

Reflections on the 2007 Crossings Conference

Colleagues,

I asked for participant reflections on the Honest-to-God Gospel conference we had here last month. A few folks responded. Some told me that they already did so on the Crossings Conference blog. Here are some items that came back to me. I also offer my own comments on their comments. Peace & Joy!

Ed Schroeder

A-1. *Comment received: "Some of the speakers were pretty high falutin in their presentations. Why not have two tracks at the next such Crossings conference—one for preacher-theologian types, one for the rest of us."* **A-2.** *Comment on the comment: I offer a caveat for moving toward two tracks in future Crossings stuff.*

Major caveat: *No Biblical book ever does that. Even egghead-theologian-and-missionary St. Paul does not offer egg-head epistles for the pros, nickel-word epistles for the peasants. Most often it's the eggheads (priests, kings, church leaders) who don't yet understand the nickel words of God. Some other thoughts:*

1. *"Two-tracks Crossings" contradicts the commitment of the ancient founding duo NOT to do that. We figured if we can help the common folks understand and do theology, make*

crossings from Biblical groundings to their own slice-of-life trackings, then MAYBE, just maybe, the clergy in the audience will catch on too.

- 2. Crossings did indeed from the outset seek to do “systematic” theology, but systematic theology as “theology that’s patently useful for ministry.”*
- 3. That’s really “practical” theology. Theology that’s eminently able to be put into praxis. Methinks that ought to be the dipstick for ongoing Crossings programs and projects. Really the old double-dipstick: making use of Christ’s benefits, benefitting the folks whom Christ himself wants to benefit.*
- 4. If some presenters at the gathering were mostly doing academics and didn’t pass the test of #2 & 3 above, they maybe shouldn’t have been on the program with those topics.*
- 5. Yes, Rudolf Keller, as most folks speaking their non-native language, wasn’t always easy to understand. My hunch is that the greatest difficulty –for lay and clergy alike who commented–was his speaking in his own slow English with occasional “German” pronunciations of English words. And he is indeed a German professor. But when you read his English text, it is not egg-heady at all. Solid, yes, and it’s got marvelous narrative flow. Marie and I were constantly thinking of non-seminary grads as we translated his German text. I had my own reason for recommending him to the program-planners. I wanted the current generation of Crossings folks to see/hear/learn of the Elert historical roots of Crossings–of the Gospel Aha!–and to hear that “live” from a German insider to the Elert heritage.*
- 6. In Keller’s text he presents Elert as one following the rubrics of #2 and #3 above. Systematic theology (or dogmatics) always in service to the church’s*

proclamation. Scholarly, yes, and possibly not everybody's cup of tea all the time, but still in the end it passes the double-dipstick measure.

7. Bob Schultz calls attention to the final paragraphs on "Holy Scripture" in Elert's dogmatics that links to this. Here's a translation that he and I have scissors-and-pasted together: Elert, *Der Christliche Glaube*, 1st edition, 1940, p. 238

Every text-interpreter presupposes "understanding," i.e., that the interpreter and the text-author are on the same wave-length with their presuppositions of earthly existence. Under this rubric the documents of the NT can also be interpreted by someone not a member of the Christian church. And vice versa, the theological interpreter must be concerned for the same inner solidarity with the Biblical author as interpreters of non-Biblical texts are with the authors they are interpreting. The first question both need to answer is: WHAT did the author "mean."

It becomes "theological" interpretation when the text is understood as God's Word. This happens when the readers or listeners—and therefore Biblical scholars too—hear that Word of God personally speaking to them. To understand the Holy Scriptures we must not only show WHAT the text means, but WHO is meant by the text, namely, no one else but the readers and the interpreters themselves. The readiness to acknowledge oneself as "meant" by the text is called "faith."

In other words: Exegetes understand scripture correctly only when they are willing to submit themselves to the Lord who is speaking here, i.e., to acknowledge, from the very texts that they seek to understand, God's own verdict on themselves.

[Just in case our English may still need “a little work,” I offer an RSP, a Revised Schroeder Paraphrase.]

