

C is for Conference

The Second International Crossings Conference is almost here—and we hope that you will be able to tell all that you were there. **Who Do You Say “I Am”:** Getting Honest about God Today will begin October 21 at Our Lady of the Snows Retreat Center, a fifteen-minute mile drive from downtown St. Louis. It will be preceded by a pre-conference workshop October 20.

The conference will operate with the same law-gospel lens as did the first. It will focus its aperture on the question of God as it confronts and confounds not only the person on the streets but also those of us who preach from the pulpit or sit in the pew. What does it mean to be “honest about God” in today’s church and world?

John Strelan is returning (you might say, by popular demand) from Australia to be a keynote speaker for us once again. Steve Kuhl, our president, and Mary Sue Dreier, from Luther Seminary are also keynote speakers. In addition, we have such an impressive plethora of speakers throughout the days that you will be hard-pressed to choose: Ed Schroeder, Gary Simpson, Robin Morgan, Fred Niedner, Phillip Kuehnert, Kit Kleinhans, Michael Hoy, Marcus Felde, Lori Cornell, and Jerome Burce.

The pre-conference day offers two options to choose from. The first is an all-day workshop to learn, apply, and practice using the Crossings six-step methodology. We call that tracking, grounding, crossing. Jerome Burce and members of the Sabbathology writing staff will lead this. Option two is the oppor-



(Above) Martin Luther, 16th century reformer.
(Left) The first international Crossings conference, January 2007.

tunity to discuss Robert Bertram’s book **A Time for Confessing** with editor Michael Hoy and Edward Schroeder.

People who attended the last conference commented that they really appreciated meeting kindred spirits, especially those who came from overseas. Already we know that special guests Bishop Armencius Munthe from Indonesia and Paul Tambyah, a physician and lay theologian in Singapore, are intending to join us. Armencius uses our six-step method to teach preaching in Indonesia. Paul met Ed and Marie a few years ago when they were in Singapore.

We are honored to have as one of our presenters at the forthcoming Conference one of Luther Seminary’s shining professors of theology and ethics—Gary M. Simpson. Gary has been teaching at Luther for almost two decades, encouraging reformation-thinking in congregational life and community. He has many other published articles and books, and has blessed us by sharing the following theses in this newsletter, under the clever title, “A Reformation Is a Terrible Thing to Waste: Promising Theology for an Emerging Missional Church.” Because of space, we had to edit out his footnotes; but if you want them, let us know and we’ll send them to you.

mhoy

R is for Reformation

For in Jesus Christ every one of God's promises is a "Yes." For this reason it is through him that we say the "Amen," to the glory of God. (2 Corinthians 1:20)

"A mind is a terrible thing to waste." So says the United Negro College Fund. My Grandma Klemm said it this way, "Waste not, want not." Now Grandma usually meant the food on our plate, "our daily bread," as she taught us to pray. Knowing the Scriptures as she did, she understood that they too warned against waste. And not the waste only of our daily bread, which, as Luther taught her, meant our mind as well. Scriptures pointedly warn against wasting Christ. Paul puts it poignantly, "I do not nullify the grace of God; for if justification comes through the law, then Christ died for nothing." (Gal. 2:21) If Christ were to die for nothing; what a waste! The ultimate waste!

The sixteenth-century Reformation decisively echoes that Scriptural warning. The Lutheran confessors, for instance, state this confessional caveat positively. They do all theology for the sake of church and world with the stated purpose to make Christ "necessary" rather than "useless." Christ emphatically did not die for nothing. These Reformers took Paul's Scriptural cue and inextricably linked making Christ necessary with a lively distinction between law and gospel, or, to follow the **Apology of the Augsburg Confession's** more precise wording, the distinction between law and promise.

Famously, they brought this distinction to bear in their articulation of justification by faith alone. For their fellow confessors ever since, justification by faith alone denotes "the hub"—as in hub of the wheel, as my teachers taught me way back in seminary—for critical theological reflection on Christian life and practice, indeed, on all life and practice.

There are two ways to waste Christ. The church could **miss**, even **distort**, the promise **in** Christ; and the church could **hoard** for itself the promise **of** Christ for the world. Because of the sixteenth-century context the Reformers majored in overcoming the "distorting" waste. Increasingly in North America

today Christian churches are hearing the Holy Spirit's sure call to overcome the "hoarding" of the promise **of** Christ. At those times when our Reformation heritages have indeed attended to the "hoarding" waste, it has too often come at the expense of contesting with equal vigor the "distorting" waste of Christ. Likewise, when our Reformation heritages have indeed attended to the "distorting" waste, that attention also has come at the expense of vigorously contesting the "hoarding" waste of Christ.

