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The *Solus Christus* Response to the Crisis of Authority in Enga Lutheranism

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“I am the Alpha and the Omega”, says the Lord God, “who is, and who was, and who is to come, the Almighty” (Rev 1:8).

“But God demonstrates His own love for us in this: while we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Rom 5:8).

The Apostle Paul suggests that, within the body of Christ, glossolalia, for its own sake, and divorced from an evident goal to strengthen the bond of love, which unites one to the other, is an empty and pointless noise (1 Cor 13:1). Harsher still, is the verdict on theological endeavour, which does not have, as its constant referent, the specific questions and confusions, the struggles and pains of living human beings, and which does not seek, as its final purpose, the care, comfort, and invigoration of people, who have names and faces, through words about the Word made flesh, the mystery of God in Christ. Such disengaged endeavour implies the Apostle, in the succeeding verse, makes of the person, who indulges in it, a nothing-at-all. With this in mind, and to the end that the subsequent discussion will be rooted in the self-same realities, in which Christ our Lord, through His Spirit, seeks still to root Himself, I begin with some stories of life amid the movements, Lutheran-style. Dateline: Enga Province, 1985.

The young man was distraught when he finally came to see me. School fees were due within the week, and he was without a toea to his name. What had he been doing over the holidays to find some money, I asked. And now the story came out. It seems that, shortly after the conclusion of the previous school year, he'd been invited to join a group of young people, both men and women, in so-called *wok misin* activities, travelling around among the eight or so

congregations of one of the Gutnius Lutheran church's sub-circuits to conduct informal services of prayer, preaching, and song, with the goal of reviving the interest of the area's youth in the church's message and life. The lay leader of the sub-circuit, who organised and promoted the activity, appointed the young man as leader of the group, and promised that, at the end of the holidays, he would pay his school fees for him, both as thanks, and recompense for services rendered. The same lay leader instructed the group carefully, before sending them on their way, emphasising that, whereas they were not all of the same kin by birth, they were now, by virtue of their baptism, brothers and sisters; and that if they truly had faith in this new reality, then they would understand, also emotively, that relations between the male and female members of the group were governed by the same incest taboos that apply to one's blood kinsmen. So, how did it go, I asked. Well, said the young man, at least with the *wok misin* aspect of things, although it was terribly difficult not to be attracted to a certain young female member of the group, who happened to be the wife's sister of the lay leader. Imagine his difficulty, then, when upon conclusion of the work, and the disbanding of the group, he found himself spending a few nights in the lay leader's house, together with the attractive young lady; and, when it came time to go to bed at night, the lay leader retired with his wife to one of the house's two bedrooms, indicating that the young man, the wife's sister, and two or three young children were all to share the other bedroom.¹ And, in the dead dark of the second or third night, temptation came in the form of the wife's sister snuggling close. Things happened, which are virtually bound to happen in such circumstances. One of the children noticed something, and told mama the next morning – and the young man was slung out of the house, amid much noise and hullabaloo, and sent on his way, without the earned and promised school fee. I kept a promise to the young man to speak to the lay leader on his behalf. While confirming the young man's story, in its essential details, he was surprised at the suggestion – and unwilling, in the end, to grant it – that he had placed undue temptation in the young man's path,

¹ How times have changed from the not-so-distant days, when husbands and wives, to say nothing of unmarried young people, were not to be caught dead sharing sleeping quarters.

and that a little mercy was therefore in order, given the young man's school fee predicament. Instead, he returned again and again to his disappointment in the young man, which was both painful and profound. "And here I thought he was a real believer", he said over and over. "*Em I semim mipela nogut tru*" – in the eyes of uncommitted onlookers he has made a mockery of us all, and of all we profess.

I drove up to the building where a meeting of the Gutnius Lutheran Church Council was in progress, and I was delighted to see standing there two of my students, who had spent the year away from the seminary, fulfilling practical experience requirements. My delight quickly passed to resignation, however, when I caught the less-than-happy glances they were darting at each other, and the grim tones in their voices. A suspicion that they were picking again at the same old bone was quickly confirmed, as I stepped between them to keep the peace. Student A had been assigned to work in an area, which had recently experienced a wave of charismatic activity. Student B was posted to a congregation within A's home sub-circuit. B, an older man, and, by nature, cautious and conservative, was intensely annoyed that A had brought a group of young folks from the area where he was now working down for a visit to his home congregation – onto B's professional turf, in other words – to do some *wok misin*; and that, while there, A and his group had said and done things commonly associated with local charismatic and Pentecostal movements, which to B's mind, were *ipso facto* un-Lutheran. A, the sort of person who will be reproved by no one, least of all a fellow student, asserted that, while he had, indeed, encountered and learned some new worship habits this year, he saw nothing in them that substantively contradicted what he had learned from his teachers; and that all he wanted to do was to introduce the folks of his home area to the same spirit of commitment and joy² that he had encountered in the congregations

² For a description of what he could well have been referring to, with his comment on joy, (Pidgin: *amamas*), see Wendy Flannery, "Mediation of the Sacred: the Authority of Ecstatic Religious Dreams in Contemporary 'Spirit' Movements", in Wendy Flannery, ed., *Religious Movements in Melanesia Today* (3), Point 4 (1984), pp.128ff.

with whom he was now working. B's rejoinder was to repeat that, far from bringing joy, A's group had simply stirred up turmoil and confusion, with statements and actions that were inherently suspect, and in violation of standard Lutheran ideas and practices.³ And so it went. With each exchange, A and B hardened their respective positions, ceased any attempt to listen with sympathy to each other, and rejected any intimation, also from me, that there might be the faintest smidgeon of merit in what the other was trying to say. I finally called things to a halt by firmly instructing each to get back to his place of work, mind his own business, and look forward next year to some exciting sessions of sorting things through in the classroom.

