

The Emmaus Conference Lectures + 9-10 April 2010  
Parkland Lutheran Church, Tacoma, Washington

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A Reaction to Dr. A. Andrew Das's *Our First Resurrection*

✠ In Nomine Iesu ✠

The Rev. Dr. A. Andrew Das has given us a very substantive series of lectures speaking about our new life in Christ that began at baptism. In preparing my reaction, I found reading the “penultimate draft” versions of his lectures engrossing and thought-provoking. So, at the outset of my reaction, I would add my sincere thanks to him, and to the Emmaus Conference for inviting my participation. Thank-you!

Let me begin with a couple of preliminary remarks before focusing on some particulars by way of a formal reaction. First, as a teacher, I want to compliment Dr. Das for the manner in which he has framed and delivered his lectures. This has not been a dry, arcane talk, but a vigorous *vade mecum* along an intriguing route of inquiry looking at an important aspect of Christian faith and life. While today there is much pedagogical pooh-poohing of lecturing as an effective way of teaching, I think it important to recall what Aristotle says in his *Metaphysics* in this regard, namely, “The effect of a lecture depends upon the habits of the *listener*” (995a, emphasis added). For all who were listening, I am certain that Dr. Das's lectures were very effective! In this same regard, I think one of the hallmarks of a good lecturer is his ability to anticipate his hearer's questions and to answer them. Dr. Das consistently answered the questions raised in my mind as I read, and I again compliment him. (Now, does that mean I don't have any questions for him? That wouldn't be any fun!)

That leads me to make my second preliminary remark. In his book *Approaches to Paul*, Magnus Zetterholm notes the challenge of scholarly work in biblical studies, namely, that “most scholars are reduced to relying on other scholars when it comes to matters lying outside their own special field” (Zetterholm, 2009, 101). In the field of New Testament biblical studies, scholarly work means one must be competent certainly in the biblical and historical languages—Greek, Hebrew, Latin, and probably also Aramaic. But important scholarship also means being familiar with the Greco-Roman world, its religion, culture, and social history. The Jewish side of the equation cannot be a null, either. Second Temple Judaism and the developments that took place “between the testaments,” Jewish mystic writing, and Rabbinism all need to contribute to the scholar’s work. Finally, the scholar needs to be able to work in text critical ways, and underneath all of this, he must bring to the table solid theological credentials and training.

Now, I sense that in Dr. Das we have a scholar whose constellation of competencies includes most, if not all these areas, so that we are being treated to “the real deal,” if you will, but I know that in myself you have someone who is dependent (à la Zetterholm’s observation) on the work of others in most, if not all of these areas. My own field of study is historical theology with a focus on Martin Luther. Academically speaking, I graze in different pastures than Dr. Das. However, being in a small college, in a small theology department, I do get to teach in the area of biblical studies, including Paul’s Letter to the Romans. So I offer here my reaction and observations more as an interested teacher of the Word, and not as an expert in the field of New Testament biblical studies. (I hope that doesn’t make me the “unreal deal.”)

Dr. Das begins his lectures on “Our First Resurrection” by doing what good, “first act of the mind” logic requires by examining first the key term “first resurrection” proposed by the Conference’s program committee. I have to confess that as I began reading his discussion of the amillennial view of Revelation 20:4-6 I *thought* I knew what a responsible exegesis of the passage

was. Perhaps I was just channeling Dr. Siegbert Becker, whom I had as my teacher in seminary, because I thought that his understanding of the *first* resurrection in Revelation 20 as new, spiritual life was a solid exegesis of the matter. Certainly, as Dr. Das led us to see by the time we got to the conclusion of the series, the new life we enjoy in Christ by repentance and faith, is a radical life from death, rightly considered our “first resurrection,” but in a qualified use of those words. Dr. Das insists that we arrive at that understanding with exegetical integrity. He demonstrated conclusively that *ajnastavsi*~ in its various New Testament occurrences always refers to the resurrection of the body. Thus, his first lecture led us to make an immediate course correction from the anticipated route and to explore just where the functional equivalent of John’s phrase “the first resurrection” is used in the New Testament in the sense of our new life in Christ by baptism.

