

Retiring from Doing Theology

Colleagues,

Back in the days when I was head-honcho of Crossings Community's operation (1983-93), it was a three-point parish: semester-long courses ["Crossings from Luke" or Matthew or Isaiah or Romans or Psalms or Acts, etc—finally 21 such titles in the curriculum], weekend workshops linking Sunday texts to Daily Work [in the high season every other weekend somewhere in the country, and occasionally overseas], and the print-medium newsletter.

After 1993 the first two faded away. It took a full-time staffer to make those happen. The board could find no one to take the job, if for no other reason than that the first line in the job-description—also when I started—was "Raise your own salary." But the newsletter continued (and still does as a quarterly) and with cyberspace now on the scene, that's where the action was. That's where Crossings went.

Way back in that 83-93 decade I once cheekily asked one of our brightest and best: What do you want to do when you grow up? "I want your job," she said. Well, she was in no position to move in and do so when 1993 rolled around. With the internet becoming the prime turf for Crossings work, the board of directors worked out the current schema. Crossings alumni as volunteers—and no full-timer(s) at all—run the show.

But there is nostalgia. It surfaced at the Crossings board meeting this past week. [Although I'm long gone from the board, I'm always invited in as "consultant."] Why don't we do those weekend workshops again?

So they're scheduling one such in the "pre-conference" to the big get-together—to which all y'all are invited—at the end of

next January. And you can guess which old nag is to be saddled up for the event. I've tried to dissuade them, but they won't listen. Not that I don't want to do it, but that I think something more important ought to be the pre-conference agenda. To wit, the show-and-tell debut of "Gospel 101" the first course in the Crossings Cyber space-Seminary that they are cooking up. "But that's for next year, Ed." OK. I'm a consultant, not a decision-maker. And as an old codger I'm prone to want stuff done today (even better, yesterday)—if for no other reason than that I may not see too many more tomorrows.

Back to that student who once said: "I want your [Crossings] job." After 1993 my "retirement job" took Marie and me to all the continents except Antarctica as Global Mission Volunteers for the ELCA, our last place being Singapore in 2004. Right from the outset, though, I kept a Crossings connection by dabbling on the internet, even when out of the country. Thursday Theology was then posted from wherever in the world the Division of Global Mission sent us. Like topsey, it grew. Today's ThTh posting is number 427.

But something else came over the horizon as the ThTh numbers grew. Namely, attending to reader response, which itself has morphed into "calling" me to the work of one-on-one theological consultations. These past 2 weeks [my weeks go from Thursday to Thursday. The T.G.I.F. exclamation is more and more my doxology.] I got more such calls than ever.

1. A whole passel of responses to ThTh 426, last week's sifting (Gospel-sniffing) of the sermon many of us Schroeders heard at the family reunion. Some were funny, some adulation. Some called for "consultation." See below. And, no surprise, one came from the preacher of that sermon, a good friend of mine though unnamed in ThTh 426, who said I mis-heard his proclamation. He had indeed

proclaimed the Gospel that I said I hadn't heard. As soon as he can get his [apparently hand-written] manuscript transcribed, he'll send it to me and I told him we'll post it untouched. One of the surprising responses came from a theology prof who told me she had "just googled three words together" and discovered who the preacher must have been. And did she guess right? She did. Are there no secrets at all now that cyberspace has come? Is anonymity now extinct?

Here's a funny one from a southern "lady-theologian" of "conservative Presbyterian" persuasion.

Dear Ed, You really don't have to be a heresy-hunter. You don't even have to look for it at all—we are covered up with it (as we say in Mississippi). The theological basis for the sermon you discussed (in armchair theologian terms) is "send 'em to hell with a full stomach, warm clothes, and good shoes". The other Mississippi term for all this is putting lipstick on a pig, but I won't even go there

2. Emails from (hang on to your hats) Alexandria, Egypt, and Papua New Guinea about the Macedonian cry for law/promise educational materials to put into the extended hands of folks, lots of folks, in those places. That sounded like "Cyberspace Seminary" to me, so I forwarded the messages to the Crossings board—and they grabbed it. Might have to be tomorrow. The two guys sending these e-requests are LCMSers. Surprise? Not really. One guy got his theology at Valparaiso University, the other I'm not sure. But he's on the listserve and says that our take on things Christian is his take too. [Oh, yes, the PNG bloke sent along his own Law'Gospel primer – 44 pages, parallel columns of Pidgin English and English English. Would I please comment. I can't say no. But maybe next week.]