The husband and wife of 20 or so years were experiencing severe strains in their marriage, and he was starting to carry on a serious courtship of another woman. My inclination was to attribute much of the difficulty to the fact that husband and wife were living apart, he at his place of work, and she at home with the school-age children. When I suggested this to the husband, however, he dismissed it. "We've lived apart before", he said. "We didn't mind it then, so why should we mind it now? My problem with her is that she's mixed up with that One-Way mob,⁴ and spends so much time with them, chasing around to this and that activity, that she neglects her proper responsibilities at home. My pigs aren't being looked after properly, nor are the children for that matter." Several counselling sessions later, it became apparent that, as was only to be expected, the matters at issue between the two were several and complex. Yet, when it came time to state terms and conditions for a rapprochement, the husband ignored all other questions in favour of the matter of the wife's denominational affiliation. Unless she renounced her second baptism, forsook the "One Way" group, and

³ This is a generous translation of a frequently-heard phrase: *i no fit long lo bilong Gutnius Luteran Sios*.

⁴ Several years earlier, the wife had joined a group, which had broken away from the local Lutheran congregation – of which the husband was still a member – and had accepted re-baptism. The group continues to put heavy emphasis on frequent communal activities, to which members contribute time as well as money and produce.

returned to the Lutheran congregation, of which he continued to be a member, he would divorce her, and take the new wife. He claimed to have heard a prominent leader of the Gutnius Lutheran church give his public blessing to such a move. In the end, she finally agreed to his terms, on the condition that he would call off his other courtship. At least, for the moment, victory was his.

For a couple of years now, an officially-sanctioned and so-called “*diwai kros*” movement has been under way in one of the five regions of the Gutnius Lutheran church. A movement of moral reform, it centres on the making of solemn public vows to abstain from specific activities – fighting, post-mortuary payments, and feasts (*kumanda*)⁵ – venial demands for compensation, in cases of injury and death, lewd or inflammatory speech – which have always occupied a prominent place on the official list of the cardinal sins of the ancestors. Supposedly, all Christians assented to a ban against these activities, when they were baptised, but – or so it is commonly perceived – virtually all have continued to dabble in them. And so, now comes the chance to up the ante, and get serious about things. Those who wish to (or in some cases are invited to by congregational leaders), may undergo an intense course of basic catechetical instruction, similar to that prescribed for catechumens in the church’s early days. Upon its conclusion, a grand worship service is held, attended by representatives of numerous neighbouring congregations, and presided over by the local bishop, with the assistance of as many of the region’s pastors as can be mustered for the event. The keystone of the service is the making of the vows of abstention, and the bestowing, as a sign of those vows, of a silver cross on a black string, which is hung from the neck of the recipient. If, at a later date, the vows are broken, the cross is to be taken away from the offender, and hung in the church

⁵ For a description of what the traditional *kumanda* entailed, see M. J. Meggitt, *The Lineage System of the Mae-Enga of New Guinea*, Edinburgh UK: Oliver & Boyd, 1965, pp.181ff. These days, it is impossible to find a consensus, particularly among younger adults, on what exactly participation in *kumanda* involves, and whether or not it requires the compromising of Christian principles. Some would insist that it absolutely does not. Others are not nearly so certain.

building, in plain view, and he or she is to be barred from receiving communion. An act of public repentance is required before the cross can be returned, and communion privileges restored. And now, comes reports of an emerging two-tier structure in certain of the congregations that have experienced the movement. In one place, the story goes, two cups are provided at communion: one for those who have “received the cross”, and one for those who haven’t. In another place, those who have received the cross, supposedly commune first; the “ordinary Christians” follow. Curious about these stories, I quizzed a few of my students, who been through the movement themselves. No, one of them said, he knew of no such distinction of persons emerging in his congregation within the context of public worship; although the evangelist who had led him and his group through their pre-ritual course of instruction had emphasised that, after receiving the cross, they were to acquire plates and cups of their very own, and were no longer to share the use of these with those who had not been through the ritual; nor were they to permit those unpledged others the use of their clothes or beds and mattresses. The stated point of these new arrangements was to prevent close contact with the non-committed, and so to avoid being enticed into breaking one’s vows. He, himself, was ignoring these stipulations, he said, but not so his mother. She also, a recipient of the cross, was beginning to annoy her friends and neighbours with her unsocial behaviour.

Finally: Responding to an invitation, I attended a meeting of the evangelists of a sub-circuit, which had “gone charismatic” in 1983. I was astounded to discover that, of the three burning questions (I so express myself in all seriousness), which had prompted them to summon me there, two were as follows: “May we clap hands when we sing?”, and “Will we be in error if, at the conclusion of the public worship service, we invite people to raise their hands, and join together in saying ‘Alleluia’ and ‘Praise the Lord’?” I knew that the missionary to that area had already affirmed them in their freedom to do these things, and had done so on more than one occasion. Why, I wondered, should they have felt obliged, even once, let alone again and again, to ask about such things?

So much for story-telling. I could continue endlessly, and with ease, but will not do so, thanking you instead for the patience with which you have listened thus far. Most of you, no doubt, have a wealth of similar stories to relate. Certainly, and a colleague of mine in the Enga province is rich in these, and that unavoidably.

For the Enga Province of 1985 is gripped in a fervour of interest and activity with respect to matters spiritual, to the extent that it would be nigh impossible to find anyone – man or woman, old or young, Christian or non-Christian – who is not in some way touched and affected by it. Any reader of the literature of recent years on Melanesian religious movements will have already noted the prominent place that the Enga Province assumes in it. While it is not my purpose here to contribute to that literature, from the point of view of descriptive analysis, a few quick comments along those lines are nonetheless required, for the sake of clarity in the discussion to come.