I mention all of this to underscore a primary reaction I want to make to the lectures as a whole. Dr. Das exhorted us at the outset that we “come to see the importance of reading individual books of the Bible on their own terms and within their own immediate contexts as ancient documents from a different culture” (Lecture I, 1). This is an affirmation of historical-grammatical methodology that has long been the hallmark of good Lutheran exegesis. The reader of Scripture should be concerned with the intent of the author and seek to understand the historical and grammatical context and issues surrounding a given text. What was the life context of the writer? How would the first readers have understood his words? What was the writer trying to communicate? Lutherans hold that a particular biblical book is its own first interpreter. How does a passage fit into its paragraph or chapter? What is its relationship to the rest of the book? Since Scripture is a unity, how does a particular text stand in relation to the rest of Scripture? Moreover, Lutheran exegesis, following Luther, recognizes and treasures the christocentricity of Scripture: *Was Christum treibet*. The Bible is interpreted in the light of Christ and the central message of salvation through him as St. Paul affirms in 2 Corinthians 1:20, “For no matter how many promises God has made, they are “Yes” in Christ.”

Plainly, Dr. Das practices what he preaches in regard to exegesis and has presented “the real deal” to us.

But let me turn now from an overall perspective to a particular issue and reaction. The third lecture led us in a consideration of “Resurrection Power in Romans 5-8.” Dr. Das argues that the trajectory of Paul’s discussion of the life of sanctification that follows the apostle’s great justification chapters emphasizes the victorious new life that is a harbinger of the fullness of the life to come in heaven. This trajectory is unmistakable, particularly in chapter 8 where Paul declares climactically, “We are more than conquerors through him who loved us” (8:37). But Paul’s route to that climax, as Dr. Das notes, is through the troubled waters of chapter 7. To quote the lecture at that point: “Does Romans 7 contradict the sense of empowerment that we saw not only in Galatians but also elsewhere in Romans 5-8? If we really are living in victory, what do we do with Romans 7:7-25?” (Lecture III, 3). Dr. Das also notes that “Lutherans have always followed Martin Luther in seeing in this paragraph a reference to Christian existence, and maybe that is the case. *Although nothing in our doctrine depends on any particular reading of Romans 7*, I would nevertheless like to challenge the traditional way we Lutherans have looked at these verses...” (Lecture III, 3, emphasis added).

Now, I need to admit my bias as this point: In teaching Romans 7 myself, I have always taught that “traditional” understanding of the “I” in Romans 7, viz., Paul is speaking personally, and after 7:14, he is speaking of his current life as a Christian. Reading Dr. Das’s argument for the identity of the “I” the first few times, I was extremely skeptical, even resistant, and worked through what he said over and over. The questions I raised, he consistently answered so that now, like Agrippa to Paul (Acts 26), I find myself saying in response, “Almost thou persuadest me...” I am especially intrigued by the compelling information Dr. Das gives in support of his view in his discussion of Paul’s use of the “movie line” from Medea and his use of *προσοποποιεία*. Context is critical in

understanding a text, and I have no counter argument or disconfirming evidence to offer to Dr. Das's construction of the context for Paul's words.

