we go on sinning that grace may abound?” In those chapters the Apostle was fighting for the grace-alone-ness facet of the Gospel – but the same questions arise with every facet – if it is Christ alone who saves, then why should I bother? If salvation is brought from outside of me, if my inner renewal is not the basis of my justification, then why should I try to be renewed? If faith alone saves, then why should I bother trying to become loving? If those who work only one hour receive the same pay as those who have borne the heat of the day – why bother? If God has his elect, then why ever send a missionary? Now we are talking! Those are the

right questions – if I have forced you ask them, then I have forced you to look the Gospel square in the face and see it for it is: truly Grace alone, God's work alone with man bound in sin and God alone free to act.

And ironically enough, this is why only the Gospel, the real Gospel of grace alone and unconditional election (which are the same thing), can motivate good works. It is the only thing that can cut through the mercenary instinct in the fallen human mind. Is saving our skins the only possible motivation for good works? What a narrow and odd doctrine. God had to kill it with the grace-aloneness of the Gospel.

So likewise with missions. Is the desire to lord it over another and be a little god who can save some and damn others by action or inaction the only possible motivation for preaching the Gospel and giving to the Church? What a bizarre notion. God had to kill it with the doctrine of Election. My motivation in mission work is neither the fear of punishment (my own or another's) nor the hope of reward (my own or another's): it is rather the joy I have in the Gospel and the amazing mercy of Christ who has chosen to use us vessels of clay, what is, we chamberpots.

For consider what happens to Christian freedom and that hearty Lutheran joy in God's creation under the Functional Arminian scheme. What is more important: your child's college education or the saving of souls? How can you spend all that money that could have gone to missions? How dare you have a hobby that takes time that could have been spent in door to door evangelism! For surely, a soul saved is more important than a fishing trip. How can you in good conscience plunk down hundreds of dollars for a family vacation when that money could have been used to save a soul? Those who take this doctrine seriously are already raffling off cars at Easter Sunday services. I salute them for having the courage of their convictions. If we can save more people with our actions than would have been saved otherwise, if we must do whatever we can to get people into the church to hear the Word because God works through means – then woe to us if we don't give a car away every week to get folks to show up, or flat out pay unbelievers to show up to hear the Word – woe to us if we spend even one

dime on a cruise to Cazumel rather than on a missionary's ticket to some Godforsaken land.

The truth demands consistency and courage. If you really believe that your giving or action is the deciding factor in the saving or damning of some, then truth demands that you take a vow of poverty.

So bless those papists monks! They have the clear-sighted vision to act on their beliefs. Nothing is more important than helping spring people out of purgatory and save souls here on earth. All earthly pursuits must take a backseat. The best thing you can do is dedicate your whole life, lock, stock, and barrel to the saving of souls. Everything else is second best, selfish, and carnal.

But Luther overthrew all those notions with the Gospel of grace alone – and to have grace alone, you must have election. He famously said in his preface to his collected works that he could wish all his works would be lost save only the catechism for children and *The Bondage of the Will*. It is those works that focus most clearly on salvation by grace, and grace alone. It is those works that allow for Christian freedom and the enjoyment of God's creation. We are not bureaucrats in heaven's Department of Salvation. We are not cubicle dwellers who must trudge through one sharing of the Gospel after another and never giving thought to any other matter. We are not Shopkeepers tallying how many souls get into the saved column. We are the sons of the free woman. We are the free children of God. We can sit in Wittenberg and drink beer while the Spirit does his work through the Word. We can go fishing and play racket ball and take a walk with our wives and worry about how the Huskers will do this fall in the Big Ten (Go Big Red). It is for freedom that Christ has set us free.

And glory of glories – in all this the Lord has chosen to use us for his purposes. And his purposes are many. That he might have more children to love, he sets us in families and blesses us to be fruitful and multiply. That men might serve one another as Christ serves us, he gives us each a vocation and a place of service to others as butchers and bakers and candlestick makers. And that his word might go forth, he calls some to be preachers in his church and provides for them through the generosity of the people. In all these things, God delights to bless us by doing his good works through us. But don't

kid yourself – if you reject this, take your ball, go home and pout: not one of the elect will be lost. You cannot stop God's plans, you cannot snatch a lamb from him no matter how much you might try.

