

Thoughts of a Manger

Colleagues,

On December 1, with arms full of greenery for the family Advent wreath, my sister-in-law Linda Schroeder was walking back across the street from the garden shop to get to her car. That's all she can remember. Witnesses say she was struck by a hit-and-run driver (who a day later did "turn himself in.") The orthopedic surgeon at St. Louis University hospital, who went to work on the shattered leg, the multiple-fractured pelvis, etc., told her later that she's a "statistical anomaly." "How so?" she asked. "People with injuries like yours bleed to death by the time the ambulance gets them to the hospital," he said.

So she's miraculously alive. The family-clan and larger community thank God. Linda too gets theological—and doxological even—as she faces 6 weeks of toe-to-tummy motionlessness before her rehab therapy can even be considered. Here's a Christmas poem from her hospital bed to close out Thursday Theology for A.D.2000.

Peace & Joy!

Ed Schroeder

Thoughts of a Manger by Linda Schroeder

. . . while they were there, the days were accomplished that she should be delivered . . . and she brought forth her first-born son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger. After the car hit her, they scooped her up and delivered her to the emergency room – and they repaired her with sutures and staples, metal plate, screws, rods and pins and braces and laid her in a hospital bed.

*Here I lie cradled in a hospital bed,
snatched in a moment from independent living,
self-determination and free range of motion,
sentenced to weeks, maybe months, of total dependency,
helplessness and captivity,
transformed instantly from fully active adulthood to an
almost infantile
state of existence.*

*And as I lie here,
looking up at life from a new perspective,
feeling swaddled in God's embrace,
I begin to wonder if this is even a hint of how it was for
Jesus.*

*There he lay in a manger,
drawn from throughout the cosmos and beyond to the confines
of planet Earth,
sentenced to many months of abject dependency and
helplessness, trapped in speechlessness and non-locomotion,
transformed metaphysically and metaethically from omnipotent
divinity to totally human infancy.*

*Incredible! Unimaginable!
Yet I do believe – – – and I can only begin to imagine.
I wonder what it was like for Jesus.*

*Here I lie in a hospital bed.
There he lay in a manger.*

*At least I can think clearly and speak. I can communicate
where it hurts and when I need to use the bedpan.
I can feed myself if someone places the food where I can
reach it.
I can use the phone and carry on my ministry through a band
of faithful COPE(*) disciples.*

*Many more than a few shepherds and wise men
have called and come
in shock, amazement and devotion,
bearing gifts of cards and flowers,
hugs and prayers.*

*My mother is not here to ponder these things, but I myself
have time aplenty for pondering.*

*I consider how my deprivation only hints at his.
I wonder what redemptive purpose my suffering may yet serve,
while never doubting the salvific nature of his earthly
sojourn and suffering.*

*I hope without assurance that I will rise again to
walk on my own two feet,
while his rising sustains, guarantees my confidence that
nothing can ever separate us from God's love.*

*Here I lie in a hospital bed.
There he lay in a manger.*

*I wonder what it was like for Jesus. And in wonderment and
jubilation I join the angel chorus:
Glory to God in the highest!!
Peace to God's people on earth!!*

(*) [COPE stands for "Congregation – Offender Partnership Enterprise," an ex-offender after-care ministry. Honchoed by Linda for the past 16 years here in St. Louis, Missouri, it is now drawing national attention.]

Christmas 2000 in Bethlehem

Colleagues,

Two years ago a dozen or so of us Crossings folks celebrated Christmas in Bethlehem. Our “home” during those days was the guest-house of the Talitha Kumi school in nearby Beit Jala. It’s mentioned in the final paragraph below. So the people and places mentioned below are woven into our own biographies. I receive messages almost every day from Christians in the Palestine/Israel war zone. This one from Lutheran bishop Younan came this morning. I pass his words on to you—weeping with those who weep—as the Feast of the Nativity comes toward us. But even tears, bitter tears, cannot eradicate the Joy to the World that came first to Bethlehem. That Joy is not a “no tears” smiley face, but faith’s confidence about the future—even as the tears roll down.

How so? With our God-problem healed by the manged Messiah (= the core meaning of the “Peace on Earth” announced by the angels), those entrusted to him have an upbeat future. Long term, big time—all the way through to resurrection. His life, now ours as well, trumps every messenger of death—snipers, missiles, gunships included. Two years ago the pastor of Christmas Lutheran Church in Bethlehem, Mitri Raheb, told us: “No, I’m not optimistic about the outcome of our conflict. Yet I still have hope.” And then playing on a Luther quote he said: “If I knew that the end of the world was coming tomorrow, I would today still plant an olive tree.” And he smiled. He trusts the Joy to the World that his congregation’s name celebrates.

God’s pacification program inaugurated at Bethlehem constitutes the grounds for the apostle’s incredible imperative in last Sunday’s second reading (Advent 3 in the Revised Common Lectionary): “Rejoice in the Lord ALWAYS!” Anticipating our “Huh?!” of disbelief he continues: “Yes, I said REJOICE, and I meant ALWAYS.” Even as the shelling

continues overhead? Yes, then too. Your Lord is “near” there as well. No matter how many volleys come out of the Gates of Hell, says this Lord, “they shall not prevail.” Oh, yes, he did say that. Could that really be true?

No, you don’t see that verified on CNN. But when you add God’s cradled Christ to even the most grisly slice of human history, that history gets re-worded. And if, as he says, “My Word shall never pass away,” then we won’t either when our story’s re-worded with his. As Bishop Younan says: “What word does God have for us at this moment? It comes to us from Bethlehem!” Read on.

Peace & Joy!

Ed

A Christmas letter from Bethlehem and Jerusalem 20 December, 2000.

From the desk of Bishop Munib A. Younan

**The Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and
Palestine (ELCJ)**

Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

Salaam and grace from the land of our Lord Jesus Christ.

A Christmas without festivities

This year’s Christmas celebrations in Bethlehem were originally planned to be the climax of the year-long festive Millennium celebrations. We are sad to tell you that this is not to be so. All the festive celebrations with concerts, shows, scout parades and activities in Manger Square and many other places in and around Bethlehem have been cancelled. This is due to the ongoing crisis situation which has until now claimed the lives of more than 325 people and wounded over 11.000 – the overwhelming majority of them being Palestinians. The entire Gaza strip – as

well as towns and villages in the West Bank – has now been sealed off for months by the Israeli forces. People are not allowed to move. Many cannot reach their places of work. The unemployment rate is now soaring in the Palestinian areas. Around a third of the entire population is at present living below the poverty level.

In this situation we ask ourselves how can we celebrate Christmas when there is no peace and no justice? How can we celebrate Christmas in a state of mourning, with bereaved families, injured youngsters, paralyzed youths and traumatized children? How can we celebrate when we are treated as prisoners and strangers in our own land?

When thinking about this year's Christmas, Psalm 137 often comes to my mind: "By the rivers of Babylon there we sat down and wept. Then our captors asked us for songs and our tormentors asked us for mirth, saying: Sing us one of your songs. But how could we sing the Lord's song in a situation like this?"

A Christmas in worship and reflection

My nine year old daughter, Martha, asked me: Is there no Christmas this year? I said: No, there are no Christmas festivities, but there is a real feeling of the people of the first Christmas.

Even with the festivity arrangements cancelled there will of course be worship services held in the churches during this Christmas. We will once again sing our Christmas hymns and listen to the Christmas story. And we will meditate and pray together as we normally do in our many liturgical traditions. But this year we will do this in a fresh spiritual way, as the difficulties we are facing give us all a possibility to reflect more deeply on the meaning of what happened at the First Christmas in Bethlehem 2000 years ago.

Then as today the situation was certainly not very romantic and beautiful. The people of the land were to register in their hometowns; thus they experienced what it is to be ordered around in their own country getting permits. The Holy Family was not accepted in any dignified inn; thus they experienced what it is to be marginalized. King Herod threatened to kill the children, thus they and their parents experienced the abuse of power by the strong against the weak. The Holy Family fled to Egypt; thus they experienced what it is to be refugees. People were under occupation and were not being respected by their rulers. There was no justice and no peace in the land. It was in the midst of this that the Babe of Justice and Peace was born in Bethlehem. It was in this situation that the celebration of the simple shepherds took place. It was in this situation that the Magi saw the star of Bethlehem and not the Apache and Cobra war helicopters. It was in this situation that the angels proclaimed what the people could not proclaim: Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace amongst those He favors (Luke 2:14)

A special Christmas in a special time

Surely our Christmas will be a special one this year when we are facing the consequences of injustice and violence. But what is even more special is that it happens so that our Moslem and Jewish neighbors also hold special religious celebrations during this Christmas season.