Even a casual hearing of the above stories will have prompted the observation that new activity among Enga Lutherans is as varied as it is abundant. Understanding “new activity”, in the broadest sense, as anything which challenges and moves beyond a *status quo*, it is possible to identify at least six streams of such activity, which are distinguished from each other by source and scope, as well as by their relation to the structures, models, norms, and presumptions of that which is perceived as being “traditionally Lutheran”.

The first such stream has its source in the vigorous endeavours of a growing number of historically non-Lutheran groups, which, because their mission appears to be as overtly directed to baptised Lutherans and Catholics as it is to the unchurched, I term “sectarian”. Most prominent of these – and also the oldest, with roots dating to the first years of Christian evangelistic activity within the province – is the Seventh-day Adventist church. Much less aggressive in its competitive activities, is the Apostolic church, which, likewise, has a long history in the province, at least in certain areas.⁶ In the late 1970s, other groups began to make an

⁶ I hesitated to include the Apostolic Church in these ranks, precisely because its level of competitive activity has been so significantly lower than that of, say, the Seventh-day

appearance, here and there, among them, the Assemblies of God, the Church of Christ, and the Four Square Gospel organisation. Lutheran congregations have been directly touched, and exercised, by these groups, only to the extent that one of them should set up shop in the near vicinity and begin efforts at proselytisation.⁷ Their indirect influence has been far more pervasive, however, inciting widespread debate concerning the nature and proper practice of baptism, and provoking much enquiry, and anxiety with regard to things eschatological.⁸ Such of these groups as are Pentecostal in character, are also making a significant contribution to an ongoing furore over the nature of the operations of the Holy Spirit.

A second stream, related to the first in its present character as extra-Lutheran, is nonetheless distinct from it, by virtue of its origin as a movement within certain Lutheran congregations, which culminated in schism, and the establishment of a new organisation, avowedly independent, not only from the Gutnius Lutheran church, but also from the aforementioned sectarian groups, with which it shares many common characteristics, in particular, a requirement of re-baptism by immersion, and a heavy emphasis on moral reform.⁹ Commonly called *WanWe* by Lutheran non-adherents, this group continues to have a strong impact,

Adventists. Their presence on the list is due to two things: firstly, because of the theological challenge, which their teaching on, and practice of, baptism pose to Lutheran congregations; and also because there has, in recent years, been an increase of movement on their part into previously all-Lutheran areas.

⁷ At times, the reaction by the established Lutheran congregation to the incursion of one of these groups had bordered on violence. In 1984, several students told me of an attempt by an Anabaptist group to establish themselves in the students' home area. On the day appointed for the first re-baptism ceremony, the local Lutheran circuit and congregational leaders descended on the Anabaptists assembly and began a yelling match, which culminated in the Anabaptists being rolled around in the mud by their Lutheran assailants, amid shouts that "if you want to be re-baptised, then this is the way to do it". Those telling the story, did so with relish and evident approval. Of particular enjoyment to the listeners, was the claim that one or two expatriate Anabaptist missionaries were among those given the "mud treatment".

⁸ Two incessantly-asked questions: "Who is the beast of Rev 13:18, whose designation is 666?", and "Will the world end in the year 2,000?"

⁹ See the reference to this group in Flannery, "Mediation of the Sacred", p. 152. Not having inquired for some time, I do not know whether the name cited by Flannery, *Sios bilong Jisas Krai's Wok Aposel*, continues to be the official designation of the group.

particularly in those areas where it was first established, through pronounced dedication to proselytising activity.¹⁰

Still, a third stream of activity flows from the presence of a strong charismatic movement¹¹ within Lutheran congregations of the Saka and Kandep regions of the province.¹² Regarded with deep suspicion by the bulk of the church's leadership, as well as by the many congregations outside these areas, whose only experience of charismatic activity comes through their contact with groups, which also insist on re-baptism, the Saka and Kandep charismatics assert, with determination, their Lutheran identity and commitment to continued life within the structures of the Gutnius Lutheran church, and, likewise, are at pains to demonstrate their stance within the accepted bounds of orthodoxy.

The fourth stream centres on the activities of the *diwai kros* movement, described briefly in the story above. Found particularly in the Sirunki/Lagaip region of the province, it has surfaced also in congregations within the Wapenamanda district. The unique characteristics of this movement are twofold. Firstly, it is almost wholly indigenous, embodying, as it does, a central rite, set within a complex of associated activity, so completely bound by the framework of Enga culture, as to be unrepeatable elsewhere. While an outsider can detect a superficial similarity in intent to the rite of confirmation, there is no one within the movement itself who makes that association.¹³ Secondly, the

¹⁰ Another group, established some five or six years ago in the Wapenamanda area, maintained ties for quite some time with an expatriate body, by whom it was supplied for a year or so with a missionary. Last I heard (though unreliably), the group had declared its independence, and sent its missionary on his way; in which case, it would probably fit well into this second stream described here.

¹¹ My use here of the term "charismatic", follows the definition by John Barr in "The Age of the Spirit: Introduction and Assessment of Contemporary Pentecostal-Charismatic Renewal Movements", in Wendy Flannery, ed., *Religious Movements in Melanesia Today* (3), Point 4 (1984), pp. 165ff.

¹² Described by Gary Teske, "The Holy Spirit Movement Among Enga Lutherans (Kandep)", in Wendy Flannery, ed., *Religious Movements in Melanesia Today* (2), Point 3 (1983); and Tony Krol, and Simon Es, "Enga Catholics and the Holy Spirit Movement", in Wendy Flannery, ed., *Religious Movements in Melanesia Today* (2), Point 3 (1983).

¹³ Indeed, at the service, in which I first witnessed the performance of the rite, a separate rite of confirmation was conducted for young people preparing to make their first

movement has surfaced with the unquestioned support – some would say at the instigation – of the clerical leadership of the regions concerned. Since this clerical leadership includes some of the most prominent officials of the Gutnius Lutheran church, critique of the movement by those who are sceptical, whether expatriate or national – and there are any number of these – is deemed a dicey business. Nonetheless, at least one of the church's assistant bishops has forbidden the movement to congregations, over which he exercises supervision, without, however, openly challenging those of his episcopal colleagues, who are promoting it within their jurisdictions.

