

a) “Unearthing Gospel Gold,” a Seminar, with a Nudge from Taiwan. b) Felde on the Lord’s Prayer.

Colleagues,

All that clinking of glasses on New Year’s Eve seems to have encouraged the runner Time to quicken the pace. As I write we’re scarcely a week away from the annual Crossings gathering at the Shrine of our Lady of the Snows, Belleville, Illinois, across the river from St. Louis. The first of these happened in 2007. In the years since, we’ve fallen into the pattern of hosting a full-blown conference in even-numbered years and a shorter seminar in the other ones. This year features the latter, an event running for two evenings and a day-and-a-half, from Sunday, January 25, 7 p.m., through noon on Tuesday the 28th. As at past seminars, conversation will focus squarely on an exploration of the methodology that shapes our work at Crossings, and of the theology that drives it.

A few days ago Cathy Lessmann, the person who manages the practicalities of our Crossings operation, sent a note around advising that there were still some slots open for this year’s seminar. “Act now,” she said. My purpose here is to punch that up with an exclamation point.

Those of you who read this by e-mail will be thoroughly familiar with the kind of work that the Crossings method generates. After all, the same e-mail service that delivers these Thursday Theology postings to your inbox also brings you weekly text studies, each of them laid out in the six-step pattern that the late Bob Bertram developed in conversation with his colleague,

Ed Schroeder. It builds on the prior work of Richard Caemmerer, the great teacher of homiletics who used the middle decades of the past century to shape a few generations of Missouri Synod preachers, some of whom would spill into the momentary Association of Evangelical Lutheran Churches, and after that into the ELCA. I sat in Caemmerer's classroom, as did my father before me. Not that we've discussed this much, but if we did, we'd surely recall the same unmistakable goal: to get us, as explicit "servants of Christ and stewards of God's mysteries" (1 Cor. 4:1), delivering nothing less or other than Christ and his benefits as God's essential gift to sinners.

So too with Bertram's refining of Caemmerer's ideas in the form of the Crossings method. Again the aim was—and is—to rivet attention on Christ-for-us, inviting hearts to grab hold of this as the Word of words from God to anchor a life on today. Bertram's key contribution was to sharpen the focus on the dynamic interplay between faith and works that God seeks constantly to address through the simultaneous operations (pl.) of his twofold Word, Law on the one hand, Gospel on the other, the former exposing the poisonous convictions that generate shabby behavior and leave one butting heads with God, the latter creating the confidence in God, rooted in Christ, that spills into thoughts, words, and deeds that cheer the Father's heart and bless the world. Yes, this sounds at first blush like a mess of theologian's gobbledygook, which brings us promptly to Bertram's—and Schroeder's—next great gift, a way to lay this out in a manner that folks who haven't sat through seminary classes can grasp, appreciate, and use in their own encounters with the Word, and in their daily entanglements with the confounding gift of life in God's world.

This, then, is the method that Crossings uses and touts, and the chief subject of the forthcoming seminar. If you haven't sat through one of these, I commend it to you as worth the price,

and then some, a veritable deal-of-deals that will make your best Black Friday door-buster look like some kind of sordid rip-off. Let me also underscore what the paragraph above suggests, that this is not for pastors only, though we certainly encourage pastors to come, and seminarians too, tuition waived for the latter. But so committed are we to sharing the value, that any first-time attendee can expect a 50% tuition discount; and we encourage you, with that in mind, to spread the word to anyone you know who might be interested. A Sunday School teacher. A youth leader. A key member or two of your church council. A person who keeps checking in at Bible studies and asks the kind of questions that probe for God's message to them, and its usefulness come Monday morning. A college student who is serious about the faith, but still entangled in a gauzy web of legalistic notions that it's all about doing what you're supposed to do to make God happy. Are the college kids of 2015 as susceptible to romantic notions as they were in my day? If so, tell them you're packing them off on a last-minute prospecting adventure, where the treasure sought is Gospel gold—thus our title—many grams of which you expect them to come home with.

Or better still, tell those students that Elder Chen wants them to go.

And who is Elder Chen? Well, we learned about him only yesterday, in a note from Dr. Jukka Kaariainen. Jukka has twice blessed our conferences with penetrating Law/Gospel analyses of the matters under scrutiny, most recently a year ago when he joined us via Skype from his study in Taiwan. He teaches theology there, at China Lutheran Seminary. Here's what he passed along yesterday:

I wanted to briefly share with you how the Crossings preaching method is bearing fruit in Taiwan. I taught my fall systematics

class the 6-step preaching method and had them write a sermon using it.

One of my students was a 59-year old, retired police captain. Aboriginal. Formerly Presbyterian church elder. Grew up in the mountains, hunting wild game. 2nd career seminarian. He'll be graduating in May and heading off to a church.

This man has become the biggest fan of the Crossings method! He profusely thanks me, almost every time he sees me, about how the methodology has changed, not only how he preaches (at his internship church, etc), but also how it's positively changed his relationship with his wife and others. Quote from our lunch conversation just now- "I just try to remember, it's all about magnifying Christ." I am hopeful that Elder Chen (as we reverently call him, being almost 20 years my senior!) will be a bright beacon in the hazy horizon of charismatic legalism in the Taiwan church! He told me, "Be sure, whenever you teach, to teach that preaching method and have the students write a report on sanctification (my other assignment in class)."

Thus far Jukka. Seems to me that we need lots of bright beacons in the hazy horizons of the legalisms afflicting the U.S. church at present. Their name is legion. Amid them and against them, we aim at Crossings, in our own small way, to strike the match called Christ. This, in sum, will be our Belleville agenda. God grant that you and others can join the fun.

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Speaking of fun, you'll find some in the latest issue of Word and World, the journal of Luther Seminary, St. Paul, Minnesota. It's graced with an article by Crossings' own Marcus Felde, at once the president of our outfit and the consummate wordsmith who turns out our quarterly newsletter. The title is quintessential Marcus: "The Lord's Prayer: Who Could Ask for Anything More?" The content is the Gospel gold we'll be talking

about when we get to Belleville, unearthed by the methodology of which Marcus is a master, and polished here to a piercing gleam. By all means take the time to read the article, receiving it as the theological substance of this week's post.

Just by the way, here's a line that jumped out at me immediately: "Christian faith seeks what God has promised us in Christ." Mini-aha: Well, of course! And since when has anyone said it quite that succinctly, or with quite that degree of clarity? Comes the corollary, another head-smacking insight: no wonder so many Christian people get frustrated with prayer. Possessed also of other faiths, they keep seeking from God what God has not promised us in Christ; and when God fails to follow through on their demands, they chafe and grumble. Not so, as Marcus teaches, when we pray as Jesus taught. I suddenly can't think of another source I'll be turning to first or pushing harder the next time I need to help baptized people think about prayer, and practice it.

Peace and Joy,
Jerry Burce, for the editorial team