Our Moslem friends will then celebrate the end of Ramadan. Their month of fasting is a time of repentance and renewal in faith; a search for a genuine spiritual closeness to God, and for a new commitment for Justice and Peace. It ends with a joyous three days celebration of Id-al-Fitr. At the same time our Jewish neighbors celebrate the Hanukkah festival of light, when candles will be lit in the homes and gifts exchanged between family members. We pray that these feasts will be an opportunity to

motivate the religions possibly to contribute to just peace and reconciliation.

What word does God have for us at this moment? It comes to us from Bethlehem! We saw it with our own eyes during a candle procession held there on the Second Advent Sunday. Around 2,500 people—Palestinian Christians and Moslems as well as a delegation of visiting church leaders from the US—walked in silence between the churches and the mosque with candles in their hands. We stopped at each house of worship and listened to Scripture readings, and sang and prayed. The message from Bethlehem that evening was: We want The Power of the Light and not the Fire of Might. This is the message of Christmas for the world. For all who believe in arms and find their security in them. For all who close their eyes to injustices; for all who are blind to the truth; for all who do not see the pain and suffering of their fellow human beings; for all who are mourning, for the bereaved, and for the victims of political structures.

The light shines from the great star that rose in the dark night of Bethlehem, announcing the good news that the people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned. — For as in the day of Midian's defeat you have shattered the yoke that burdens them, the bar across their shoulders, the rod of their oppressor. Every warrior's boot used in battle and every garment rolled in blood will be destined for burning, will be fuel for the fire. For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. (Is 9:2-6)

This light of the Prince of Peace gives us hope in the dark and difficult times we are facing. And we are convinced that His

light shines in the darkness, and that the darkness has no power to overcome it.

We welcome all of you to join us in fervent prayers for a just and comprehensive lasting peace in the land of Incarnation and Resurrection. In the USA and Sweden people are taking turns to hold Prayer Vigils for Peace in churches country-wide, so that there will be people praying for peace every night and day somewhere in the world. And they will continue to pray until just peace and reconciliation will materialize. No power, no politician can deprive us Christians of the power of prayer, which is able to transform darkness into light, injustice into just peace, prejudice into friendship, fear into security, hatred into love, animosity into reconciliation, and hatred into seeing God in the other.

We thank God for each and everyone who keep us in their prayers. You are welcome to join in! Let me share with you all, a prayer by one of our children in our Lutheran school in Beit Jala:

*O Lord Jesus, protect us from danger, and distance the bombs away from our homes because they have been destroyed and we are forced to leave our homes for the street. O, Jesus distance the evil from us and the missiles and the rockets so that we can go back to living peacefully and so that Santa Claus can come to us. Our teacher told us, that at the military checkpoint the soldier did not allow Santa Claus to enter Bethlehem. We want Christmas to come and want to decorate the tree like the rest of the children in the world. O, Jesus give us courage and strength to overcome fear and to live in peace and tranquility and freedom in our beloved land and precious Palestine. Amen.
(Bisan Mousa. Third Grade. Talitha Kumi Lutheran School. Age 7)*

I wish you all A Peaceful Christmas & A Blessed New Year full of Justice and Reconciliation.

Pray for us.

Your Brother in Christ,
Bishop Munib A. Younan
The Lutheran Bishop in Jerusalem

Reflections on the Message of the Advent Season

Colleagues,

Here's something for Advent. It's the Pastor's Piece in the December 2000 newsletter from Mt. Olive Evangelical Lutheran Church, Mukwonago, Wisconsin. That pastor, Steven Kuhl, also wears a couple of other hats. He represents the Greater Milwaukee Synod of the ELCA on the Council of Churches, does some teaching at nearby St. Francis Archdiocesan Seminary, is an active partner in the Lutheran-Episcopal-Roman Catholic dialog group, plus a couple other things. And in his spare time he's the president of The Crossings Community, Inc. I hope you'll be edified as much as I was.

Peace & Joy!

Ed Schroeder

ADVENT'S ADVENTURE

Reflections on the Message of the Advent Season

On Sunday, December 3, we begin the season of Advent. Whatever all else Advent is about, one thing is certain: Advent is about

adventure. Adventure is not just an exciting trip, a vacation get-a-way. As Webster's Dictionary defines it, "adventure" is "an undertaking involving danger and unknown risks." What is the danger inherent in Advent's adventure . . . and what is the risk? Answering that question is the key, not only to understanding Advent, but all of life.

Before we can begin to answer that question, however, we must first ask "Whose adventure?" "Whose adventure is Advent about?" In the first instance, certainly not ours. Advent is, first of all, about the adventure of the Son of Man, the One who will venture into our world as the end-time judge. And that spells danger! Not for the Judge, but the judged, for "the world" engulfed in sin, including you and me.

In the "meantime" (that is, in the here and now), the world lives something like a thief, plundering and pillaging God's good creation . . . perhaps even laughing it up, under the illusory security of darkness (cf. Jn 3:19), marveling at what all it can get away with. (cf. Rom 2:3-6) But such frivolity is not the enduring theme of this world's life. The enduring theme of its life is the "end-time." The end-time is like the time when the police finally arrive – also like thieves in the night (1 Thess 5:2) since their arrival, too, is unexpected by the real thieves. Once on the scene, however, the police quickly dispel the security of the darkness with their searchlights and put an end to all mischief with cuffs and bars. In that day, there is no laughter for the plunderers of God's good creation. There is only, as Jesus often put it, "weeping and the gnashing of teeth." (Mt. 8:12; 13:42; 22:13; 24:51; 25:30)

Although the end-time has not yet come, there are signs of its impending arrival all around us. (Cf. Mt 24; Mk 13, Lk 21) Like the thief who plunders amidst the backdrop of distant sirens, so we too have reminders all around us of the final, impending

judgment. That reminder is most vivid in the fact that we live, as St. Paul says, “under law.” (cf. Rom 3:19) The law exists in our midst, not as a sign of hope, but as a reminder, in the meantime, that the end-time judgment is coming. Those who would teach that the law is given as a means of escape from sin and judgment are the worst kind of plunderers of God’s good creation. They are truly the ones who live under the illusion of darkness. For they underestimate God’s word, God’s word of judgment to come.

But if that is all that Advent’s adventure is about (namely, the future coming of the end-time Judge) then we, the Church, wouldn’t even have the nerve to observe it. But we do observe it – and that’s because for us Advent is primarily about another adventure. Not one still to come, but one that has already happened, the ramifications of which are still unfolding. Advent is about how this same, future-coming Son of Man has come already . . . “in the meantime” . . . under an alias, the name Jesus, which is code-name for “Savior.” (Mt 1:21)

In Jesus, the Son of Man comes to deliver his verdict ahead of time, at least for those who will receive it. Now that in itself is nothing to cheer about. But what is worthy of cheer is what he adds to the verdict. Surprisingly, he adds not recompense but mercy. In Jesus, the end-time Judge comes not to count sins, but to forgive sins. He comes not as Judge, but as Savior, as the One who can save us from the judgment that is to come. In effect, Advent is about how the Son of Man undermines and negates his own future appointed task as the end-time Judge.

How he makes this way of escape possible is the heart of Advent’s adventure, also known as the Christian gospel. Here is the adventure to end all adventures, the riskiest, most dangerous venture of all: the journey that makes possible the reconciliation of God and the world.

The adventure began 2000 years ago in Bethlehem with the simple birth of a child named Jesus. We dare not be fooled by the ordinariness of this beginning. This child is more than meets the eye. He is, as St. Matthew says, Emmanuel, "God with us." (Mt 1:23) That title was not originally meant to be reassuring at all. Isaiah first used it to refer to the judgment of God that would befall King Ahaz for his wavering ways. (Isa 7:14) However, as Matthew relates it to Jesus, it means not only that he is divine, the Son of God. It means that the God we have come to know through Jesus – God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit (Mt 28:19) – has placed the final outcome of the world in Jesus' hands. Because this child is also destined to be the savior of the world, his mission is clear: he must figure out a way to defeat the coming judgment, his own endtime assignment. To this end Jesus dedicates his life and sets out on the adventure of adventures, an adventure filled with danger and risk beyond compare.

The danger and risk of Jesus's adventure is evident throughout his life. For example, while still a child, King Herod ordered his death (Mt 2:16) and, as he went about his ministry of befriending sinners, the Scribes and Pharisees plotted his death. (Mk 3:6, 14:64; Mt 26:4, 65; Jn 11:53) But the most profound danger and threat that Jesus encountered on his great adventure came from God himself. As strange as that might sound, it is true. On the cross, Jesus confronted not only the judgment of his human critics, but the very judgment of God. This was the way he would save the world from the end-time judgment to come.