In the fifth stream, large numbers of congregations are experiencing waves of activity, in which the newness consists not so much in the nature of the activity itself, as in the level at which it is being done. Thus, youth groups form and travel, both within and beyond the congregation's immediate area, singing songs, and conducting informal services of worship; nightly devotions are held at different locations within the parish; women's groups begin to meet; Sunday worship, still conducted within the framework of traditional liturgies, is marked by vigorous singing of recently-composed songs, set to what have recently become the new standard melodies; increased attention is given to moral standards within the congregation; efforts are made to collect funds for the erection of a permanent church building, or a new parsonage. In general, emphasis is placed on heightened activity, along traditional lines, though with a high degree of lay leadership and participation.

Finally, one might conceivably speak of a sixth stream, distinguished from the fifth, primarily by degree; the level of activity is lower, the clerical onus for instigation and leadership is far more pronounced, the mistrust of anything smacking of innovation is far stronger, and the corresponding tendency to assert adherence to the norms of "traditional Lutheranism" is much more in evidence. Yet there is newness, also here, newness in the struggle to define what does and does not correspond to the perceived tradition, and newness in the attempt by the congregation as a whole to achieve a measure of renewed interest and

communion. Confirmation and first communion have been so associated with the Lutheran tradition.

involvement within the constraints of that tradition. Interestingly, it is also within this stream that one encounters new desires to reconcile Christian faith with officially-condemned aspects of traditional Enga culture, chief among these being participation in the activities associated with *tee* (the Enga *moka*), or exchange ceremony, on the one hand, and *kumanda* on the other.

So much for description, and now, on to analysis. Many of you will already have noted that of my six so-called streams of activity, only a few – clearly the third, perhaps, the first, and, by stretching definitions, also the second and fourth – correspond with what the literature has come to identify as new religious movements within Melanesia. A cursory scanning of titles of the articles and papers, which touch on such movements, quickly reveals an almost exclusive focus on two types of activity: either that which explicitly identifies itself with the operations of the Holy Spirit, or that which is overtly syncretistic, drawing heavily on the ideas and constructs of traditional Melanesian religions, at the expense of the Christian content of the faith. I may as well unburden myself immediately, then, with the assertion that, to this point, the definition of what constitutes a new religious movement has been too narrow. Sir Isaac Newton put into words for the world that the world, so I suspect, had instinctively known from the beginning: that for every action there is an equal and opposite reaction. Both action and reaction are movements. Both actor and reactor are re-shaped and re-moved with reference to the former *status quo*. New religious movements breed, by way of response, new religious movements. To observe that the latter are less noticeable than the former, owing to their reactionary tendency to sharpen the norms, re-assert values, and operate within the structures of the challenged *status quo*, is to say nothing of their quality as *new* events. It is on these grounds that I claim to find Lutherans of the Enga Province engaged with at least six new religious movements, freely admitting that I arrive at that number through several acts of arbitrary definition. Another observer, using another measuring stick, could well find more – though not, I think, fewer.

Six religious movements, each in competition to varying degrees with the others, each seeking to define itself over against the others, each reacting to the others' acting and prompting the others to react in turn to it. Back we go to Newton's realm for another analogy: bodies acting and

reacting vigorously to each other give off energy in the form of heat and light. When the interacting bodies are bodies of people; and when the interacting attains a certain pitch, and the sparks generated achieve a certain level of intensity: then the results are confusion and pain. Of confusion and pain there is now an excessive measure in the circles of Enga Lutheranism. To this, the stories I related earlier bear eloquent witness, and it was primarily for the sake of bearing that witness that I related them. If the theologian's chief task is first to plumb, and then to make accessible, the depths of God's Good News in Christ; and if that good news is addressed, in the first place, to those enmeshed in the toils of confusion and pain, "harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd" (Matt 9:36) – and I here join countless theologians before me asserting the axiomatic nature of both of these propositions – then it is precisely at this point that our urgent engagement, as theologians, with the reality of today's religious movements must have its beginning.

A careful observer of the Enga Lutheran confusion will quickly notice several things. Firstly, with the exception of one highly significant affirmation, to which I will have cause to return later, there is virtually nothing which might be deemed a verity. Name the idea or the practice, and someone can be found who will take issue with it.

Secondly, one is struck by the speed with which people pass judgment on the unfamiliar, by the superficiality of comment on it, and by an apparent inability to identify and evaluate principles, as opposed to their manifestations.

Thirdly, one detects at all levels, from little old *lapun mama*, all the way up to the ranks of episcopal leadership, a tendency to rely heavily on instinctual and emotive grounds, when reacting to the religiously different, to the near exclusion of the intellect.¹⁴ There follows from this,

¹⁴ In this regard, I recall a recent visit to Timothy Seminary of a contingent of staff and students from Lutheran Highlands Seminary, Mt Hagen, during which the present topic was discussed. In preparation for this meeting, students and teachers at Timothy Seminary prepared a list of practices associated with new movements in the Enga Province, and organised this, according to the categories of good, indifferent, and unacceptable. The most striking feature of the finished product was the absence of any reference to, let alone

a corresponding inability to articulate the grounds upon which discrimination is based.