O is for "Our" condition needing reform

Sisters and brothers in Christ, let us not be naïve about North America today. Our market economy projects the most powerful and expansive culture ever assembled. Our consumptive culture of the modification of all things is on the move, colonizing everything it meets. This colonization has stopped at little so far.

How many of us can already cite too many instances whereby economic models of marketing have passed themselves off as the missional character of the church? Again, let us not be naïve about America today! Our political state aims to impose hard power, our military prowess, wherever it serves our global advantage. How many of us can already cite too many instances whereby crusading models of power have passed themselves off as the dynamics of a missionary church among the nations?

The Reformation could be wasted. It surely could! And that would be a terrible thing. Further, this waste would come under cover of professed good and much ballyhooed benevolent intentionality. That is, it could come under the guise of proclaiming Christ worldwide. Only the promise **in** Christ, freshly rooted in the distinction between law and promise, firmly fastens and forever frees the missionary promise **of** Christ for the world.

The Reformation is a wonderful thing to proliferate! And that's the best way to disrupt either the market's or the state's colonizing of the missional character of the church. God calls the church today to a double major: to proliferate the promise **of** Christ to the

world by promoting the promise **in** Christ. And vice versa: to promote the promise **in** Christ by proliferating the promise **of** Christ for the world. This is “promising theology,” and it lives precisely for an emerging missional church called, centered, and sent to promote Christ for the world.

S-S is for the “Subtle Secret” of Mission (as PromiSSio)

Missio as Promissio

In the Reformation’s doctrine of justification the *sola fide*, by faith alone, has always been the “most embattled *sola* of all.” Already at the Diet of Augsburg (1530) those confessors testified that “the logic of promise,” of *promissio*, is the hermeneutical heart of the entire scriptures of the Old and New Testaments. Faith alone justifies “based upon the nature of a promise,” they stressed. St. Paul provided them concise formulations of an entire biblical teaching, of the entire Bible’s chief truth claim. “For this reason it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed.” Or again, “Scripture has consigned everyone under sin, so that, by faith in Jesus Christ, the promise might be given to those who believe.” Promise and faith go together like a hand and glove.

The Reformation proposes a linguistic innovation of Christian mission. This innovation focuses on the public effects that God’s promissory speaking has on the world’s future for its redemption. Because communication always opens the future, the Reformation’s basic confessional insight concerns how the church, Christ’s missional body, speaks. And how does the Reformation propose the missional church to speak? It recommends speaking caringly. Indeed, the church’s sending Spirit authorizes this care.

And what’s to care about? “Well, it all depends,” we routinely say. Every worldly thing, of course, depends on meeting some condition. In fact, every to-

morrow depends on some condition. Life is conditional, thank God! The Reformation confessors saw that clearly. Further, they saw that the dependability of all things, or not, ITSELF depends on God’s way of speaking according to conditions, or not. In this way they urge the missional church to attend caringly to how it speaks in God’s name.

I is for “If” (followed by “then”—the conditional law)

Conditionality is the deep logic of law—“law” being the category the Reformation used to name everyday conditionality. Under the deep logic of law life’s possible futures exhibit, in one way or another, an “**if . . . , then . . .**” conditional form. **If** you in some way or other are this or that, or do this or that, or meet this or that expectation, **then** you will be or have some resulting this or that. In the logic of promise the promissor herself takes on the other’s condition as the promissor’s own, and thus opens up an unconditional, free future for the other. “**Because I . . . , therefore you . . .**” Freedom, therefore, is the deep logic of promise. “For freedom Christ has set you free,” Paul notes concisely. The “nature of a promise” constitutes the missional promise **in** Christ for the sake of the missional promise **of** Christ to the world. Here’s why Luther, for instance, raised up the “promising God” against the Babylonian captivity of the church in his era.

By caring in this way the church participates missionally in the Holy Spirit’s promotion of Israel’s Jesus as the world’s Good News to the glory of the Son’s Father. The Reformation exhorts the church to always care for the difference between the Holy Spirit’s speaking according to law and speaking according to promise. When you speak Christ Jesus to people, speak him in such a way that you communicate God’s unconditional freeing promise into the living reality of the world and your hearers. In this way truly God calls into existence a newly trustworthy creation populated as well with a people of faith.



Gary Simpson, *Modern-day Reformer*

For emerging missional church this means a critical revision of the still current mantra, “*missio dei*.” “*Missio duplex dei*,” the twofold mission of God, commends itself as more congruent with the Reformation’s core confessional insight regarding law **and** promise. We’ll explore this critical revision under our subsequent themes.