3. A response to #425, "Gnosticism and legalism" from Alex, a Russian "new" Christian living in Lithuania, whom we got to know on one of those mission volunteer stints. Good morning, Ed. Just finished reading "Gnosticism and Legalism." Surprise again. Answer comes before the question is asked.

But then again I have more questions. What's your diagnosis of what's wrong with us human beings? What does Jesus mean when he says: My kingdom is not of this world? Is there any definition of the Holy Spirit given somewhere?

One more. During my whole life, curiosity was a stimulator to self-development (here curiosity is those questions like "who am I, and what is the world around," and so on). Now I realize, that from some moment, which I missed, curiosity became an obstacle, a harmful addiction, leading to a huge temptation. Could you comment on this please?

Please drop me a message when you have some time. Best regards and very best wishes to you and Marie."

[We once asked Alex where he learned such good English with a heartland American accent. "From watching CNN day in and day out," he said.]

We had witnessed his baptism, so I had to reply. Like this:

Dear Alex,

It's good to hear from you. But you do want me to go to work, heavy work. And I am such an old man!

You have given me four (4) questions to answer.

1. "What's your diagnosis of what's wrong with us human

beings?"

2. "What does Jesus mean when he says: 'My Kingdom is not of this world?'"
3. "Is there any definition of the Holy Spirit given somewhere?"
4. "Curiosity . . . Now I realise, that from some moment, which I missed, curiosity became an obstacle, a harmful addiction leading to a huge temptation. Could you comment on this please?"

QUESTION #1 AND #2

I think I can bunch #1 & #2 together by asking you to read the attachment. It is an article that I wrote for a journal here in the USA. It was just published in the August issue of CURRENTS IN THEOLOGY AND MISSION. They have a web site, but they have not yet posted the August 2006 issue on the www. So I'll send it to you (my original manuscript) as an attachment. It's about "The Kingdom of God in the Gospel of Mark."

You mentioned that you had just read my piece on "Gnosticism and Legalism." In the next posting of Thursday Theology (August 10, 2006) I critiqued a sermon I heard on August 6 that was defective because it did not take the "diagnosis of what's wrong" deep enough. So you can see there my answer to your diagnosis question. I use the code language of our Crossings community: D-1, D-2, D-3. That is: diagnosis first level, diagnosis deeper level, diagnosis deepest level.

In general words I'd say (and I'm just repeating the Bible's own perspective, I think)

Diagnosis of what's wrong.

D-1 is the level of our behavior: how we act and interact with others in our world. And the "wrong" is that we don't

really love these “others,” but use them for ourselves, or ignore them (don’t give help when they need help and we could give it). It’s “external,” on the outside, something that others too can see us doing—or not doing.

D-2 Level 2 goes inside. What’s the human sickness on the inside? What’s in the “heart”? In place of “fear, love, and trust in God,” there is NO fear, no love, no trust in God. In place of these “good” things is fear, or love, or trust in all sorts of other things. And it is “out of the heart” that our human actions, our human behaviors come. Out of God-DIStrusting hearts comes bad stuff in relations to other people and to our world. Out of God-trusting hearts come behaviors showing love and care for other people and for the world we live in.

You might think that is the deepest diagnosis, but not so. It’s deeper, but not deepest. According to the Bible there is an even DEEPER diagnosis.