Why preach? Why give? How can we not? We who died to sin, how can we live in it any longer? We who are saved by grace, how can we resist giving a reason for this hope we have within to all who ask? We do not do good works to earn salvation, our own or another's, but because we are the Father's children and we love to please the Father. We do not spread the Gospel to collect feathers in our cap, or out of fear that God might lose one of his elect if we don't, but because we live and breathe and have our being in this Gospel. A father loves his son just because. A preacher preaches just because. A Christian prays just because. If any mercenary thought, any extortion, any “or else” enters into such things they cease to be what they are and we are held again under the Law, coercion, and sin.

God will save his elect, with or without you. If you do not a damn thing none of His elect will be damned. If you do everything, their number will not increase. This is the doctrine of grace alone. This is the doctrine of election. You are nothing. God is everything. It depends not on man's will or exertion, but on God, who has mercy.

V. The Lutheran Practice of Worship and Missions

But does this matter? Is election the one doctrine that has no impact in the real world of Christian behavior? Can you believe like a Lutheran, but act like an Arminian? Can your substance be the Book of Concord, but your style Willow Creek? Should you know and believe in your heart that this doctrine of unconditional election is true, but act like it isn't?

I have heard this paradox put in a positive light time and again. Yes, we know that God has his elect – yes, we know that salvation is not by human choice – but still God commands that we preach to bring people to faith. So, it seems that at the heart of the matter, yes, God alone saves. But in the workaday world of guiding a parish and sending out missionaries – our works do indeed matter. So you can be a Lutheran who knows the deep truths of election and grace – but you'll still want to work

with the down to earth tips and tricks that, well, *work* – and the place to go to learn those is at the feet of the Arminian Shopkeepers.

James Voelz tried on this notion a few years back in an influential article, “Newton and Einstein at the Foot of the Cross.” Voelz uses the analogy of physics as a way to explain how seemingly contradictory statements in Scripture and theology can be reconciled. He calls this a post-modern approach to theology – viewing these seemingly opposing statements as both being true depending on your perspective. (I hear echoes of this in the Saint Louis faculty's talk of the Two Kinds of Righteousness as well, but that is a topic for another day.) From modern physics we know that there are deeper truths at work than Newton understood. But still, when you want to graph the trajectory of a baseball from the short stop to first base, you would waste a lot of time working through the general theory of relativity, gravity's curving of space, and so forth. Newton's simple, more straightforward equations will get the job done just fine.

Voelz' essay is worth reading and as an exercise in speculative theology it is enjoyable and expands the horizons of its readers. However, I was not impressed with how the essay was used by this or that professor in my seminary training. See – they would say – Lutherans are Einstein. We know the deep, accurate truth. And that is important to know and it even comes in handy – sometimes. But the Arminians are Newton. And when you are playing a game of pool, a skillful Newtonian engineer is worth a dozen Ivy League theoretical physicists. When it comes to the day to day practice of the church in reaching out to the lost, it's not the highfalutin FC SD XI you need, but a good Billy Graham sermon.

So, it would seem, knowing the doctrine of election or not knowing it has no practical impact. But then why does Paul talk about it so much – and Jesus? But our Confessions treat Election like a practical doctrine – a doctrine that is not meant for the ivory tower but for the bedside and confessional. I think we are fools to imagine that a Lutheran parish can use Arminian forms of worship, Arminian songs, Arminian prayers, and Arminian preaching and remain Lutheran in theology. I think that we are fools if we think any doctrine worth having does not have practical implications. And election and

salvation by grace alone are doctrines worth having.