N is for “Nullifying” the law (crossing out the condition)

Missio as Communicatio

One biblical theologian has proposed “God’s endangered promises” as the plot of the biblical story. This raises the question about the conditions placed upon every promise ever made. Every promise yields up its spirit when it meets some condition or another that limits that promise’s lively future. Take the marriage promise as a case in point. Though divinely ordained to be the most endearing and thus the most enduring of promises, we know all too well how endangered this promise is. Even when marital promises outrun the usual slings and arrows, there’s always that final “it depends.” “‘Til death do us part” stylizes even the best kept promises as **conditional** promises.

God’s promises, likewise, travel dangerous terrain and, finally, they too come face to face with that condition which conditions all other conditions, namely, death, the death of sufferers, of sinners, even death on the cross. The Holy Spirit’s raising of the cruci-

fied Son is the Father’s own truth claim that this promise, made in Jesus’ own body, is the world’s singular unconditional promise, i.e., a promise that surpasses every condition, every limit, every enemy. The promise of Jesus’ cross involves the Son’s taking on conditionality itself and all peoples subject to life’s conditions. Here conditionality meets its end. Here promising theology meets the cross and thereby meets its origin and consummation.

We noted earlier that the nature of a promise entails the promissor “taking on” the condition of the other. In Christian theology this taking on is known by the old Latin phrase, *communicatio idiomatum*, the communication of properties, the sharing of what properly belongs to one with another and vice versa. Our short-hand will simply be the *communicatio*. Instead of engaging the doctrinal tradition regarding the *communicatio*, I will simply lift up a poignant moment in early twentieth-century theology which illustrates the significance of the *communicatio* for our new era of missional church. I’m referring to Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s critique of Karl Barth’s theology of sovereign Lordship.

G is for “God’s” revealing

Bonhoeffer’s 1930 critique comes in reference to Barth’s concept of revelation. Barth introduced “revelation” in his early dialectical or crisis theology in order to criticize and go beyond nineteenth-century, German liberal Protestant theology and church life. Barth indicted liberal Protestantism for reducing theology to anthropology and Christian faith to mere “religion.” He maintained that a singular focus on divine revelation would reveal the bankruptcy of liberal anthropocentrism.

Bonhoeffer agreed with this basic criticism, which was aimed also at his own Berlin teachers, like Reinhold Seeberg, Adolf von Harnack and Karl Holl. Liberal theology had, as Bonhoeffer would say years later, “conceded to the world the right to determine Christ’s place in the world.” It had “compromise[d]” with modernity’s assumed optimism, progressivism, and superiority. Still, Bonhoeffer did not find Barth’s theology of revelation completely satisfying, nor did he find every basic insight of liberal theology totally bankrupt. Bonhoeffer was indeed quite dialectical,



The Crossings board met for its annual meeting August 13 & 14 in St. Louis. From left, Lori Cornell, Michael Hoy, Steve Albertin, Jerry Burce, Paige Evers, Steve Kuhl, Don Tanner. Missing are Cathy Lessmann (taking the picture), Ed Schroeder (in Budapest), and Tom Law (but joined via cyber space).

insightfully upholding both a “yes” and a “no” to Barth, on the one hand, and liberal Protestantism, on the other.

Barth framed “revelation” around the notion of God’s absolute “freedom” and therefore the pure “contingency” of divine revelation. He conceived God’s glorious, sovereign Lordship as God’s absolute, free will to do anything God wants to, to reveal God’s self or not. Only in this way, thought Barth, is God’s revelation safe from being objectified, distorted, manipulated, exploited, and controlled by human pretensions. Encapsulating Barth, Bonhoeffer noted: “Revelation is an event that has its basis in the freedom of God” (**Act and Being**, 82). God’s revelation is pure act “with all the instability of a deed being done right now,” to cite Bonhoeffer’s summary of Barth. “How could it be otherwise,” mused Bonhoeffer, since, as sovereign, “God has sole control?” (**Act and Being**, 83). This is Barth’s “actualism.”

Still, Bonhoeffer was not satisfied. A Western modern framework is “lurking here” in Barth, noted Bonhoeffer. Like Immanuel Kant, Barth is out to limit human reason. Human reason is not in control; God is in control (**Act and Being**, 84). But, argued Bonhoeffer, limiting reason **in this way**, that is, by keeping God “at a distance,” means that Barth surrendered true temporality. “It follows that, even though Barth readily uses temporal categories . . . , his concept of act still should not be regarded as temporal. God’s freedom and the act of faith are essentially supratemporal” (**Act and Being**, 84). Barth’s attempt was “bound to fail” (**Act and Being**, 84) because for Barth “no historical moment is *capax infiniti*,” capable of the infinite.