Think about it. It only stands right that as Jesus goes about befriending sinners he must also assume responsibility for them, for their sin and God's judgment upon them. And this is precisely his plan: to assume and conquer their sin and God's judgment. It's not that Jesus was guilty in himself. Rather, it is as Paul says: "For our sake [God] made him to be sin who knew

no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.” (2 Co 5:21). The result is that God was so impressed that he raised Jesus from the dead, effectively making him the pivotal point in history. As we believe in him so we have from him. Jesus as savior, not the anonymous end-time Judge, now becomes the enduring theme in life, at least for those who receive him in the mean-time through faith.

Therefore, for us, Advent is an adventure in faith. It is a matter of trusting in the mean-time that the end-time has been secured by Christ. What this means practically is that we live a life of repentance and forgiveness. No longer worried about the end-time judgment we through faith can entertain that judgment now, already . . . and do so with Jesus’ added benefit: resurrection hope, a new lease on life, a new life dedicated, not to the plundering and pillaging of God’s good creation, but to the care and redemption of all that he has made.

Peace be with you on your Advent adventure,
Pastor Steve

Roman Catholic – Eastern Orthodox Rapprochement

Colleagues,

Paul Goetting, like me, is a retired ELCA pastor with LCMS roots. We were classmates in seminary days—class of ’55—and teaching colleagues at Seminex. Paul and wife Trudy (nursing instructor—specialty midwifery) have been short-term missionaries off and on for a number of years. Their venues

of service include India, Afghanistan (in earlier days when that was still possible), Egypt. In 5 days they are heading to Ghana in West Africa for a semester of work at the Good News Theological College and Seminary in Accra. Good News seminary teaches students from the so-called African Indigenous Churches [AICs]. AICs might be compared to storefront churches in the USA, but not very far. With no connection to the historical "main-line" denominations, AICs regularly arise around a charismatic prophet (man or woman). They produce their own blend of Good News and local African culture—consciously syncretistic, sometimes heretical, but magnetic in its drawing power. They constitute a huge segment of today's African Christianity. Some of the AICs have membership in the millions. I hope we can pass on to ThTh readers postings from the Goettings when they are at work on location.

All the above may seem like a strange segue to a very "main-line-churches" topic: Roman Catholic – Eastern Orthodox Rapprochement. The connection is that we got it from the Goettings. They sent us this about two months ago. It was forwarded to them, they said, by "our friend, Sister AnneMarie, an RC nun, Luther Scholar, teaching at U.of Paris with whom we became friends when we were at the Tantur Ecumenical Study Center, near Bethlehem in the West Bank."

Sister Anne's note says: Quand le temps est un peu morose, les éclaircies sont bienvenues! [When times are a bit glum, breaks in the clouds are welcome!] So for your first days of Advent 2000, this welcome break in the clouds.

Peace & Joy!
Ed Schroeder

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

October 5, 2000

ORTHODOX AND CATHOLIC BISHOPS ADOPT DIALOGUE STATEMENT AT CONCLUSION OF MEETING IN CRETE

CHANIA, CRETE – The North American Joint Committee of Orthodox and Catholic Bishops adopted a statement on the Orthodox-Catholic dialogue at the conclusion of its 17th meeting, which was held on the island of Crete near Chania, Greece, from October 2nd to 4th. The statement, the full text of which is found below, takes stock of the dialogue between the two churches at both the international and national levels, and calls for an intensification of their relationship, since “continued dialogue in love is the only way that our churches can be faithful to Our Lord’s command to love one another, and to be reconciled.” The bishops joined their “prayer to those of Orthodox and Catholic faithful around the world that our churches may continue to set aside the animosities of the past and look forward in hope to that blessed day when we shall once again be united around the common table of our Lord.”

Before the meeting several of the Catholic and Orthodox bishops made a pilgrimage to monastic communities on Mount Athos, the renowned center of Orthodox monasticism, where they were warmly received. This pilgrimage was in preparation for a discussion of monasticism in the East and West. Roman Catholic Archbishop Rembert Weakland presented a paper entitled The Apostolic Letter *Orientalium Lumen* and Monasticism East and West, and Metropolitan Maximos of Pittsburgh responded. The bishops also heard a paper by Archbishop Vsevolod of Scopelos: *Primacy and Conciliarity*. The role of the laity in our churches was the theme of the final session. Archbishop Weakland presented a paper entitled, The

Role of the Laity: from Vatican Council II to the Bishops' Synod of 1987, and Metropolitan Maximos of Pittsburgh offered a response from an Orthodox perspective. After each paper a lively discussion ensued.

In the information session, the bishops exchanged views on recent events that affect the relationship between our churches, such as the situation in Ukraine and Kosovo, and discussed recent documents such as Dominus Iesus and the Note on the term "sister churches" from the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith.

This meeting of the Joint Committee of Bishops took place at the Orthodox Academy of Crete, a center of learning and dialogue founded in 1968 under the spiritual protection of the Ecumenical Patriarchate. The bishops expressed their gratitude to Dr. Alexandros Papaderos, the Director of the Academy. They were also honored to meet the venerable local hierarch, Metropolitan Irenaeos of Kissamos and Selinon, as well as Metropolitan Irenaeos of Chania and other local leaders and friends of the Academy at a dinner on the evening of October 2nd. Both hierarchs welcomed the group to Crete and expressed strong support for ongoing ecumenical dialogue between our churches.

The Joint Committee of Orthodox and Catholic Bishops was established in 1981 and is currently under the joint chairmanship of Metropolitan Maximos of Pittsburgh and Archbishop Rembert Weakland of Milwaukee. Other Orthodox members include Archbishop Peter of New York (Orthodox Church in America), Archbishop Vsevolod of Scopelos (Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the USA), Metropolitan Isaiah of Denver (Greek Orthodox Archdiocese), Metropolitan Christopher (Serbian Orthodox Church), Metropolitan Nicholas of Amissos (Carpatho-Russian Orthodox Diocese), Bishop Seraphim of Ottawa and All Canada (Orthodox Church in America), and Bishop Dimitrios of

Xanthos (Greek Orthodox Archdiocese, staff). Other Catholic members of the Committee include William Cardinal Keeler, Archbishop of Baltimore, Archbishop Alexander Brunett of Seattle, Archbishop Oscar Lipscomb of Mobile, Bishop Robert Mulvee of Providence, Bishop Dale Melczek of Gary, Bishop Edward Kmiec of Nashville, Bishop Nicholas Samra, Auxiliary of the Melkite Greek Catholic Eparchy of Newton, and Rev. Ronald G. Roberson, CSP (staff). In addition to this Joint Committee of Orthodox and Catholic Bishops, a North American Orthodox-Catholic Theological Consultation has been meeting continuously since 1965.

Statement

On the Catholic-Orthodox Dialogue At the Dawn of a New Millennium

The North American Joint Committee of Orthodox and Catholic Bishops Orthodox Academy of Crete, Chania, Greece October 4, 2000

Our Joint Committee of Orthodox and Catholic Bishops was founded in 1981 as a forum where Orthodox and Catholic hierarchs from the United States and Canada could discuss pastoral matters of concern to both our churches. Gathered together now at our 17th meeting, we wish to take stock of our Joint Committee's work, and to affirm the importance of continued and intensified dialogue between our two communions.

We look back with joy on the dramatic events of the 1960s that brought an end to the many centuries of hostility that kept us apart from one another. The meeting between Ecumenical Patriarch Athenagoras and Pope Paul VI in Jerusalem in 1964 was followed by the formal lifting of the 1054 anathemas on December 7, 1965.

Those excommunications were reversed, to be replaced by relationships of love – they were “erased from the memory of the Church” and “consigned to oblivion.” The growing dialogue of charity between Catholics and Orthodox led finally to the establishment of an official International Joint Commission for Theological Dialogue between the Catholic Church and the Orthodox Church by Ecumenical Patriarch Dimitrios I and Pope John Paul II when the Pope visited Istanbul in November 1979. This renewed relationship has been symbolized by the semiannual exchange of delegations between the sister churches of Rome and Constantinople on their respective feast days, and a rejection among our faithful of “every form of proselytism, every attitude which would or could be perceived as a lack of respect” (Common Declaration of Pope John Paul II and Ecumenical Patriarch Dimitrios I, December 7, 1987).

With gratitude we note that this theological dialogue was anticipated by almost 15 years in the United States. Prior to the establishment of our Joint Committee of Orthodox and Catholic Bishops in 1981, an official Orthodox-Catholic Theological Consultation had been meeting since September 9, 1965, even before the excommunications were lifted. In North America, where Catholics and Orthodox live side by side in a place that is to a large extent free of the political and religious tension that has often been present in our countries of origin, our theological dialogue has been able to make much progress and to address various theological and pastoral questions touching upon our relationship. At its June 2000 meeting, our North American Theological Consultation issued a document entitled, “Sharing the Ministry of Reconciliation: Statement on the Orthodox-Catholic Dialogue and the Ecumenical Movement.” We wish to express our satisfaction with this important text, and we recommend it warmly to our faithful. We make our own its evaluation of the Catholic-Orthodox dialogue

and the broader ecumenical movement as rooted in the very actions of God who “desires everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth” (I Tim. 2:4).