So what does missions and worship based on a Lutheran confession of election and grace look like? If God has his elect, then my preaching of God's Word will be received by them. I need not doubt it and I need not beat myself up if my preaching of God's Word is not received. Consider Paul in Pisidian Antioch. He preaches a riproaring sermon at the synagogue and then Luke calmly notes, “And when the Gentiles heard this, they began rejoicing and glorifying the word of the Lord, and as many as were appointed to eternal life believed.” (Acts 13)

As many as were appointed to eternal life believed. That is my missions motto. That is how it works. The Word goes out because preachers have just got to preach, and Christians have just got to give an answer for the hope they have within – and then as many as are appointed to eternal life believe. If that is the case – then why on earth would I tailor the worship of God's house to those who do not believe his Word like a Shopkeeper trying to sell ice cream? Will that make a difference in “as many as were appointed to eternal life believed?” Will my machinations increase the number of the elect?

The Arminians, on the other hand, sail by the pole star of their theology: humans are free to reject God or not. Men need convincing. *Everyone is a potential convert.* Therefore, we need churches and worship that appeal to everyone. A praise band church for the Boomers, an ancient-future, organic whole-wheat host coffee house church for the jaded millenials, a rockabilly church for the hillbillies, red chasubles with giant white N's on them in Nebraska, etc. We need that, because everyone is a potential convert, a person wavering on middle ground between God and Satan – and to get people to convert, to choose God, you need them to be comfortable. And since everyone is a potential convert – you must make everyone who is not yet converted comfortable. So your church starts to look like places where everyone who is not yet converted (that is, unbelievers) are comfortable: whether coffee house, honky tonk dive, or university lecture hall. Thus the clientèle of Arminian churches is, by design, heathenish. That's why you get advertisements like these that do not have a speck of the Gospel

in them – they are all about heathenish concerns: cool music, comfortable seats, tips for raising your family.

For a Lutheran, everyone is not a potential convert in the Arminian sense. We do not believe that every man is on a sort of neutral ground whence he may chose to go with God or not. Rather, we believe that everyone we meet just might be one of those appointed to eternal life who will believe when they hear the Word – not tips for healthy living, but the Gospel. Each man I see might just be one of God's elect. Therefore, our churches do not cater to those who are not yet converted because we want to get them to make their decision. We don't have to have this sort of church and that sort of church to appeal to this sort of unbeliever and that sort of unbeliever – we do not have several different constituencies that must be appeased. Rather, we serve the one people of God, his elect from every nation. And what the elect want, what the Church wants, is the Word of God, and worship that flows ceaselessly from the Word of God and is immersed in the imagery of the Word of God and is connected to the people of God of all times and places.

So, the Shopkeepers are right this far: know your target audience. Is yours the potential convert or the elect of God? It will make all the difference.

Potential converts will be comfortable with a stage they will recognize from corporate events and plays. The elect of every nation will want an altar, set high and front and center, so that the Lamb of God once sacrificed might always be before their eyes.

Potential converts will need music they can connect with and that matches their individual tastes – so they'll need several different venues with several different genres represented. The elect of every nation will want the music of the Church, music that will connect them to Christians of all ages – not music that will pigeon hole them not only in their own time, in their own demographic, thus cutting them off from fellowship with all the believers in their geographical area..

Potential converts will want to see a preacher they can relate to – a man in suit and tie, or khakis and polos – a buddy, a friend who might convince them to join up with him. The elect of every nation

will want a servant of Christ, a man who stands in the stead of Christ and so is thus covered in robes thick with metaphorical meaning and beauty.

Potential converts will want preaching that is practical – that hits them where they live – that tells them how to get the things potential converts (that is, unbelievers) want: a happy family, a better sex life, a secure financial footing. Potential converts do not understand words like redemption, justification, propitiation, and so forth and certainly don't want to hear them. The elect of every nation will want preaching that is dripping with the blood of Christ for they know and feel their sinful condition, their weakness, and their need. They want to learn the Word of God as he gave it and grow to know the language of the Scriptures inside and out.

Potential converts will want ample parking, theatre seats, shiny new buildings in the latest style, and a food court: things they recognize and are comfortable with. The elect of every nation will appreciate the solidity of a parish that has existed for a long time – and if they need a new building will want it to look like it will be there standing faithful watch until Christ returns. They will not want to be isolated from the body of Christ by the more than metaphorical walls of the theatre seats' arms. And they also will like ample parking.