Fourthly, debate over religious matters is frequently, if not usually, intertwined with conflicts, whose roots are buried elsewhere. In such situations, the usual inability to address the religious conflict with clarity affords ample opportunity to make of it a smokescreen, with which to conceal otherwise unjustifiable agendas in a haze of righteous outrage. In turn, efforts to achieve mutual understanding in the religious matter are impeded by the felt need of both parties to triumph over the opponent in the objectively-unrelated conflict, which lies as close, if not closer, to the heart of their difficulty with each other than does the religious problem; one dare not permit a useful smokescreen to be blown away. Worst of all, this intertwining of motives and aims is so taken for granted that any attempt to seriously address a religiously-based conflict, must first conquer a mountain of suspicion and cynicism, which presumes that fine words always, and necessarily, conceal a dubious agenda.¹⁵

Fifthly, one is impressed by the amount of actual harm done by erroneous theological assumptions, by the ease with which such false assumptions are accepted, and by the extent to which they are allowed to remain substantively unchallenged. (I recall again my amazement that a vibrant young man should be not only permitted, but instructed, to spend a night in the same room with the young lady of the house, and that the resulting triumph of flesh over spirit should then provoke surprise, let alone consternation.)

Sixthly, as in the case of the people, who sought endorsement for the clapping of hands, one senses a widespread yearning for repeated assurance that “we are right in doing what we are doing”.

discussion of, the criteria, upon which the various items on the list had been assigned to one or the other of the categories.

¹⁵ Those schooled in the ways of Luther’s Small Catechism will recognise this as a violation of the eighth commandment, which requires us to “put the best construction on everything”. By no means unique to the present situation in the Enga Province, this malady, nonetheless, seems to be more openly pronounced there than in other places and cultures of my experience.

Seventhly, one struggles frequently to suppress either a smile or a grimace over the credulity with which outrageous statements are received and inquired about: the anxiety over 666; whether it is true that the Spirit alone is carrying on divine operations, while Father and Son enjoy a well-deserved rest; whether my uncle's cousin's assertion of apostolic authority has any validity to it; whether a divorce will, in fact, be beyond the reach of God's evaluative comment, provided one has the good sense not to get married in church; etc., etc.

Eighthly, one is quickly dismayed by the readiness of opponents in debate to stake out hard-and-fast positions, with respect to each other, and by the rapidity with which communication breaks down, efforts at understanding cease, and disagreement degenerates into unyielding opposition.

Finally, one hears, on all sides, a demand for conformity, particularly in matters of practice, and a corresponding denigration of those whose habits, in matters religious, are other than mine. Linger in the neighbourhood of all such loud talk is a palpable sense of unease, and the unmistakable scent of fear.

At what point does the pained onlooker approach this mess with a helpful word or two? One tack might be to identify and extract the common assumptions shared by all, and to pursue conciliation and amity, the basis of these. Such assumptions are indeed to be found, and in abundance. For example: *Mipela mas i stap stret long ai bilong God* – it is necessary that we be righteous in the sight of God; *Mipela i mas bihainim stretpela pasin* – righteous behaviour is required of us; *God i no save lusim sampela rong* – certain behaviours place one beyond the pale of God's forgiveness. Very quickly, one perceives, in all quarters of the church, a deep concern over the nature of God's verdict on human beings, generally, and on the individual, in particular; a conviction that such verdict is related closely to the quality of human behaviour, and that human behaviour can influence the divine verdict; that present experience can afford an indication of the state of God's relation to, and opinion of, the individual; that the principle of due reciprocity, which is of such utter significance in one's relationships with other human beings, is, likewise, of utter significance in one's relationship with God. Taking these, then, as

but one of several families of assumptions, on which one could find broad and general agreement: what does one now do with them? Each assumption serves only to prompt new questions: if God's opinion of me is of crucial importance, what is that opinion? If my behaviour is of significance in shaping that opinion, which behaviours will produce the desired conclusion? If experience provides an indicator to the present state of God's verdict on me, how is that experience to be interpreted?

Deafened by the shouted babble of irreconcilable answers, which are the fruits of his labours thus far, the observer does well to set aside his chagrin, and to focus on the one happy result of the noise: each of the several streams has now been driven by the process of answering the common questions, to identify the authorities upon which its unique answers are based. And, suddenly, one finds oneself gazing on the roots of the chaos. . . . For what is cited as an authority by one is rejected as an authority by others; and what is claimed as authoritative by all quickly reveals an inherent inability to function on its own, in a sufficiently authoritative fashion.

So it is, for example, that scripture-quoting is as popular in the Enga Province as it is anywhere else in Christendom, with one and all citing, as the supreme authority for their words and deeds, the Holy Bible. But, in the complete absence of clear and clearly-shared hermeneutical principles, the throwing back and forth of Bible passages, in a debate on the merits of baptism by immersion, becomes an exercise in utter futility. Again, many will seek their authoritative refuge in the creeds, the catechism, or *Tok Bilip Bilong Yumi*; the PNG Lutheran statement of faith. The immediate response is to wave a New Testament in the air, while denigrating "doctrine-based faith", as opposed to "Spirit-based faith", an impressive-sounding distinction, which leaves the opponent speechless.

A favourite authority, of course, is the Holy Spirit, whose activity is said to be responsible for the varieties of charismatic experience. But sceptics about in the wings, ready to observe loudly that, even if the genuineness of the claimed experience was not open to question – which it is – everyone knows full well that unholy spirits are in plentiful supply within the cosmos, and that there is no guarantee that the claimed experience, even if genuine, does not proceed from one of these. Dreams

and visions, another frequently-cited authority, are fair game for aspersions cast on similar lines. So, try experience in general, depended on by many for signs of God's gracious favour, and for authentication of positions taken over against other. Sad to say, it takes little imagination to point out that He makes the sun to shine, and the rain to fall, on the unjust as well as on the just, and, in the end, the righteous join the unrighteous in the sleep of death. Equally hapless are attempts to point to the sanctity of one's behaviour – or the behaviour of one's group – as sufficient reason to presume that one is on the right track. The fate of the Pharisees is too well known; and in any event, there is no way, in the end, to settle the debate over God's opinion on *kumanda*, or the chewing of betel nut.