The fall of communism in Eastern and Central Europe and the establishment of religious freedom in those countries ten years ago now is a source of deep joy for all people of faith. But these profound changes also unleashed hostilities between our communities there that had remained under the surface, unaddressed during the long years of persecution, isolation, and silence. These problems focused on the status of the Eastern Catholic Churches and questions of property. At the same time, strident currents emerged in both our churches in those areas, fueled in part by the suspicion that ecumenism was a betrayal of the true faith, and that it had been manipulated by the communist authorities for their own ends in an attempt to weaken authentic Christian witness. This points to the urgent need to present the true nature of ecumenical dialogue, not as a betrayal of anyone’s faith, but as an effort to understand what we truly have in common at a level deeper than our divisions and theological formulae.

All this has had a negative impact on the international dialogue which for the past ten years has been struggling to deal in a satisfactory way with the question of the status of the Eastern Catholic Churches. We regret that the Eighth Plenary Session of the international dialogue, held in July 2000 at Emmitsburg, Maryland, was unable to make progress on this and other significant issues.

The difficulties that have recently beset the international dialogue do not alter our conviction that continued dialogue in love is the only way that our churches can be faithful to Our Lord’s command to love one another, and to be reconciled. Indeed, when difficulties arise the need for dialogue becomes

even greater. As we look back on our experience of dialoguing with one another as bishops of the Orthodox and Catholic churches, we realize that through an honest and well informed exchange of views a solution to even the most persistent disagreements can be perceived. Our Joint Committee of Bishops has issued statements dealing with Ordination, Mixed Marriages and the recent tensions in Eastern and Central Europe, and we are confident that much more progress can be made on these and other issues. We encourage our Orthodox and Catholic faithful everywhere to engage one another in an exchange of views in a spirit of openness and humility so that the Spirit's work of reconciliation might continue, for the glory of God.

Our Joint Committee is meeting on the island of Crete, whose soil has been fed by the blood of a host of martyrs, and whose history has not been unaffected by our sad divisions. We take this opportunity to give thanks to God for the great strides that have been made to overcome what divides us. As the new millennium dawns, we join our prayer to those of Orthodox and Catholic faithful around the world that our churches may continue to set aside the animosities of the past and look forward in hope to that blessed day when we shall once again be united around the common table of our Lord.

The Enlightenment That Won't Go Away: Modernity's Crux

Robert W. Bertram

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Abstract.

The Critical Process unleashed by the Enlightenment and endlessly resharpening itself to this day has mortally wounded the God of Deism, maybe also of theism, even of Christianity. A temptation of Christian theology is to retreat in denial into an updated version of Deism, seemingly granting full license to modern science but only so long as it does not impugn God's love. The alternative here proposed is to ride out The Critical Process, in fact to encourage it, all the way into modernity's crux: How can a design that is not benign still be divine? The Christian reply is: through a real death of God and of ourselves as well, and through resurrections beginning now, thus freeing The Critical Process from the illusion of insuring our survival and, instead, for the honest Enlightenment task of merely telling the truth.

Keywords: Christian theology; The Critical Process; critical reason; crux; Charles Darwin; Deism; Enlightenment; evil; David Hume; postmodernism; rationalism; science; survival; yoke.

Editor Philip Hefner has asked that I respond informally to Zygon's March 2000 "Discussion: Rethinking Christian Theology in Light of Science." The discussion opened with two set pieces on that subject by Arthur Peacocke and David Pailin, followed by a critique from Vitor Westhelle, all three of them variously (though enviably) knowledgeable in science and theology. The discussion as a whole was introduced by a canny, provocative lead-in written by the editor himself, which simply must be

included in my response. In fact I have had trouble, as the reader will see, getting beyond the thesis Hefner advances in his introduction and hence reading the three essays in any other light than the one in which Hefner casts them. They deserve much more. But each of the three in its own way bears Hefner out, though they may not all want to.

Hefner entitled his introduction "The Enlightenment Won't Go Away (Hefner 2000). Because it won't, at least just yet, I am thankful. Westhelle may be, too, if he can agree that his thoughtful brand of postmodernism is really more "modern" than "post," hence more Enlightenment, at least in one fundamental respect. In that same fundamental respect, however, Peacocke and Pailin strike me as deeply ambivalent about the Enlightenment. For its ongoing, withering critique—most recently now in postmodernism but long before that—devastates not only the sort of religion they themselves reproach but, if I am right, their own religion as well. Pailin posits and Peacocke seconds "that the basic structure of reality. . . [encourages] people to feel at home in it because it is a basically purposive process that. . . respects human values," and all because of theism's God (Pailin 2000, 149, quoted in Peacocke 2000, 132). Yet isn't it exactly this uncritically optimistic theism that is refuted by the scientific rationality that Peacocke and Pailin, out of the other side of their argument, wish to champion? They can have it both ways, it seems to me, only by hoping the Enlightenment will go away.

Granted, that is not how they understand themselves. Pailin spurns theological notions that are "pre-Enlightenment" (p. 146), and Peacocke sees himself as "one for whom the inheritance of the Enlightenment is ... irreversible in its effects on theology" (p. 121). So I may have them wrong. However, the suspicion continues to haunt. The theology that both Peacocke and Pailin appear to want is not so much Christian theology, the

subject assigned for this "Discussion," as it is a somewhat Christianized version of "natural theology" (Pailin's own word for it) with distinct debts to the old deistic tradition of a religion of "reason." That inheritance, of course, comes "naturally" to English Christians like our two essayists. That early strand of the Enlightenment, namely deistic rationalism, they loyally uphold.

Then what is it about the Enlightenment that they seem to wish would go away, if they do at all? I am thinking merely of eighteenth-century critics of rationalism, David Hume for example. Pailin, far more than Peacocke, acknowledges the embarrassment posed by that criticism, though I don't find Pailin incorporating it into his own proposal. Peacocke would not have had to wait until twentieth-century "neo-orthodoxy" for its irksome strictures on natural theology. He has far more telling (and far more rational) strictures to complain about right on his own island, two centuries before. Notice, I am assuming that Humean skepticism, opposed though it is to an earlier stage of Enlightenment thought, is itself one further stage in that same continuing Enlightenment. So, I contend, is postmodernism, its own claims to the contrary notwithstanding. In any case, this historical assumption figures materially in my agreement with Hefner that "the Enlightenment won't go away," at least in one fundamental respect. For that reason, *Deo gratias*.

What we mean by "the Enlightenment," of course, is subject to definition. Still, it is not a wax nose. Though it is hardly one thing, it is this and not that. There is something about the Enlightenment that through all its subsequent self-corrections demonstrably perdures. It is in light of that larger something, not only "in light of science," that Christian theology needs to be rethought, "enlightened." Science, too, might further profit from the same enlightenment. Certainly both of them together could, science-and-theology. And what is it about the

Enlightenment that won't go away? Answer: its very criticalness. It is that historic vocation that free peoples have inherited from the Enlightenment (not to mention the Reformation, and before) to be unsparingly critical, sparing not even themselves in the process. But hasn't Enlightenment critique been particularly hard on traditional religion, also Christian theology? Yes, particularly. Yet Christian theology can also, I hope, weather and welcome that criticism and, as in this small essay, do its bit to promote it. That requires neither masochism nor a theological game of chicken ("more self-critical than thou"), just a rationale for survival, outliving the very mortifying process we simultaneously employ.

May I call that The Critical Process? It works through, but is not limited to, our own critical reason. Indeed, such reasoning itself comes under criticism from itself. It implodes in self-contradiction, precisely when it is most critical. For that reason I am stretching toward a more inclusive term, The Critical Process, so as not to restrict this phenomenon prematurely. It is a process not only in which we engage but which engages us, even consumes us. Today's critics are tomorrow's criticized, each new critical wave engulfing the one before, but the movement as such seems to sustain a momentum of its own. Then, is the process an infinite regress? I do know there have been historic moments—moments of great daring, perhaps, or despair?—when the most critical reasoners (Hume, for example, or Theodor Adorno or Elie Wiesel) have tried to bring this whole infinite regress to heel. They have forced a showdown by bringing under The Critical Process the very Source of that process, demanding a reckoning from . . . whom? The ultimate Critic? God? The prophets and Jesus showed similar chutzpah. Most of us, I suppose, shrink from such hazardous consistency, what religious people call blasphemy or atheism. Instead, we prefer the safety of compromise and denial, slackening The

Critical Process while we are still (presumably) ahead. Both kinds of critics, the consistent and the inconsistent, and many subkinds in between, now float in the wake of The Critical Process unleashed by the Enlightenment. It is a process we cannot live without, we moderns, anymore than we can live with it.