Potential converts will enjoy an hour away from the annoyance of caring for children and will thus demand a children's service or other planned activity to keep pre-pubescent children out of sight and out of mind. The elect of every nation are the body of Christ, young and old, and yearn to be together to hear the preaching of his Word and to receive his Sacrament.

Potential converts are a little put out at being excluded – better not to have the Sacrament with them present, or if you must have it, not be too stringent about letting any and all participate. The elect of every nation cannot imagine a Sunday without the Body and Blood of Christ – and they do not wish any to receive it whose life or doctrine would give the lie to the unity it expresses.

Potential converts do not like to sing. It is an embarrassing public act best left to professionals. So the music should be the solo driven fare of the radio that you can sing along with if you so desire,

but that someone else is actually singing. The elect of every nation recognize that there is too much joy for plain words only: *quis cantat, bis orat*, he who sings, prays twice.

Potential converts like things new and fresh and want to be out of a rut. A screen will be handy in displaying new things for them to say and read. The elect of every nation want to pray together as the body of Christ in this time and with all times – thus they will want to know the words by heart and will want those words to be what Christians have always prayed.

Potential converts will want a diversion from any sense of holiness – a joke filled exposition of the little kiddies in a children's sermon ought to do the trick. The elect of every nation want their children to view God's house (and especially the chancel) as a holy place for prayer, worship, and silence – not jokes and play time.

Potential converts want to be entertained and will appreciate a stage drama put on every now and again. The elect of every nation want to be in the drama of salvation from confessing their sins to hearing the Word to meeting heaven on earth in the Sacrament.

In other words – have a heart for the elect of God, not a “heart for the lost.” Which is such an oddly unthinking phrase. If the Arminians and the Functionally Arminian actually meant what Jesus meant by “the lost” they would indeed be getting it right. But when they say, “I have a heart for the lost” they mean that they want to cater to unbelievers to make them believers. To love goats that they might turn into sheep, if you will. But what does Jesus say? He has a heart for the “lost sheep of Israel.” They are the sheep. They are God's elect. They are just lost. What is going to lead them home? Not goatly things but sheeply things!

Thus, this doctrine of election is the most practical of all for it tells you to whom, and therefore how, to minister. Let ministering to the elect be your pole star and guide to your ministry. Do what the elect Church of Christ want. Lead the sheep committed to your care into being who they are, even when they are tempted by the world and false shepherds to be something less than what they are. This

will give you the clear sight and the courage to know what to do when the lambs entrusted to your care come begging for entertainment worship. That's not really what they want – it is the world living in them trying to take over. The Church has never done such things – toss out the liturgy and introduce the theatre into the chancel? Be the man of God in that place and lead them better than that.

And rest assured – God will bring his elect to his Church where a faithful shepherd will care for them: as many as are appointed for eternal life will believe. Perhaps in your field of service that will be a small number, or perhaps it will be great. Perhaps you will have to undergo much adversity and Satanic attack and suffer much for the kingdom of Christ. Or perhaps it is the Lord's pleasure to bless you with a peaceful ministry and your cross will come in other ways.

But no matter – be the man God ordained you to be: a servant of the Church, not a servant of potential converts or a would-be creator of the Church.

And likewise with missions – that is nothing else than a church living in a place where the church is small. The French traded with the Koreans – and lo and behold, the Word gets out (for how can Christians not give a reason for hope they have withing?) and some Koreans believe. What can the Church do then but send them their own pastor? The same happened when the Norwegians bumped into Madegascar – someone asks, and another gives a reason for the hope he has within, and a believer is born, and he needs a pastor, and off he goes to have a church and minister to the elect of every nation. The parish is the mission and there is no mission outside of the parish for how can there be a Christian isolated and alone?