On to human authorities: missionaries are still looked to for the last word in wisdom, particularly those missionaries with a history in the place; but only by some, and then only when it can be assumed that the missionary will confirm my preconceptions. But let him once attack those preconceptions, and reference is speedily made to 1975, and the meaning of independence.¹⁶ National church leaders are even less reliable, for all that they've been duly elected and elevated, and for all the high regard that people are wont to show to officialdom. Enga leaders lead, after all, by consensus. Let one try to swim against the tide of widespread opinion, and the clay feet of his not-so-secret bad habits will be pointed out for one and all to mutter over: as everyone knows, nothing beats the good old *argumentum ad hominem* (argument based on personal characteristics).

And so it goes, leaving one and all to wonder, in the end, where to turn to next. So it is that we, the onlookers, now stand at the crux of the problem in Enga Lutheranism. The authorities are failing. That which is necessary to maintain common presuppositions; to ensure a common understanding of Christian language; to identify and censure foolishness; to adjudicate controversies; to provide trustworthy direction; to assure the

¹⁶ Dr Willard Burce, of Martin Luther Seminary, Lae, enjoys a near-legendary reputation in certain areas of the province, where he began working as an evangelist missionary in 1948. In 1982, he was requested to make a tour of congregations, which had been touched by a growing wave of charismatic activity, many of them in the area where he had originally worked, to address the subject of charismatic renewal. It was instructive to observe how even he, for all the authority he carries, was subjected to constant challenge during his tour.

fretful and calm unspoken fears; to command a common allegiance; and to function as that focus of obedience around which all can unite; to be that sufficient authority from which all other authorities derive their integrity: this is missions – or better, this is being missed, among Enga Lutherans.

What follows, as an inevitable result, is this: whenever somebody, whether an individual or a group, suggests an idea, or recommends a practice previously unknown, the resulting need to evaluate it drives one immediately to one's authorities. If it should happen that those authorities recommend the new suggestion, well and good, at least for one's relations with the original proposer. Should it happen, on the other hand, that one's authorities frown on the new notion, and if the proposer of the notion, having already committed himself to it, chooses to take issue with the authorities cited, recommending, instead, authorities of his own, then confusion necessarily ensues. One's options are now limited, either to remaining confused or to withdrawing behind one's own inadequate authorities, and starting a shouting match. In either event, the body of Christ is not edified. Neither is one freed, for all one's bluster, from the pains of doubt and fear that the other might, in the end, be right.¹⁷

Comes the rub – and I speak now no longer as an uncommitted onlooker, but as a participating interpreter of the Word, attempting to make my own voice heard above the babble: that doubt and fear, which lingers on after the noise dies away, is the first unmistakable sign that all is, in fact, not right with God. Thus, the man and the woman quaked when God walked in the garden in the cool of the evening. Insufficient authorities reveal fully their insufficiency precisely at this point, that they cannot assure one, *beyond question*, of the forgiveness of sins. By thus leaving the door open, however slightly, to doubt and uncertainty with regard to God's gracious intentions, they render it impossible to "love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, strength, and mind"; and they thereby provoke that defensive posture, from which one is unable to "love your neighbour as yourself". Thus, they leave the confused and terrified

¹⁷ Reflected in the all-too-frequent parting shot of Enga religious debate: "We'll see who's right on the Last Day".

conscience justly terrified, and the self-righteous prig justly condemned for his self-righteousness.

And so the crisis of authority in Enga Lutheranism is, indeed, a crisis worthy of the name, not only because it renders chaotic relations between persons and groups within the church, but, above all, because it reintroduces chaos into the relations between all involved and the very God whom all claim to profess, and whose will they seek to discern and obey. That large numbers of those involved do not recognise the chaos at this utterly significant point – and I speak here not of the consciously-doubtful and seeking, but of those hunkered behind the barricades of their arbitrary authorities – is no argument against its presence. The Word given the theologian to explicate is prophetic, as well as apostolic. It is a Word about a God who reveals His wrath before He shows His grace, a God who refuses, with adamancy, to be had by human beings on any terms other than those which He, in His mercy, has chosen to set forth. His insistence is that He be looked to, and depended on, because of who He is, not because of what anybody or anything else might happen to be – whether bishop or missionary, experience or intuition, presumed Spirit or righteous behaviour. In a situation, such as that which pertains to the Gutnius Lutheran church, the theologian's first task is to make this obvious: to break down the barricades of the insufficient authorities, and to drive those behind them into the horror of no-man's land, where there are no safe and handy rules, no false assurances, behind which to cower; where all can be rendered equally dazed and uncertain, and all can be driven to ask again the agonised question of the Philippian jailer: "What must I do to be saved?"

And what then? Then, let it be that all are reminded of that sole verity, alluded to earlier, which all have always held in common amid and, despite their bloodiness, over against each other: namely the definitive Christian confession that Jesus is Lord. That this should have been missed, as indeed it has been, in the quest for sufficient authorities, speaks loudly of the extent to which that confession has yet to be understood by those who profess it. It does not say anything, on the other hand, of the tenacity and conviction with which the confession is made. But, it is at just this point of blind and thoughtless faith that the theologian's chief and proper work begins: which is, in the first place, to

lay bare the content of the confession of Christ's Lordship, in order that it might be explored and seen for what it truly is; and in the second place, to point its implications in the direction of the specific questions being asked, and the concerns being raised.¹⁸

As to the content of the confession, the following aspects of it require urgent clarification within the present context of Enga Lutheranism.

Firstly, that "Jesus is Lord" is an epistemological statement (i.e., a statement about the way we know things). Jesus, Son of Mary, is none other than the Lord Christ, Son of God. Omega, whom we hope to behold, is also Alpha, the point at which our beholding begins. Less cryptically: the *one sure and unmistakable revelation* by God of His good and gracious will toward us is the historical career of Jesus of Nazareth. What was said, and happened there, in Palestine takes precedence over all else in determining what God now thinks of us. All other epistemological authorities are authoritative only because of, or to the extent of, their relation to Him. "In many and various ways God spoke to our fathers through the prophets; but now in these last days He has spoken to us through His Son". And again: "The Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we have beheld His glory, full of grace and truth".