Consider an example, the critical science and theology of Victorian England. In Hefner's aforementioned introduction he cites A. N. Wilson's recent book, *God's Funeral*. The book is a devastating but not unsympathetic recounting of Wilson's English ancestors in the nineteenth century who did what they had to do, get rid of God. It is not that Wilson cannot understand their plight. After all, the God whom they had inherited, hence the God whom they denied, was little more than the God of the Deists, not the Christians' God with whom Wilson identifies. So he construes the Victorian deicides as good riddance. For that very reason, however, Wilson finds it no wonder that these new atheists, having freed themselves from what they thought was God, should then still pine for some Godlike replacement, at least a moral and aesthetic equivalent. The only God they had succeeded in killing was a figment to begin with. It was a construct which Deists had concocted in hopes of salvaging a religion of reason to satisfy Enlightenment criteria. It did not satisfy the Victorians who followed, who (as I read the history) out-enlightened the Enlightenment Deists by finishing God off—this deistic God—not realizing how they, too, were still undershooting the real thing. That is why they themselves were not satisfied, not religiously. As Hefner concludes, "The Enlightenment won't go away, and the same can be said of traditional religion" (2000, 117). Mightn't it be that on one point at least the Enlightenment and "traditional religion" are joined by a common "yoke" (Greek: *zygon*), namely, The Critical Process?

What I would underscore, more than Wilson himself might, is that these nineteenth-century critics who overthrew the God of their age were not only opposing the Enlightenment, as they believed they were. They were also, willy-nilly, advancing it. True, they attacked the Enlightenment in its earlier form as Deism. But the Enlightenment as The Critical Process they vigorously perpetuated, of course in new ways but every bit as aggressively as the first wave of Enlightenment critics had. Indeed, it was not until the Victorians rediscovered him that Hume, from the previous century, finally came into his own as the unmasker of Deism. (Wilson calls him a "time bomb.") In his *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* (1779), in the person of Philo, Hume had cited Epicurus's classic trilemma on the problem of evil. The implication should have been clear then already though Hume's deist contemporaries may not have been ready for it: If God is able and willing to prevent evil but does not, why call him God? That option, atheism, was Epicurus's own preference. Was it Hume's? Probably not. Certainly the Victorians'. Therewith they finally did in the God of the Deists, Paley's Watchmaker, the absentee landlord whom Deists imagined they had kept sufficiently aloof from the messiness and pitilessness of "what is" so as to salvage God's reputation as God. Charles Darwin, though not without personal struggles of his own, administered the final blow. "What is" could now be explained by natural selection, without recourse to the hypothesis of a Designer.

On further thought, was it only the God of the Deists who succumbed? Mightn't it have been the God of Wilson's own "theism" as well? (In fairness, Wilson does seem to allow for that.) Evidently Darwin thought so, or, if he wavered, many of his followers surely think so. In any event, the question is a fair one still today: Isn't the God of Christian theology, which Zygon rightly asks us to "rethink," likewise implicated in the

Victorians' attack? After all, the problem of evil, which is really a euphemism for the problem of God, is no less embarrassing for today's theists, let alone Christians, than it was a century ago. Our answer to that question about God, now as ever, really depends on how far we are prepared to ride out The Critical Process—all the way to the death of God, our God, not just the Deists' God?

Even we, for all our differences from the Deists, still have a stake, as they did, in God as Creator. Yes, more than they did, with our Creator being so much more immanent than theirs. And for that conviction we have not only faith but good reason. For is it really so far fetched, isn't it in fact altogether reasonable, critically reasonable, to infer that there is plenty of "design" in the world about us, especially if we are already persuaded on other than scientific grounds? At least for the previously convinced, always glad for corroboration of their faith, design is massively evident whether or not they need to invoke it to solve their technological or bench-science problems. But then might not Pailin and Peacocke be right after all about reality as "basically purposive" and respectful of "human values"?

The trouble is that what is equally reasonable is the opposite: whatever design there is is hardly universally benign. Science itself will not let us forget that. The very IBE (inference to the best explanation) that Peacocke urges upon us, rightly so, infers to the diametric opposite of his own counterfactual optimism. So here we have two lines of reasoning, both compelling, coming into collision with each other. (Pailin seems to sense that better than Peacocke does.) That is what I meant earlier by saying critical reason implodes upon itself and does so precisely by being most reasonable. It is reasonable to expect that in, with, and under all this awesome complexity is the Creator we believe in, and that any such Creator is both

able and willing to prevent evil. Alas, it is just as reasonable to observe that this Creator conspicuously does not prevent evil or, worse, sometimes does and sometimes does not. That sort of selectiveness—call it favoritism—makes Epicurus's taunt all too understandable: Then why call that God? In short, if the design is not benign, can it be divine?

Martin Luther acknowledged the problem exactly as a God problem—and sweated it. Erasmus shifted the problem to humanity, positing just enough free will in us to make us the guilty ones. (Luther asked him why he “accused” human beings in order to “excuse” God.) Calvin defended God's partiality, both ways. Darwin, let it be said to his credit, did not blink the old question, Why some and not others? Remember how *On The Origin of Species* is subtitled, *The Preservation of Favored Races in the Struggle for Life*. But he evades the scandal of blaming the favoritism on God, in this respect still like the Deists, by attributing it instead to the selectiveness of “Nature.” Theologically, that is arbitrary. It would have been at least as truthful to admit that this scandalous “design” seems intentional and that its Intender thereby frustrates human rationality at its most honest, moral best.

Wasn't it William James who in protest exclaimed, “Damned if I'll call that God”? So that's why. “The Absolute” of the idealists struck James as one who is able and willing to prevent evil but does not, therewith demanding our rejection. But on pain of damnation? James was capable of feeling damned, also of saying so. Then perhaps *that* is why, when faced with a nonbenign design, we reject this self-implosion of reason: to avoid blaming God, yes, but only so as to avoid our own “damnation” or, in secular terms, the death of our rational selves. But at all costs, even the truth? We have been known to abdicate even the truth in order to salvage what we can of ourselves. Might not that have been the stronger impulse behind Deism, not only

Darwinism, stronger even than the impulse toward theodicy, namely, the all-out human drive to survive? In the *Zygon* "Discussion" before us, Peacocke unabashedly stakes his case for the trust-worthiness of our "cognitive processes" on how they have insured our "survival," for him a big word—so big, he senses it may subject him to the postmodernists' charge of "foundationalism" (2000, 125- 26). Also, he makes no effort to conceal his own debt to prestigious Deists who, with Erasmus before them, tailored their notion of reason to what was humanly advantageous (p. 121). And why not? Well, for one reason, as Peacocke to his credit concedes, "The extent" to which evolutionary biology insures the survival benefits of human rationality "is still an open, indeed confused question" (p. 126; emphasis added). To say the least. That admission, though still too modest, sounds more like the persistent Enlightenment conscience that I have been calling The Critical Process. Precisely by its rational doggedness it not merely insures but eventually incriminates our survival, and not just biologically.

This mortifying collision of critical reason with itself, this theological crux of modernity which the sciences are good at abetting, may just be the ultimate example of what Westhelle (2000,169-70) calls humanity's "limit" situations. Still, taken by itself, that is not yet Christian theology. But it may be a radicalized natural theology, which Christian theology can help parlay into the common good. That won't be easy, if only because of the resistance my proposal will encounter right within the theological establishment. For this proposal, too, is one of those "subjugated knowledges" that, in Michel Foucault's apt phrase, cries out for "insurrection." More imaginative Christians will plump for insurrection via resurrection. I mean resurrection in the here and now. Of course, that also presupposes dying here and now, though now an enlightened dying. For the crux is played out in a real death of God, who for now

might better go unnamed. (Perhaps to heighten suspense? To observe the church's "Discipline of The Secret"?) Meanwhile, we might at least drop a hint. He was the one who claimed that his "yoke," or *zygon* (pronounced *dzuGON*, rhymes with "begone") is altogether reasonable, or, as he put it, "easy" (Matthew 11:30). I take this to mean that, because the burden has shifted to his side, The Critical Process (including critical reason) is liberated from the illusion of insuring our survival and is freed instead to do its own thing, tell the truth. That way the Enlightenment not only won't go away, it could just come into its own.