All interpreters seek to “understand” the texts they are working on. So Biblical interpreters do so too. But when you are interpreting the Bible, the subject matter you are working on is the Word of God. And that makes a difference from all other similar scholarly/academic pursuits in interpreting texts.

Yes, in both cases you handle your study material as “objectively” as you can, apart from personal prejudices. Yet no matter how “objective” you seek to be in your work and study of that Word of God—keeping a proper “neutral” distance—that very Word of God is also speaking to you about yourself. “Hey, theologian, I’m talking about YOU! Even more, I’m talking TO you.” That doesn’t happen for paleontologists or mathematicians. Dinosaurs don’t make personal claims on the folks digging up their fossil remains; likewise numbers don’t do that to the ones who are crunching them. Elert’s claim: Bible scholars who ignore that God is also talking to them personally are not being “faithful” to their subject matter. Thus they’re not being good interpreters of their material from a scholarly/academic angle.

- 8. Them’s my druthers about Crossings-two-tracks. Let other outfits pursue the mostly egghead assignment. Is there even such a thing in Christian theology? Maybe so. But Crossings’ Articles of Incorporation go in the nickel-words direction.*

B-1. *Comment received: Someone voiced dismay that the conference presentations and discussions gave scant attention to “the church speaking out on critical public issues.”*

B-2. *My thoughts: As soon as you say “Shouldn’t the church speak out on x, y or z?” –so it seems to me–you have to figure out the following:*

- 1. WHO speaks for THE church? Is it the pope? The ELCA presiding bishop? Episcopal bishop Robinson? The Archbishop of Canterbury? Some study commission? Whose study commission? Your local pastor? Grandma Schmidt? This is not a trivial question. For the speaker-outers regularly don’t agree. Christians already in the NT era didn’t always agree. It’s no different now. So who speaks for THE church? Why not Grandma Schmidt, possibly even in preference to the Pope? But that pushes a further question:*
- 2. Why in the NT is there NEVER any reference to, any mandate from, Jesus or the apostles that THE CHURCH should speak out on issues? That’s in none of the mission mandates in the NT. Was the first century A.D. already the kingdom of God on earth, and thus it was unnecessary? Hardly. Did the apostolic writers miss something—that we latter day saints have now discovered? Maybe. But then again, maybe not.*
- 3. Why, for what theological reason, does Luther NEVER talk this way? Was he a wimp? ‘Course not. My conviction: His ecclesiology—Gospel-grounded, he was convinced—rendered it impossible for him to recommend any such thing. [The Crossings web site has some stuff on that. One example: “A Second Look at the Gospel of Mark – Midway in the Year of Mark.” Click on “Writings of EHS.” It’s the 4th one on that list.]*
- 4. If one is speaking for THE CHURCH, you are speaking for the Church’s HEAD. That’s where the mouth is. Why does the HEAD of the body of Christ never give such an assignment to his disciples anywhere in the 4 gospels?*

They are never given a “prophetic” mandate. Au contraire. Their vocal assignment is something else. So whence this conviction that THE church should be the Amos or Hosea to society today? Until such WHY questions are answered, and answered substantively, methinks we ought to go slow with such conviction that THE church should speak out on matters of God’s left-hand regime. Could be that there is no authorization at all for that sort of thing from THE HEAD himself. [Which is my conviction. One sharp example: When two brothers came to Jesus asking him to adjudicate their “justice-issue” conflict (Luke 12:13), he said “Thanks, but no thanks. Not my job,” and he changed the subject.] And if members of the Body are doing that sort of thing—as many denominations, today especially in the USA(!), are doing—then they are quite likely in conflict with the Head. And if that’s the case, what’s THE issue here that needs speaking out on?

Yes, the conference program didn’t highlight that speaking-out agenda. I don’t know if the conference planners did that on purpose, but I’d not be surprised if they did. And for theological reasons. Crossings theology—if you can call it that—has been doing theology and proposing praxis that is a “second opinion” to much of what’s prevalent in the churches today, also to the habit of making “social statements.” Gospel-grounded ecclesiology is different from what’s widespread in American Church-ianity these days.

More next time.

Peace and Joy!

Ed Schroeder