In the second place: the confession "Jesus is Lord" is a soteriological statement. Jesus is Lord because He is Saviour. It is because of His exclusive possession of salvific power that we look to Him. He alone has earned, through His thoroughly innocent death, "the authority on earth to forgive sins". All other salvific authorities, e.g., word, sacraments, and church, are, in fact, salvific only by virtue of their relation to Him. He alone is the certain demonstration and authentication of God's love for us.

In the third place: the confession "Jesus is Lord" is an eschatological statement. It is He, and no other, who awaits us at the close of the ages, and it is His Holy Spirit who now seeks to lead us there.

¹⁸ Cf. Hermann Sasse, *We Confess Jesus Christ*, St Louis MO: Concordia Publishing House, 1984, p. 9.

He is the one who will separate the sheep from the goats, and it is on the basis of His existing relationship to us that such separation will take place. He who has triumphed over sin, death, and the devil for our sakes, and who now claims us as His own, will “neither leave nor forsake us” until that triumph is complete, and we “behold Him face to face”. He is our Lord, because He is our Righteousness, the sole sufficient ground upon which we can hope to stand with utter confidence before the unveiled glory of God.

So much for a brief review of the content of the confession. Without presuming to be exhaustive, allow me, again briefly, to sketch the implications, which the confession has, for some of the pressing and practical questions being asked in the Gutnius Lutheran church.

Firstly, with respect to matters epistemological:

The authority of holy scripture derives from the unique prophetic, and apostolic, witness it bears to Christ, who, in His person, is the authoritative revelation of God. “Search the scriptures, for these are they which testify of Him”. Scripture, therefore, is always to be read with reference to its Christological centre. Mere bandying of Bible passages, without such reference, is blather, and not to be trusted.

Creeds and confessions have their proper role, having grown out of the church’s historical efforts to identify clearly that Christological heart of holy scripture. Faith, which shuns doctrine in favour of ephemeral “spirit”, is ungrounded and utterly foolish.

The authority of the Holy Spirit is the authority of Christ, whose Spirit this is. It is to the authoritative Forgiver of Sins that the Spirit leads. Promptings in directions other than Christ proceed from spirits other than His, for, apart from Christ, no one can hope to stand in the presence of the Father. God is Trinity, not tri-deity.

If popes and councils can err,¹⁹ so can bishops and missionaries. What is to be trusted about them is not their persons, but their words about

¹⁹ Luther’s famous statement at the Diet of Worms in 1521, made in connection with his own quest for the Sufficient Authority.

the Word enfleshed. If such words are lacking, then shun or replace them. If those words are there, then lend them your ears.

“Jews demand signs, and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified”; and again, “A wicked and adulterous generation asks for a miraculous sign! But none will be given it except the sign of the prophet Jonah.” Demands for experienced evidences of God’s power and favour are, at root, unfaithful. The sign already given in Christ cannot be surpassed. Neither can it be negated. *Satis est*. So let it suffice.

Leaving behind a pile of unfinished business, we move on to the consideration of some matters soteriological (i.e., to do with salvation):

“God was in Christ, reconciling the world to Himself.” What makes for hope and salvation is not our actions toward God, to which He must respond, but rather His action toward us in Christ, which calls forth a response from us.

That called-for response is nothing other than faith, which is to say, confidence that what God so wildly and impossibly says of us in Christ is, in fact, true. Moreover, in the matter of seeing before us the visage of a gracious, as opposed to a wrathful, God, faith is or it isn’t. There are no quantitative or qualitative measures that must first be met. For “while we were still sinners, Christ died for us”.

To continue without reference to what God has already done in Christ, in attempts to curry His grace and favour, and demonstrate our own merited worthiness before Him, is blasphemy.

On the other hand, good trees bear good fruit, bad trees bear bad fruit, and it is “by their fruits that you will know them”. Confidence in the graciousness of God has immediate and practical consequences. Where there are no consequences; there is clearly no confidence.

God’s choice of incarnation, as the mode for the performance of His greatest work, suggests that the ordinary and the day-to-day, as opposed to the extraordinary and the out-of-this-world, is likely to be the preferred realm of His continued salvific activity among us. Water, bread,

and wine, and the droning voices of clay-footed preachers, are more deserving of confidence than the resplendent flashiness of the wonder-workers – especially since the promises of Christ are clearly attached to the former.

“For freedom Christ has set you free. Do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery.” By the same token, do not burden others with demands that they conform in every jot and tittle of practice with you. Liberated life in the Spirit of Christ is life freed from an unrelenting pressure to conform, for comfort’s sake, to human demands. It does entail conformity to the Christ, who alone is our Comfort, in our obedience to His rule of love and service. But such conformity is gracious and bestowed fruit, not relentless pre-condition.

On, again, too quickly, to matters eschatological (i.e., to do with the last things):

“Fear not, little flock; it is the Father’s good pleasure to give you the Kingdom.” Again, “if anyone is in Christ he *is* a new creation. The old has passed away, the new *has* come.” He, on whom Christ has laid His claim, may hold his head high with the impunity of unquestionable authority. Fear mongers are to be laughed at.

Baptism is the first specific promise, and holy communion the “foretaste” of the feast to come. He who has once met us, and made us His own, is thus ever with us, to the close of the age.

The Revelation of John is read in the light of the Gospel of John, not the other way around. Beast or Antichrist, it matters not. For “He has subjected all things to Himself”. “The Lamb, who was slain, has begun His reign”, which is a reign without ending. Alleluia.

