

What Happens on the Cross? An Interchange and Conversation, Part 2

Colleagues,

Last week we sent you a sharp response by Pr. Richard (Dick) Hoyer to a sermon we had shared with you two weeks earlier (“Why We Ordain,” [ThTheol_828](#); you might want to read that again before going further). In calling the response “sharp,” I mean that in a double sense. First, Pr. Hoyer was unhappy, and he didn’t mince words. Second, in spilling his unhappiness he sliced to the heart of the one issue, above all others, that useful servants of the Gospel have got to be alive to. I speak, of course, of the cross of Christ, and what happened there. Was that death of Jesus really necessary, and if so, how necessary? Did it do something to rearrange, in a fundamental way, the relationship between God and sinful humankind, or was it finally nothing more than a dramatic demonstration of a divine attitude that blind sinners might otherwise miss? (As a church sign puts it, “Smile! God Loves You!”) The latter, as Pr. Hoyer pointed out, has emerged as the favored position in a significant segment of American Christianity, the one we used to know as “mainline.” He thought the sermon he had read reflected that, and it pained him.

We forwarded Pr. Hoyer’s comments to the sermon’s author and preacher, Pr. Ron Neustadt. Today we send along his reaction. It’s a remarkable piece; so remarkable that I’ve already stashed it in the digital basket where I keep things that bear regular re-reading as I try to stay on track in my own work as a pastor and ground-level theologian. Let me suggest two things in

particular to watch for. First, if you've ever wondered what the problem may have been in the great Anselm of Canterbury's account of the cross, you'll see it laid it out here with a succinct clarity that no one I know of has managed to match. This is something we all need to get a grip on. From clarity about Anselm comes clarity about the real problem that dogs today's accounts of the Gospel (they are legion) that remain anchored in Anselm. And in the way Ron lays this out, you'll also spot the gross deficiencies—the under-telling of the cross—that plagues most of Anselm's critics, including ones that many of us rub shoulders with and are called to bear gentle and patient witness to.

This brings me to the second great “Bravo!” about Ron's piece. It's the way he writes it, with a generous and gentle regard for the stranger he's responding to, however pointed that stranger may have been. Dick for his part will respond in kind, with a brief appreciation that you'll find appended at the end of Ron's letter. This, it seems to me, is a sterling model of the kind of interchange that faith-full servants of the Gospel will have with each other: honest, urgent, exuding passion for the vital things of Christ, yet carried out in the Spirit of Christ, in the assumption that the same Spirit is at work in the other. It becomes, in other words, a genuine conversation.

For having the nerve to show us what that looks like—and more, for consoling us all with the Gospel—our grateful thanks to Dick and Ron alike.

Peace and Joy,
Jerry Burce, for the editorial team

Dear Brother Richard,

Let me begin by assuring you that I give thanks for your willingness to express your theological concern. Our reconciliation with God is a matter of utmost importance so there is no topic more worthy of “mutual conversation,” to borrow the term from the Smalcald Articles.

Now, to address your dismay. Let me assure you that in no way do I wish to “dismiss the fact that ‘the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin’ (I John 1:70).” In fact, I think I affirm it in the sermon. Here’s how.

In the sermon, I stressed Jesus’ offer (promise) of forgiveness. That offer involved the shedding of blood (his blood), and that bloodshed was not merely coincidental with his offer of forgiveness. It was essential to his offer.

That is, Jesus’ blood was shed (as you pointed out), not because the Roman justice system put an innocent man to death nor because some Judeans had a vendetta against him, religious or otherwise, nor because it was “a sad mistake made by vengeful sinners.” But I never said it was because of any of those reasons.

Jesus’s blood was shed because the forgiveness of sins required it. Jesus’ offer of forgiveness and his crucifixion (bloodshed) necessarily go together. I do not think my sermon implied anything else.

Jesus’ offer of forgiveness and his crucifixion go together, though, *not* because God is unwilling to forgive sinners without getting God’s pound of flesh. Not at all. The facts are that for Christ to forgive sinners, he had to undergo what Luther called the “tyrant” which objects to sinners being forgiven at all, namely, the law, with its rightful claim on the sinner’s life. What gives the law its clout is its own divine authorization to object to forgiveness. A bookkeeping model (like Anselm’s)

whereby both legal justice and divine mercy can both operate without conflict—with no remarkable duel (*mirabile duellum* was Luther's term in his *Lectures on Galatians* 1531)—is unknown to Luther and, he thinks, unknown to the scriptures of both testaments. Legal justice and divine mercy come to a “settlement” in Anselm's theology and both persist after Good Friday.

Luther's “breakthrough,” as he called it, in reading the Bible was that God's law and God's gospel and their respective righteousnesses (performance and mercy) cannot be coordinated in a settlement. They *contradict* each other. Thus for Luther legal justice and divine mercy *clash* on Good Friday. This is the “remarkable duel.” On Easter Sunday we see which one is dead. In some theoretical speculative principle, justice and mercy might be coordinated. But on Good Friday—in actual human history—they were not. Not coordination, but conquest is the upshot of Christ's being made a curse for us.

All of that (these last two paragraphs) is to say that, when I said “Christ offers us forgiveness,” I was not implying that reconciliation between God and us happens without the shedding of blood. In fact, just the opposite. Christ so identified with us, not just by virtue of his incarnation, but by virtue of placing himself where we were—under the “curse” of the law—and becoming not just a debtor but a rebel against God's own law by his offer (promise) of forgiveness, that the shedding of his blood was inevitable. Such is the depth of God's love for us (to use John's key term, since the sermon text is from John).

When I say, “Our Savior came to offer us God's forgiveness,” and, “He was killed because he made that offer,” I am not saying that he was killed only by human beings as you suggested I was. It was God's own law that put him to death. (That, I realize now, I could have made more explicit, and your letter will help

me keep that in mind for the future.)

So, yes, I agree with you and the writer of I John that it is only "the blood of Jesus his Son that cleanses us from all sin." (At least, I know of no other way.) But I do not think that what I said in the sermon implies otherwise.

I don't know if I have addressed your dismay. I hope I have. Again, I give thanks for your interest in wanting the theology of the cross to come through loud and clear in preaching. That is my interest, too.

Yours, in our Lord,
Ron

Thank you, Ron, for your gracious and instructive response. I rejoice in both the instruction and the grace.

What you say your sermon did not imply, I nevertheless inferred. Perhaps I read into it what was not there, and perhaps what you assumed was there was not explicit enough to be heard. My (our?) homiletics prof told me never to assume that people already know the gospel and need not have it repeated. Always proclaim it! Explicitly.

I am glad that not only am I not "running in vain," but that we are running together.

Dick