It's not complicated – it's hard, it's heavy with crosses, and runs thick with the blood of martyrs – but it's not complicated. The Church goes on being the Church – and somehow the Word goes forth, for what can a Christian do but be a Christian and confess his faith before the world? There are no techniques required – that is for salesman and shopkeepers. We do not sell Jesus. We proclaim Him to be risen from the dead and are too busy being excited about that to give a particular damn what some heathen thinks about it: as many as are appointed to eternal life will believe, the elect of every nation

will be gathered, nothing can stop God's plan and purpose and nothing can direct or control it. It is Christ's to weep over unbelieving Jerusalem, and surely as little Christ's we will learn to do the same: but ours is not to understand the mystery of unbelief, let alone think that we can solve it by our machinations when Christ himself could not. Instead, the Church just turns on the beacon of God's Word in the liturgy so that the elect know where they are supposed to gather.

VI. Conclusion

Isn't that a more exciting and appealing and, if I may, *Lutheran*, view of missions and worship than the Arminians can provide us? It is full of freedom and joy – not guilt and high pressure sales presentations. It is grace and not works – it is confidence in God and not fear of our own failings. It is simply being the Church – and letting the chips fall where they may. And for a pastor, it is simply ministering to the elect of every nation, the Church – and living one's own life of continual repentance and faith, of failing and being washed up again in Confession and Absolution, of being kicked around and beaten up by the alligators and the half-heathen and the bureaucrats and then being healed with the Sacrament. And sometimes – sometimes it is even being martyred. But that crown is for the chosen few and we need not worry about that either. We'll just go on being the men God ordained us to be: preaching the Word, serving the parish, shepherding the lambs toward green pastures and still waters, hopefully with the sense God gave a goose, but never apart from his grace.

Epilogue: What I *didn't* just say

I think it important at this point to reiterate what I did *not* say. When I first published and presented this paper, I got several reactions accusing me of saying all sorts of things that I didn't say – in fact, of saying things that I specifically rejected in the body of the paper. Chiefly I was accused of being a Calvinist and of thus forbidding mission work and evangelism. This is odd for at least two reasons. First, I specifically condemned Calvin's limited atonement and double predestination in the

paper as well as speaking of the proper reason for doing the godly work of evangelism in a Biblical fashion. But the second reason is perhaps even more puzzling. It seems that the Arminian assumptions are now so ingrained among us that we assume that Calvinists don't do mission work or evangelism! How could you believe in predestination and do mission work? But, of course, Calvinists do mission work. And so should Lutherans – but they should not do it like Arminians or for Arminian reasons.

So just as the Gospel's grace-aloneness does not get the antinomian Christian off the hook – let us sin that grace may abound – no way! So also the from-eternityness of the Gospel does not get the lazy pastor off the hook. It's just that the lazy pastor's sin is not that he is decreasing the membership of heaven and increasing the membership of hell – it's just that he's lazy. He is not keeping his ordination vow. More on that in a future presentation on what the pastor's job is and how to judge one's own effectiveness and faithfulness.

Likewise, I did not say that you could not possibly harm another human being in soul and body. You can. It's a possibility. If you do so, you need to repent and come to Christ for forgiveness and strive to do better. What I said was that even though men may harm one another, no man will be able to snatch the elect out of Christ's hand.

The Gospel, you see, always makes its enemies afraid. *But if I preach that works don't save, no one will do good works.* And indeed, Luther was accused by Eck of actually forbidding good works just as I have been accused of forbidding evangelism. *If I preach the election of grace no one will do mission work, evangelize, or tell the good news about Jesus.* Do you see how they are both the same accusation? But, ironically enough, it is only the Gospel – whether the grace-aloneness or the from-eternityness – that sets one free.. Only someone who believes in grace alone is set free for good works. Only someone who believes in election is set free for true evangelism.

Part of the problem is that Arminian influenced Lutherans is they think think that the only reason we could possibly have to speak the Gospel is to try to win over some potential convert. But there is another reason to preach the Gospel – to discover God's elect! To gather the family together!

To turn on the beacon so that the lost sheep of Israel know where home is when the Spirit brings them to repentance. Over our next few meetings I will seek to build the insights in this paper into a cohesive pastoral theology and practice of evangelism.