The future’s certain promise is the gift, in the present, of the Spirit, whose chief gift to us all is faith in the Christ, through whom we can call God “Abba”, and heaven our home (Gal 4:6, 1 Pet 1:4). Beyond this, the Spirit’s gifts are manifold, bestowed on each, not for the arousal of rivalry and jealousy, but for the common good (1 Cor 12:7). The common good is this that the Body is built up *in Christ*. That which so strengthens and

confirms the Body is of the Spirit, and a reliable sign of the things to come. That which works against the Body is instinctively to be shunned.

But enough for now. My purpose in all this, has been to suggest that when Christian religious movements collide, the focus of the theological task is the addressing of the confusion and pain which results; that a likely well-spring of confusion and pain in such circumstances is a reliance by the several parties involved on inadequate authorities; that in his calling, as a spokesman of Almighty God, the theologian's first duty is to further the confusion by calling the authorities into question, especially insofar as those authorities provoke the wrath of God by obscuring the gospel of Christ; that it is, then, that same gospel as the sole sufficient authority to which the theologian must point; and that, in this pointing, his responsibility is to elucidate the significance of that gospel for the specific questions being asked in the struggle at hand. More than that, the theologian cannot do. The Law, having been preached, and the gospel announced, the ball passes into the court of that Spirit who blows where He wills, raising harvests of His own size, and choosing, in the hearts of men and women, whose internal appropriation, interpretation, and application of that Word of Christ is their own proper task in the theological realm.

By way of postscript, a confession: even as I pen these last lines, it all sounds a trifle shop-worn, almost trite, no doubt because none of it is particularly fresh and new after several years of teaching and preaching on just these themes. Familiarity does breed contempt. Breath-taking caverns of meaning, to which words like "sin", "forgiveness", "gospel", and "faith" are but the entering doors, are ever more easily passed by and ignored, for the simple reason that the doors themselves have taken on a tawdry and weather-beaten appearance. I hear the word "gospel", and it – the word itself – no longer invites me. It leaps from the mouth too glibly, and strikes the ear with too tired a ring. The temptation is to seek intellectual adventure, and emotional satisfaction, elsewhere.

Having so identified the log in my own eye, it were better, perhaps, that I refrain from asking the question, whether anyone else here present is also weary of old words, and on the verge of yawning over what has seemed to be little more than a re-hashing of a received tradition, and a

Western tradition at that. I ask anyway. For it strikes me that, at this time of high enthusiasm for the cause of a uniquely Melanesian theology, the matter needs to be raised among us – and spoken to more clearly than it has been thus far – what the relationship, if any, is, and ought to be, between theological endeavour in today’s Melanesia, and the tradition of theological endeavour in other places, and at other times within which each of us stands. More specifically: in the turn toward a Melanesian theology, from what do we turn away? Is the immediate answer here, as I would expect it to be, “Western theology”, then the next question is, to what does that wretchedly nebulous expression refer? If it is theology of the West, or theology from the West – or both? Is it Catholic, Lutheran, Reformed, or Pentecostal, of the 13th, 16th, 19th, or 20th centuries, or some or all of the above? Does “Western theology”, in the pejorative sense of that which is inapplicable to Melanesians, denote only that theological talk, which is ridden with the cultural conceits and idiosyncrasies of the West? Or does it embrace also the apostolic *regula fidei* of 1 Cor 15:1ff, which Western missionaries brought to these shores – the *Krais Wanpela Tasol*, to which Western theologians, at their best, have powerfully attested, and, at their worst, have hideously obscured?

But the crucial nature of this distinction is, I trust, apparent. Equally apparent, should be the crucial importance of making that distinction constantly, and with great care. For if our weariness with old words should tempt us to turn away not only from that which is truly peculiar to the West, but also from that, which God in Christ addresses to all people and cultures of all times (and which, by the way, continues to be as foreign in origin, and culturally offensive to the West, as it is to Melanesia); and if our otherwise laudable concern for distinctly Melanesian words should lead us to pursue the novel idea, the fresh formulation, the culturally-apt approach, and this for its own sake, without first and final reference to the Lord Christ, whose authority as Alpha and Omega encompasses also our endeavours as theologians in this place, then we will have succumbed to the very ill which has been the focus of the foregoing discussion. We will have forsaken the sufficiently authoritative Word of Christ for inadequate words and authorities of our own choosing, and we will have laid ourselves open to the hellish consequences of so doing.

Not the least of these consequences, by the way, is that we will have failed utterly in the task we are about, which is to respond to the cry of Melanesians – of people, like the *lapun mamas*, the young mothers, the questioning teenagers, the bewildered elders, the floundering evangelists, who make up the Lutheran congregations of the Enga Province – who, in these uncertain and confusing times, are thirsting, above all, for a faith which is vital and secure. But such a faith is to be found only within the tradition of the Word of God Made Flesh, at the spring of *solus Christus*. As He Himself once put it to a woman by a well in Samaria, only there will the thirst of the thirsty be slaked for good.

And so the cure for our weariness with old words is not to be found in turning away from them. Quite the contrary. It is to be found by turning toward them, by grappling with, and passing through, them again to come face to face with Him, who, through those words, seeks still to root Himself also in us. “Come to Me all you who are weary – all you bored and jaundiced theologians, as well – and *I* will give you rest.” Come to think of it, I got it wrong several pages ago, when I said that the theologian’s first task is to lay open the gospel for others. Surely, his first and highest task is to grasp the gospel for himself. His fundamental calling is not to speak, but to shut his mouth, to step down for a moment from the ranks of the teachers, and to take his place among the hearers again. There let him shuck the garb of his objectivity, and stand naked once more before the Word of God, where he, too, can be savaged by wrath, and solaced by grace; where he can also be killed in his conceits, and resurrected in the Spirit of holy joy and delight. Let him take his first stand before the cross of Christ, there to be shown the cross, which is his to bear, and given the wherewithal to bear it gladly. For the sake of the Christ and His people, whom we would serve, God grant as much to each of us.

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