However, part of my lingering hesitance with the argument is vested in Dr. Das's assertion that "nothing in our doctrine depends on any particular reading of Romans 7." In terms of the whole counsel of God, I think he is probably right. The fact that Christians continue to struggle against the Old Adam that remains after baptism is a truth that is taught all through Scripture. But we should note what an exegetical hole is made in the Lutheran Confessions if Dr. Das is right in his exegesis. The Kolb-Wengert edition of *The Book of Concord* indexes the number of citations of Romans 7:5-25 under thirty-four references. Verse 23, "but I see another law at work in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within my members," is the single most-quoted verse being cited either alone or in combination with other verses from the chapter some fourteen times. The Romans 7 references range throughout the Apology, the Large Catechism, the Smalcald Articles, and (especially) the Formula of Concord—both the Epitome and Solid Declaration in connection with the Confessions' discussion of Original sin, Law and Gospel, Election, the Third Use of the Law, Good Works, the Sacrament of the Altar, Free Will, and Justification. While the various confessional articles often quote Romans 7 in support of their various points in tandem with other passages from other books of Scripture, so that the point at issue is not reliant on Romans 7 alone, several important articles rely solely on Romans 7 to make their point. Consistent in every citation, of course, is the understanding that Paul is the "I" of Romans 7, and that, from 7:14 forward ("We know that the law is spiritual; but I am unspiritual, sold as a slave to sin") Paul is speaking of himself as a Christian, *simul iustus et peccator*.

What is my point? It is not that we should defend the exegetical position of the Confessions about Romans 7 at all costs or against new, compelling, responsibly obtained information that alters our understanding of particular passages of Scripture. My point, rather, is that Dr. Das's exegesis is a

“bigger deal” than it may first appear and that it deserves a wider hearing and more careful scrutiny by good Lutheran exegetes and dogmatians before one “signs on.” Perhaps I am only displaying my own scholarly inadequacies as I say so, but I have to affirm, “Almost thou persuadest me.” I’m not there yet.

With my remaining time, let me turn briefly to Dr. Das’s larger point of the need for Lutheran preaching, teaching, and pew-sitting to apprehend from Scripture in general, and Paul and John in particular, a more robust living of our victory in Christ. Here I think he has identified correctly and importantly an over-emphasis in confessional Lutheran teaching and preaching on forensic justification—*Christus pro me*—that, while rightly near and dear to the heart of every subscriber to the Formula of Concord, nonetheless has come to overshadow the tandem message of *Christus in me*, the dynamism of which Luther’s own formulations of justification speak so fervently. In this regard, I think especially of Luther’s Preface to Romans. Luther penned this Preface first in 1522 for the publication of the *September Testament*, but it was itself a reflected of his 1515-16 lectures on Romans, as well as Melancthon’s *Loci Communes* and *Annotations on Romans* which Luther had instigated. I think Luther’s words are apropos for underscoring Dr. Das’s observations, that they corroborate much of what he said, and can serve to cap my comments. Luther writes:

Because the flesh is not yet slain, we are still sinners. But because we believe in Christ and have a beginning of the Spirit, God is so favorable and gracious to us that he will not count the sin against us or judge us because of it. Rather he deals with us according to our faith in Christ, until sin is slain.

Faith is not the human notion and dream that some people call faith. When they see that no improvement of life and no good works follow—although they can hear and say much about faith—they fall into the error of saying, “Faith is not enough; one must do works in order to be righteous and be saved.” This is due to the fact that when they hear the gospel, they get busy and by their own powers create an idea in their heart which says, “I believe”; they take this then to be a true faith. But, as it is a human figment and idea that never reaches the depths of the heart, nothing comes of it either, and no improvement follows.

Faith, however, is a divine work in us which changes us and makes us to be born anew of God, John 1[:12–13]. It kills the old Adam and makes us altogether different men, in heart and spirit and mind and powers; and it brings with it the Holy Spirit. O it is

a living, busy, active, mighty thing, this faith. It is impossible for it not to be doing good works incessantly. It does not ask whether good works are to be done, but before the question is asked, it has already done them, and is constantly doing them. Whoever does not do such works, however, is an unbeliever. He gropes and looks around for faith and good works, but knows neither what faith is nor what good works are. Yet he talks and talks, with many words, about faith and good works. (LW 35, Preface to Romans 1522, Revised 1546, 370).

And lest I be guilty of talking and talking with too many words, let me close my response here by repeating my thanks to Dr. Das for his stimulating lectures, to the Conference for inviting me, and for your kind attention.

Respectfully,

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Reference: Zetterholm, Magnus. *Approaches to Paul: a Student's Guide to Recent Scholarship*. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2009.