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[The Enlightenment That Won't Go Away: Modernity's Crux \(PDF\)](#)

Crossings Theology: Roots and Branches

Colleagues,

The posting of 2 weeks ago, ThTh 127, linking the lectionary-appointed Gospel for Thanksgiving Day 2000 (in the USA) to theological instruction at Valparaiso University forty-plus years ago, elicited some responses. Here are three of them. You may remember that ThTh 127 reported on the “new curriculum” [New Testament Readings, aka NTR] at V.U. in the late 1950s and the significance of Matt. 6:24-34 in that whole enterprise. Today's three responses are from **(1) Bob Bertram**, the “head honcho” of the whole NTR operation; then **(2) Walt Keller**, a new instructor on the dept. staff as the venture was launched; and finally **(3) Joan Cole-Heine**, a VU student at the time of the first run of the experiment. Bob and Walt are both retired—well, sortuv. Joan is a long-term deaconess recently ordained as Lutheran pastor at a nursing home in Canada.

Peace & Joy!
Ed Schroeder

1. Dear Ed,

For a seventy-year old your memory is remarkable. (Ten years from now, you'll discover, it will be even better.) The way you recollected the "Programming of the Pericope," Matthew 6:25-34, from our curriculum at Valpo over forty years ago is almost photographic. I should know, I was the one who wrote that programming (You said I honchoed the "prime paradigm" and the rest of you "hammered it out." Actually we all hammered it out, beginning with the honcho. Since Mt. 6 was the first gospel lesson in the fall semester, the chairman had to go first.) To this day I—you too, I suspect—have been made to eat my title for that first programming, "the grasslike fate," which you quote. In short, we not only hammered the text out, it hammered us out—at the hands of many of our critics then and since. And wasn't that the whole point of the pericope, something even we cocky faculty found hard to learn? "Following" the Matthean Jesus meant following him right through the flames of his cremation? What is so good about that Good News is that his cremation is our New Creation. Sometimes our students, like Gail McGrew Eifrig [current editor of VU's magazine, THE CRESSET], learned that better than we, their teachers, did. You're right: it is to give thanks for. Along with Gail's moving memoir of those heady days, there is the article by Jerome Taylor in the prestigious Roman Catholic journal COMMONWEAL almost exactly forty years ago (1/29/60). With that the Valpo curriculum became a national headline, only exacerbating our celebrity/notoriety. It's been hard to live with us ever since. We made enemies the old-fashioned way: we earned them.

Nevertheless, Peace and Joy!

Bob Bertram

2. Ed:

ThTh 127 sent me way back down Memory Lane. I dug up my file for Fall Semester, 1959, the first semester I taught at Valpo. I have the NTR-1 syllabus [first course for freshmen] from that semester, complete with all the notes I took to work my way into that Mysterious Master Mind behind that syllabus. The title for Trinity 15: Anxiety, Hatred, Distrust, and Grass, so fully descriptive of a young instructor, recently come from the familiar surroundings of the parish, trying to become a worthy professor in the unfamiliar surroundings of a university full of Ph.Ds. Those years were not so much a "Platzregen," as they were years of "Sturm und Drang," that ultimately yielded (I speak autobiographically) to the gentler rains that watered the earth and made it fruitful in all the years that followed. For that I thank God and all His earthly agents. When our current VU Academic V-P (now Provost) Austenson came aboard (How many years ago now?) he soon met with the Department of Theology, went around the horn and asked us each in turn for a brief verbal bio. When I said I had come in 1959, he interrupted to say/ask, "You were one of Bertram's boys?" "Yes," I gladly acknowledged, although I felt as though I had been tattooed for life!

Thanks for the memories!

Walt Keller

3. Dear Ed,

What prompted this letter was my search for the new Series C Sabbatheology from Crossings (but it's not there yet). I stopped at the Thanksgiving Day ThTh [#127, Valparaiso University and Matthew 6]. Now I could have used that back in October, since I had to preach on [our Canadian]

Thanksgiving Sunday. Well, having been thoroughly versed in grass-like fate some years ago, I had little trouble dealing with the text. But it would have been nice to have your words of wisdom. The thing is, I had a funeral the day before (for a really fine lady), and on Sunday morning here in the nursing home, just as I was ready to start the service, in trooped her whole family. Well, I'm no ad-libber, so I just went ahead with what I had. I wouldn't have changed it anyway. Sin is sin, the cross is the cross, and Christ says we're his. You can't top that. Funny thing: on your US Thanksgiving Day, I had another funeral. I didn't use the grass-like fate pericope, but I guess I could have. Only an angry son and his wife showed up for the graveside service. But the message was still: sin is sin, the cross is the cross, Christ came to save scoundrels, and only he knows if the man was ever able to hear or believe what I had ever said to him or prayed for him. The son left in a huff – not a good thing.

I must say that I miss good theology around here. We had a clown for worship for Christ the King Sunday – running around the chancel, jumping up on the pews, crawling all over the floor – I never got the point, except that the pastor loves to entertain. Of course, the last word in his shenanigans is always JESUS, and he thinks that's enough gospel for us. Well, I'm sure that, even if I don't hear much gospel at the church I attend, the people at the nursing home do hear it when I preach. And I hear it, too, because I often preach to me.

Anyway, thanks for good theology that I get through Crossings. The peace of Christ be in you. Blessings. Joan

F.Y.I. Couple months ago we mentioned that the money had run out

to pay our listserve-provider. The response was underwhelming—four checks came in from the 600 of you. Like Florida election officials these days, we're still trying to interpret the vote. If you didn't cast the ballot you intended when we first mentioned our need, you can do so now and it will still count. There'll be no court challenge. It's also tax-deductible. Here's the address: Crossings, P.O.Box 7011, St. Louis, MO 63006-7011.

Cheers!
Ed

A Book Review on “Proclaiming the Scandal.”

Colleagues,

Today's offering, on Thanksgiving Day (USA), expresses my thanks for the gift Jerome Burce has given us with the book reviewed below. As you'll divine beginning with my opening line, I commend it to you with no reservations.

Peace & Joy!

Ed Schroeder

PROCLAIMING THE SCANDAL. REFLECTIONS ON POSTMODERN MINISTRY

By Jerome E. Burce

Christian Mission and Modern Culture series (no number)

Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International

2000, x, 124 pp, paper, \$12.00

All readers of Thursday Theology will want to buy this book and read it. If for no other reason than that one of the "References Cited" in the bibliography at the back is, you guessed it, "Thursday Theology," the stuff you're reading right now. That's a first as far as I know in published books.

Of course, there are even better reasons for commending Jerome (aka Jerry) Burce's book, though some of them may sound a bit in-house. How so "in -house?" Answer: Seminex in-house. "Proclaiming the Scandal" is a pastoral theology—the only one I know of in print—built on the systematic theology taught at Seminex. Jerry attended Seminex in the mid-70s, critically ingested the law/promise theology of the cross we all learned there, and was graduated one of our brightest and best.

His first call was back to Papua New Guinea where he grew up. [His parents were part of the first wave of LC-MS missionaries to PNG after WW II.] Before long Jerry was principal of a bush seminary in the highlands. Family medical needs compelled a return to the US, and Jerry has pastored 2 Lutheran congregations, one in Connecticut, one suburban Cleveland, since then. His book is solidly linked to those years of pastoral work, much of it openly autobiographical—"where I goofed, what I learned, what I had to learn all over again."

During the decade of Seminex's existence I once offered a seminar called: Using "Seminex" Theology for Ministry. A total of two students signed up, but we did it anyway. Jerry wasn't one of them, and neither of those original two are parish pastors any longer. But Jerry's book is a classic case of what

that seminar proposed to do. Only he has done it better, much better, than I remember us doing.

“Seminec theology” is no shibboleth for some sacred cow. But the core of that theology, what we then called “the promising tradition” [accent on God’s PROMISE], is what Jerry builds on—consciously, confessingly, convincingly—for articulating the “scandal” that the Gospel genuinely is. And then in retrospect on his own years of ministry, he crosses that scandal—paradoxically enough good news—into our crazy, mixed-up, so-called “postmodern” world today.

Proclaiming the Scandal is the 26th (and maybe last) in the Trinity Press International series “Christian Mission and Modern Culture.” The authors who preceded him in the series represent the Who’s Who of missiology today. The series aims to:

1. Examine modern/postmodern culture from a missional point of view;
2. Develop the theological agenda that the church in modern culture must address in order to recover its own integrity;
3. Test fresh conceptualizations of the nature and mission of the church as it engages modern culture. In other words, these volumes are intended to be a forum where conventional assumptions can be challenged and alternative formulations explored.

