

Reshelving: Frustrating congregations

by [Martin E. Marty](#) in the [March 6, 2007](#) issue

This winter I had occasion to caress every one of my thousands of books, kiss thousands of them good-bye as I downsized my library, and decide which to save and which to give away. Reflection at such times can turn sentimental, as finding a long-buried book can let loose a flood of memories.

I picked up *Der Brief des Paulus an die Philipper Ausgelegt für die Gemeinde*, Paul's letter to the Philippians expounded "for the congregation" by a great Swiss neo-orthodox pastor and theologian, Eduard Thurneysen. I found that I had interspersed tissue-thin pages of the Greek text for ready reference. Although I keep up a bit on Greek and passably read German, I confess that the book was not on my desktop or nightstand.

Here's the memory: between 1954 and 1956, while pursuing a doctorate at the University of Chicago, I was assigned guest preaching roles. I have rich memories of interims spent in the pulpits of what we then called "blue-collar white" or "Negro" congregations, congregations that taught me much.

One Saturday I received a call asking if I was available for six weeks of preaching. Of course. I loved to preach and the \$35 a week would put food on the table for the (then) two Martys. My caller explained: "It's in a changing neighborhood, and the white members are moving to the suburbs while Negroes are moving in." The ecclesiastical jurisdiction was taking over the property and calling a pastor who would gather together an African-American congregation.

Did I want to encourage that segregation? I told my caller: "I'll do it if you let me preach all six weeks on the prophets. I'd like to see if we could help the people change their minds." At the end of my stay, the congregation would take a new vote. The caller agreed, then added, "And you do preach in German, don't you?" Apparently everyone in the congregation spoke English but went to the German early service for sentimental reasons. "Do the liturgy in German, and preach in

English.” Figuring I had nothing to lose in making a fool of myself, I decided to memorize Thurneysen in six chunks.

Thurneysen was *Reformierte* and not *Lutherisch*, so his allusions were to Swiss Reformer Zwingli, not to Luther. I adjusted. I can still see from my underlinings, crossings-out and marginal notes that whenever he said, “*Unser Zwingli sagt*,” I’d read, “*Unser Luther sagt*.” Fortunately, none of the references were to issues on which Luther and Zwingli differed. I preached and the congregation voted. Before the six sermons: 83 voted to leave, two to stay. After my sermons: 85 voted to leave, three to stay.

Driving me home after the vote, the president of the congregation kept taking his eyes off the road as he turned to address me: “You know, Pastor, you thought it was the Germans who were holding this congregation together. You couldn’t have been more wrong. We’re *Austrian*.” There must have been no hard feelings, because two years later the resettled white congregation called me to be their pastor. I said no.

I could not reshelve Thurneysen without reading around a bit. Here, this time in English, is what Paul said to a congregation that sometimes frustrated him: “Finally, beloved, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.” Those were welcome words when Paul wrote them and in the mid-1950s, and they are today, because “*diese biblischen Menschen leben wahrhaftig nicht anders als wir*”—these biblical people truly lived no differently than we.