D-3 The God-distruster is himself/herself forsaken by God. God abandons that distruster to his own self-chosen, self-centered, selfish “faith.” The opening chapters of the Epistle to the Romans (in the New Testament) say several times “God gave them up (abandoned them)” to the consequences of their own faithless hearts and the faithless actions that come from such hearts. In other places the Bible calls this the “wrath of God,” or “God’s curse,” or sometimes “hell.” In the Thursday Theology posting for last week, the Bible text that the preacher used was the parable of the Rich Man and the beggar Lazarus. In that parable the D-3 diagnosis of the Rich man is that already in the time he was alive, there was a “chasm,” a million-mile separation, between him and God. Nothing he could do, nor could Lazarus do, would bridge

that God-gap. And if that were God's "last word," then "hell" (God-separation) is the Rich Man's fate forever and ever. Throughout all eternity. That's what it means to be "eternally damned." Never ever to have the gap closed between me and God.

And that's where the Good News of Christ comes in. Christ is the one who bridges the God-gap. Costly business. Costs his life. In his resurrection God the Father "confirms, verifies, ratifies" what Christ has done by raising him from the dead. His resurrection is the divine "OK" that Christ has really closed the God-gap for sinners. All who trust Christ have that God-gap closed for them. They can get on with a new life.

That's the Good News that crosses out D-3.

Sinners who trust Christ get a new situation at D-2. They are now Christ-trusters, instead of self-trusters, or America-trusters, or (in your past) classless-society trusters, or whatever alternate "god" they may have been hanging their hearts on.

And with their hearts trusting Christ as God's Good-Word for them, they live a different kind of life from the one diagnosed at D-1 where we began this conversation.

On the Crossings website every week there are "Text studies" posted. These studies always have the numbered sequence 1,2,3,4,5,6.

1 = the D-1 diagnosis proposed by this particular text. 2 = the D-2 diagnosis 3 = the D-3 diagnosis

4 is Healing (proposed by this specific text) for the D-3 "deep" sickness 5 is Healing for what was diagnosed at D-2

6 is Healing for what was diagnosed at D-1

I was following this 1,2,3,4,5,6 sequence in my critique of that sermon in Thursday Theology 426 last week.

BRIEF COMMENT ON THE "KINGDOM" QUESTION

My attached article speaks to the "Kingdom" question. Here's one thought.

Christ's kingdom is not "of this world;" this does NOT mean it is not IN this world. It simply means that Christ runs his kingdom in a way that no other king does in the world we live in. He says this only once, to the Roman ruler Pilate as he (Jesus) is on trial before Pilate. Pilate runs his kingdom in a worldly fashion. Pilate rules from the top. He has the power. Underlings obey or are killed. Jesus's kingdom is the upside-down of that kind of ruling. He dies so the underlings (sinners also) can live. No world ruler—even the nice guys—rule that way. So Christ's kind of regime is not "of this world," even though it is solidly IN this world.

QUESTION #3 HOLY SPIRIT

Go to LCC library or any other place where you can find a "Concordance" of the Bible, especially of the New Testament. Concordance is a reference book that tells you every place in the Bible that a particular word appears. So check on "Holy Spirit" especially in the New Testament, and tell me what you found to answer your own question. After that we can continue the conversation.

QUESTION #4 CURIOSITY

Curiosity is by itself a "neutral" gift from God the creator. But, of course, WE ourselves are never "just neutral" when we pursue our curiosity. We have a personal interest, a "vested" interest—even if it is subtle—to get

some answer to what we are curious about.

So curiosity, though “neutral” all by itself, never shows up “all by itself.” My own self is always in the mix. Thus curiosity becomes “bad” when the human self pursuing curiosity has a heart that trusts some other god, other than God in Christ. It is “good” when it flows from a heart that IS trusting God-in-Christ.

Ok, so much for now.

Christ’s peace and joy!

That might be enough for this week’s ThTh posting.

Other “consultations”—some eliciting essays as long as Alex’s were:

4. A dear missiological buddy from the RC persuasion. He greets me as his “favorite Gospel-sniffer” and wants to talk about the “forgiveness of sins,” and the banalization that has happened to both nouns in our churchly culture. He concludes: “Whaddya think? Can you do a quick exegesis of ‘forgiveness’ for a struggling Roman?” Well, I couldn’t say no to that one either. There went another couple hours. [That one might be worth passing on to the listserve some time up ahead.]
5. A pastor who told about his young son’s wrecking the family car. From his recital of what happened afterward, I was blown away by his absolutely apostolic job of law/promise God-talk with the son. But, now how should they proceed in the future? Never mention it? Pretend that with forgiveness—both from God and from dad—the memory is erased? How to avoid *lex semper accusat* now that forgiveness was spoken—and trusted. There went another chunk of time.