These three aims are (almost) the outline of Jerry’s book—at least for the final three of his four chapters. His brilliant first chapter is a lead-in to that trio. Its title is “The Gospel as Scandal.” Now you might at first expect this chapter to reflect on St. Paul’s linking these two nouns in his epistles. Not really. It’s Jerry’s tale of his painful learning in the parish that the Gospel was a scandal—not to the outsiders, but to his own parishioners . He could never coax

them to say it out loud in conversation, not even to him. They choked up instead of offering even the simplest statement of the Good News.

Even within the safe four walls of council meetings where pastor and lay leaders were arm-wrestling the congregation's future, the best they could say for why this or that proposal was commendable was: we want to attract new members to our church. When Jerry persisted and asked the Why? question again, no one was able to say anything that sounded even vaguely like THE Gospel. Slowly, painfully, he learned that today's "pastor faces a two-fold challenge: first, to arrive at a fuller understanding of how it is that cultural assumptions of his flock are impeding their Gospel confession; and second, to ascertain a way of surmounting these impediments."

He speaks to the first challenge in chapter 2: The Gospel as Proscribed Speech. Without walking us through the theological literature of postmodernism—though he patently knows it—Jerry walks us through his congregation to have us see how today's culture "proscribes" Gospel talk, makes it a "no-no" to say out loud in any "proper" conversation out in public. That is true even for public conversation among believers, even when those believers are "in church" deliberating on the church's business. Only in the Sunday liturgy is Gospel speech kosher, and there (thank God!) the pastor does the most of it.

He then links this parish experience of "a tongue-tied church" and the "spiritual agnosticism" underlying it to the still deeper "roots of repression in current North American culture." This chapter concludes:

"[My congregation] members are crippled by the pessimistic epistemology of their natal culture. This renders it horrendously difficult, if not impossible, for the

congregation to reflect and practice its identity as Church and, in so practicing, to act openly in accordance with its churchly vocation. The words on which that vocation depends are 'off limits.' Weirdly, Christians themselves become the enforcers of rules which work against the very Word in whom their life and purpose is found."

"The Gospel as Required Speech" is the next chapter. It's Jerry's constructive proposal for the next question."How shall pastors proceed in leading them beyond this impasse?" So it's specific pastor-to-pastors talk. I shall not chronicle in detail—get the book and read it for yourself. It's only twelve bucks, ten cents a page, a steal!

This much to whet the appetite. There are criteria ("game rules") for what is, and what is not, Gospel. Our culture is awash with good news proposals that are not the Gospel—and Jerry shows why they are not. Within the church's proclamation—across the denominational spectrum—other gospels are being offered that are also not the Gospel—and Jerry shows why they too are not. His four pages (69-73) on the specs of the "required Gospel" are worth the price of the book.

Jerry concludes these 4 pages with this encouragement:

"Finally, the Gospel, at once utterly scandalous and riotously splendid in its newsy goodness, is God's ongoing response to the present dilemma of tongue-tied ministers and reluctant confessors. The Church's pastors therefore have nothing except the Gospel to say as they seek to respond to this same dilemma. Let them say it with joy and confidence, for 'with God all things are possible.' The rich can be saved, including those whose wealth consists in an overabundance of religious options. This means that postmodern camels can also be drawn through the needle's eye of the Church's confession; or so implies the

Church's Lord (Matt 19:24-26)."

The final chapter, "The Gospel as Promising [sic!] Proclamation" does a reprise on the tongue-tied parishioners and finds signs of hope even among these "agnostically stricken doubters who face us from the pews Sunday after Sunday." The grounds for that hopefulness is the promising Gospel itself. "The doubting faithful are not keeping the promise to themselves but are getting it out and making it known. Someway, somehow. If not by shouting it, then by leaking it."

Christ's own original inner circle were a dozen like this, "doubting faithful, faithful agnostics, who manage in spite of themselves to keep on confessing that Jesus is Lord." When their Lord promises that they will "receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you," this is "patently not a command. It is wildly a promise. Exactly how wild is seen when the Holy Spirit, blowing where the Holy Spirit wills, turns the craven denier into the rock-solid confessor and makes polyglot linguists out of Galilean yahoos."

This chapter's "coda" cements pastor and parishioners under the same diagnostics. "We pastors not only preach to the postmodern, we are the postmodern. Our ability to recognize the anxieties of those we minister to stems in huge part from the fact that we find them in ourselves." And Promising Proclamation is "Gospel for us Let Christ be dinned into our ears by those we trust to tell of him faithfully and well, whether we find them in the books they write or among the colleagues with whom we gather in the mutual conversation and consolation of the faithful. Let the bread be placed in our mouths and the cup lifted to our lips by hands other than our own, the accompanying words uttered by someone else who, believing them, thereby invites us, again, into the circle of faith, faith that clings

against all reason to astounding, unthinkable words, ‘The body of Christ, given FOR YOU. The blood of Christ shed FOR YOU. . . .’ We will not shout the Gospel from our pulpits until it has been shouted into our hearts.”

From the longer citations presented above you detect that Jerry is a word-crafter, maybe even a rhetorician. Already in Seminary days his written work was literary, publishable stuff. Even in conversation he’s like that. His prose is not prosaic. I remember reading somewhere that Goethe had a similar affliction; even when talking about the weather, it came out in iambic pentameter. Jerry would countermand the comparison, I know. But he is a marvelous word-smith. If you read the book for yourself—as I am fiercely recommending with this rave review—here are the first words you’ll encounter at the top of page 1:

“Ever so slowly the dam softens, and words, seeping fitfully through crevices of synapse and neuron, wire and pixel, begin their altogether wondrous appearance on the computer screen before me.”

A Crossing for Thanksgiving Day 2000

Colleagues,

By popular demand (well, actually one Crossings junkie explicitly asked for it) I’m composing a Crossings style text study of this year’s Gospel (Revised Standard Lectionary)

appointed for the USA Day of Thanksgiving, a week hence on November 23, 2000. So substantively this Thursday Theology #127 belongs to the genre "Sabbatheology" (=text studies). But Thanksgiving in the USA is always a Thursday, the 2nd last one in November, so the ThTh label fits too.

Peace & Joy!

Ed Schroeder

Some history. The lectionary Gospel for this year's Thanksgiving Day, Matthew 6:25-34, was a "biggie" in my very first years as a teacher. It also is a cardinal text in the history of Crossings. How so?

Back in the late 1950s a few of us young Turks, most of us not yet thirty, theology instructors at Valparaiso University in northwest Indiana, were commissioned by the university prez to "do something!" about the Sunday-School style religion courses at Valpo. What was common at church-related colleges then was true with us too: four required two-credit-hour courses, all "survey" stuff—one each in Bible, doctrine, church history and ethics.

Head honcho for carrying out the "do something" mandate was new dept. head, Bob Bertram (he was over thirty!). Bob conjured the prime paradigm, we younger Turks hammered it out. Here's how it went. Use the church lectionary as the theological backbone for the required four courses. Use the Gospel readings and their theological substance, week for week as they came up during the two semesters of the freshman year. Do likewise with the epistle pericopes for the sophomore year. Connect those readings ("cross them," we now say) to slice-of-life stuff from the student's own environment—academic and personal—as well as to the secular and churchly culture roundabout. Constrain students to practice such crossings in written work each week.

It was a wild experiment, conflicted all the way—within the department, within the university, and with many a student's hometown pastor. We had about 5 good years, something akin to Luther's word about God's "Platzregen" that showers the land for a while—and then moves on. Later still, Bertram in '63 and I in '71 moved on to Concordia Seminary in St. Louis and then into Seminex. The penchant for the pericopes and crossings-theology came along. Eventually the Crossing Community, Inc., a Missouri-not-for-profit corporation, came into being. Sabbaththeology and Thursday Theology continue the tradition.

If you want to know more about those origins, consult the current issue of Valparaiso University's magazine, THE CRESSET (Reformation, 2000). Editor Gail McGrew Eifrig, a V.U. freshman when it all started in 1958, devotes 4 perceptive pages to this slice of her own life and what it did and didn't do for the university to which she returned some years later as prof herself.

So what's that got to do with Matt. 6 and Thanksgiving Day? you ask. First you must remember that in 1958 there was no three-year lectionary. Just a one-year lectionary with the same texts coming around again year after year as they had for perhaps a 1000 years in the Western Church.

So Matt. 6:25-34 was always the appointed Gospel for the 15th Sunday after Trinity. Even though the calendric mobility of Easter lengthened/shortened the Trinity season, Trinity 15 regularly popped up in September. So the fall semester of "New Testament Readings: Gospels," freshman introduction to "university theology," began with Matt. 6:25-34. And it proved to be a shocker.