Bonhoeffer countered Barth’s formalistic-actualistic theology of revelation with an exposition of God’s “substantial” freedom. “God freely chose to be bound to historical human beings and to be placed at the disposal of human beings. God is free not so much from human beings but for them. Christ is the word of God’s freedom. God **is** present, that is, not in eternal nonobjectivity but—to put it quite provi-

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sionally for now—‘haveable,’ graspable in the Word within the church.” Indeed, for Bonhoeffer the crucified Jesus constitutes the very form of God’s Lordship. This innovation in “lordship” merits closer attention in order to appreciate how truly new and truly good this crucified Jesus really is.

S is for “Suffering” (Christ’s sovereignty on the cross)

Bonhoeffer’s 1930 intuitions and insights leaned determinedly toward theology of the cross. They eventually led him to his now-famous July 16, 1944 prison confession, “only the suffering God can help,” not the typical omnipotent forms of divine lordship. In **Discipleship** (1937) Bonhoeffer used a rich metaphor for this cruciform Christ: “God is a God who bears.” He continued. “The Son of God bore our flesh. He therefore bore the cross. He bore all our sins and attained reconciliation by his bearing.” Such bearing, Bonhoeffer argued, constitutes “that kind of Lord” which Jesus is rather than some other kind of lordship. With this metaphor Bonhoeffer definitively tipped his critical Christology of Lordship in a decisively cruciform direction.

Bonhoeffer saw clearly that Barth’s concept of sovereign lordship distorted and thereby wastes the *promissio*, the promise **in** Christ. Barth’s “lordship” surreptitiously accommodated itself to the modern concept of the autonomous subject by using older nominalist means. By contrast Bonhoeffer put the *promissio* into the center of his theology by placing it at the heart of his homiletical practice. Finally, he portrayed the *communicatio* in everyday speech as the “bearing God” and thus as the true correlate of *promissio*.

We turn now to the current critical retrieval of trinitarian theology and find there another true correlate of both *promissio* and *communicatio*. This trinitarian correlate is *communio*. In my account of *communio* I’ll gather together what we’ve learned from *promissio* and *communicatio* for a missional theology of the church in the new era which the Holy Spirit is richly spreading out before us.

Gary Simpson

WHO DO YOU SAY "I AM": GETTING HONEST ABOUT GOD TODAY

Crossings Second International Conference
Our Lady of the Snows Retreat Center, Belleville IL
October 19-22, 2008
(Tentative Schedule)

Monday

8:30-5:00 Workshop I: Digging for the Gospel: A Workshop in Six-Step Crossings Methodology.
[Jerome Burce](#) & the Crossings Writing Team, Facilitators

Workshop II: The Heart of Bertram's Theology: A Study of "A Time for Confessing"
[Michael Hoy](#) and [Edward Schroeder](#), Facilitators

Afternoon Conference Check-In

6:00 pm Dinner and Introductions

7:30 pm Evening Prayer

8:00 pm Wine and Cheese Reception

Tuesday

7:45 am Morning Prayer

8:15 am [Steven Kuhl](#) -- Keynote: Abraham's Paradoxical God: Fearing and Trusting the God Who Promises to Save Us from God's Self

9:30 am [John Strelan](#) -- Singing God's Tune when the Audience has turned its Back

[Marcus Felde](#) -- Is the Lord's Prayer Christian?

[Jerome Burce](#) -- Six Steps Through a Text: A Thumbnail Review

11:00 am [Gary Simpson](#) -- What Does God Require, Do, and Promise when the U.S.A. Holds Elections?

[Philip Kuehnert](#) -- The Question of God in Pastoral Care

[Edward Schroeder](#) -- Reading Real Life through the Six Step Lens

1:45 pm [John Strelan](#) -- Keynote: "And there's no other God": Being Honest-to-God about God

3:15 pm [Fred Niedner](#) -- America's God: YHWH, Baal, or Golden Calf

[Michael Hoy](#) -- Being Honest about God in Times of Confessing: Insights from Bertram

[Lori Cornell](#) -- The Six-Step Parish Practitioner

4:30 pm Round Table

7:30 pm Eucharist ([Jerome Burce](#), Preacher)

8:30 p.m. Reception

Wednesday

7:45 am Worship

8:15 am [Mary Sue Dreier](#) -- Keynote: Missional God Outside the Box

9:30 am [Robin Morgan](#) -- Confessions of the Lutheran Risk-Taker: Living Care and Redemption in the 21st Century

[Kit Kleinhans](#) -- Discipleship and Equipping the Saints

[Edward Schroeder](#) -- Crossings Theology for Missions

[Steven Kuhl](#) -- Six Steps to Worship of the Great "I AM"

11:00 am Round Table (with lunch)

12:15 Prayer and Godspeed