6. A Lutheran systematic theology prof in Canada."Thanks so much for yesterday's Thursday Theology. It is a very necessary reminder to get to the real point of the Law so that the real point of the Gospel can be heard.

It is so easy to stop the diagnosis before it is finished – maybe because we so want to believe that we are capable of solving the problem. We really don't want to hear that the problem may be beyond our ability to fix.

"For your reading pleasure (and critique, should you have time) I've attached a copy of an article I recently had published in our seminary journal.

"I've been co-teaching the senior homiletics class with our homiletician the last several years and the article was originally developed as a way to introduce students to Walther's Proper Distinction of Law and Gospel. Now we are using the course as the basis for a book on "situational preaching" – funerals, weddings, crises, etc. – so critique would be helpful.

"Unfortunately I'm spending most of my energy on administrative duties these days. Being "Assistant Dean" right now means spending a lot of time on other things. Lots of Law, not much Gospel!

Cheers!"

Well, it's something like 40 pages long. He's a Crossings junkie. I think I was a reader for his Ph.D. thesis way back when, but I'm not sure anymore. So I'll have to do it. No. Not a "got to," but a "get to."

7. Last Sunday afternoon Marie and I were at the funeral for a fellow Lutheran big name in St. Louis, Arden Mead, a wingding of a celebration service. We very nearly danced

in the aisles. At one point the elder son asked the congregation: If you've ever sung the Hallelujah Chorus, or wished that you could have, come up front here and let's do it together with Dad singing along in the heavenly chorus. 150 folks walked up and sang. But one note struck a fellow attendee wrong. She wrote and asked: "In the hand-puppet message for grandkids, 'the puppet' explicitly stated that there was nothing in that casket, because their granddad was already in heaven. Now they had just seen granddad right there in the casket out in the narthex minutes before. How could they believe the puppet saying otherwise, and emphatically saying that was the truth? What could he base that on Biblically? You've told us that there's more of Platonism in such a thought than Biblical truth. There are some N.T. passages that come close, I think, talking about body and spirit. But if the Biblical teaching is that everyone after death, whether buried, burned, or never found here again, awaits the second coming of Jesus Christ to enter heaven (or otherwise), then blessed dead are no closer to heaven than I am. Conversely, if Christ dwells within us, as Paul and others say, then we are already in heaven. Wasn't it St. Augustine who said 'All the way to heaven is heaven, for Christ said I am the Way'?"

"Anyway," she continued, "it seems to me it's terribly misleading to come right out and tell kids that there's nothing in the casket of their granddad. So what are they burying?"

Yup, I too thought Plato won and St. Paul lost. Other sources had been consulted.

Note to the one who said: "Ed, I want your job." Are you sure? It's a tar-baby. And I haven't mentioned the unanswered backlog in the "Urgent" tray: a Hongkong

seminary prof who wants to argue about Elert, a Minnesota law professor who “needs some theological help,” and so it goes.

I don’t want to be complaining—or bragging either. St. James’ “right strawy epistle” (so Luther) still pertains. “Count it all joy.” Nevertheless the plate stays full.

8. Finally this one in the week’s in-basket.[Crossings tried to get an ad for the January conference placed in the LCMS newspaper THE REPORTER. Several on the program are LCMS folks. Everything seemed OK in initial negotiations with underlings. But then the boss got back from vacation.]

“My executive editor has returned from vacation and was able to review the proposed ad and related conference materials. Upon review, it was decided that Reporter would not be able to accept the ad from Crossings Community as some conference items may be contrary to LCMS theological positions. Accepting ads that promote products/services contrary to LCMS theological positions is against our advertising policy.”

The more things change, the more they stay the same.

Peace and Joy!

Ed Schroeder