Here in the Sermon on the Mount Jesus is preaching on the first commandment, saying that there are really only two

options—serving God or serving Mammon. You can only have one god at a time. Most all of our students knew that, and they (most of them LCMS Lutherans) had long since opted to serve God. No big deal. But Jesus' own diagnosis presses deeper. Do you worry? he asks. Of course, we do. Who doesn't? Well, then, do you notice that Jesus links worry with serving Mammon, not with serving God? So if you do worry—and who doesn't—you are a first-commandment-breaker. Now, wait a minute! And as if that's not bad enough notice how Jesus' diagnosis gets grimmer and grimmer as he pushes deeper. It's even worse than that.

I can't lay my hands on the ancient syllabus pages for Trinity 15 right now, but I think I can reconstruct the Crossings-style paradigm. First I'll key in the text (NRSV).

Matthew 6:25-33

RSL Gospel for (United States) Thanksgiving Day, November 23, 2000

24No one can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth (mammon). 25Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? 26Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? 27And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? 28And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, 29yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his

glory was not clothed like one of these. 30But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith? 31Therefore do not worry, saying, “What will we eat?” or “What will we drink?” or “What will we wear?” 32For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. 33But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. 34So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today’s trouble is enough for today.

I think we took 4 steps to get down to the final diagnosis—

Bad News: The Human Malady

1. Worry about anything, any anxiety about tomorrow, is part of the bad news of human life. But it’s even worse than that.
2. Root of that, says Jesus, is distrust of God as “Father in heaven,” – “you of little faith.”
3. Worse still (according to v.24) is, you are not trusting God, “devoted, serving” God, says Jesus; you are “hating, despising” God. He disallows any third possibility.
4. But it’s even worse than that. Note Jesus’ words about grass—here today, in the oven tomorrow. Sounds like a “grass-like fate” for God-distrusters.

[I do remember that in class we checked the Exodus text for the original promulgation of the first commandment and noted the grim words for those who “do not love me and keep my commandment,” a visit from God with a total wipe-out clause. Grass-like fate indeed.]

And remember Jesus is doing this diagnosis on his disciples, not the worldlings who might be expected to be hooked on mammon, on

“stuff,” getting it and hanging on to it. So even for disciples first-commandment-keeping is an impossible demand—and the consequences for not doing so lethal. Is there any good news to cope with this diagnosis, yes, finally to trump it? Yes, but in this pericope it is very brief, and then in code language to boot.

Good News: Healing for our Malady

1. The Kingdom of God and that kingdom's righteousness (to cope with #4 above).

You need to read all of Matthew to put substance on this skeletal formula. This kingdom is what God's up to in Jesus. The “Gospel according to Matthew” is his narrative about God's new operation, God's mercy-management for sinners—yes, even for first-commandment-breakers—in Jesus. Of course, you have to go all the way to the end of Matthew to learn how it is “Gospel,” really good news for first-commandment-breakers. In a word: He assumes our “grass-like fate” and on Easter God counter-signs that act along with Jesus' invitation that commandment-breakers “follow” him. Even wilder is his claim that when following him we are fulfilling the first commandment, and thus home free!

2. Seeking that kingdom and its righteousness

To make the good news of the previous paragraph one's own is to trust this Jesus as God's mercy-management for one's self and thereby gain the righteousness that comes with it. Matthew regularly uses “follow me” and “faith” for the righteousness that “exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees.” That's a righteousness that trumps items 3 and 2 of the earlier diagnosis, a righteousness to be enacted in the face of “today's cares” and “tomorrow's worries.” Which takes us to the final step.

3. “All these things as gifts”

Ah, yes, now back to the “things” we worried about as the process started, diagnosis level 1 above. Living like the birds and the lilies. Really!? Is that a human possibility? Well, he says so. Lilies and the birds do indeed work, but they don’t worry, we’re told. Of course, we need “stuff” to survive. But there are two ways to consider stuff. One is like the Gentiles, “striving for things” as though their life depended on it. The other option is facing one’s daily life needs trusting that “indeed our heavenly Father knows.” There is no formula for how to do this, only Jesus’ own encouragement that it is so, and that in the nitty-gritty practice of such lily-like living we too will have it verified for ourselves.

Summa:

Thanksgiving Days calls us to reflect on how we relate to “stuff.” [Think about that as you’re stuffing the bird.] For all of us “stuff” is gift, even when we work hard to bring it home. Luther’s one-liner for Thanksgiving was “Alles ist Gabe,” everything is gift. Focusing on stuff as gift means focusing on the Giver. Christ gives us a new mercy-management connection with The Giver. From then on it’s gift all the way down—kingdom, righteousness, the things as well. The heart of thanksgiving is trusting the Gift-Giver.

Being Threshed by a Real Comer (Luke 3:7-18)

**Luke 3:7-18 (Advent 3)
Analysis by Robert W. Bertram**

[A "Crossings" presented at the Sebring Seminar, Sebring, Cape Coral Florida, November 14, 2000.]

John said to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruits worthy of repentance. Do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our ancestor'; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire." And the crowds asked him, "What then should we do?" In reply he said to them, "Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has good must do likewise." Even tax collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, "Teacher, what should we do?" He said to them, "Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you." Soldiers also asked him, "And we, what should we do?" He said to them, "Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages." As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, John answered all of them by saying, "I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire." So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people.

Diagnosis: Threshed

Initial Diagnosis (External Problem):

Our problem, to begin with, is that we trivialize what it takes to be saved. As if by some merely external ceremony like being

baptized we could “flee from the wrath to come.” What a snaky way out of the fire!

Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem):

Worse yet is our equating salvation with our good intentions to do better in the future. What is worse about such a program is that it almost looks like real repentance. A preacher like John tells us we must repent and that repentance demands deeds, not just words – bearing “fruits that befit repentance.” So we respond ever so earnestly, “Fine, just tell me what exactly I should do.” But that’s just another, sneakier way to avoid the flames.

Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem):

Worst of all, once we realize how incapable we ourselves are of the “fruits that befit repentance,” we pin our hopes for divine help – for a Messiah – on some Law-preacher like John. But if it really is someone like John, with his kind of honesty, what does he tell us? Not only does he answer our “What shall we then do” with assignments we cannot possibly do, but also he admits that he himself does not begin to have the “might” we are asking of him. In fact, he adds that the One who is coming who is “mightier” than he will use his superior power to burn unfruitful trees, “the chaff,” “with unquenchable fire.” So much for that.

Prognosis: Salvaged

Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution):

After all this bad, dead-end news what could there possibly be in John’s “exhortations” that leads his hearers – “the people,” Luke calls them – to hear it as they evidently did, as “good news?” For the coming Christ whom John is announcing will still

be bringing fire. And everyone, even those who will be spared from the burning, will at least have to undergo a very strenuous threshing, a near-death winnowing which is itself a kind of dying. How is that Good News? You know how, probably better than John himself knew. You know what it is that makes this coming Christ a real comer. He is indeed mightier by far than John the Baptist. But he shows his might not just by the way he wields his winnowing fork on others but, much more, by the way he suffers himself to be impaled on it. The way he gathers wheat from chaff is by himself being threshed first, and outlasting the threshing. Only then, because he does, can any of us survive the threshing as well.

Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Solution):

Better yet, The Real Comer salvages us for his granary by baptizing us one by one, not only with an external baptism by water – that, too – but with a baptism by fire, cauterizing us inside and out into his own dying, and then hollying us into his resurrection with his own Holying Spirit. John may not have foreseen all that but we have seen it. And our seeing it, our believing it, is itself a testimony to the Christ's baptismal Spirit.

Final Prognosis (External Solution):

Best of all, we are now able to produce "fruits befitting repentance," at least able to begin. For starters, we can already reverse the sequence of our questions. Formerly, faced with a preacher like John, we used to ask first, "What then shall we do," and on hearing his hard answer we then asked, "What Messiah will save us?" But now, thanks to The Real Comer who goes first, we already know who that Messiah is. And knowing him we can then ask next, "What shall we then do," not because we've got to but because we get to.

Bulldozed by Baptism: The Better to See You With

Advent 2 (Luke 3:1-6)

Robert W. Bertram

[A "Crossings" presented at the Sebring Seminary, Cape Coral, Florida, November 14, 2000.]

In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler of the region of Ituracea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler of Abilene, during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah,

"The voice of one crying out in the wilderness:

'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.

Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low,

and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth; and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.'"

Diagnosis: Wilderness

Initial Diagnosis (External Problem):

Our problem, like that of Jesus' contemporaries, is symbolized by where we live and feel safe, in civilized communities where things are under control and more or less on schedule: "in the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberias Caesar, Pontius Pilate being governor of Judaea, . . . in the high-priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas." That's a problem? Yes, for such law and order societies, whether secular or religious, also encourage a false sense of security. We use our cities and temples to hide behind, like circling the wagons, protecting ourselves not just from the surrounding wilderness and predators and outlaws (as we should) but also from the painful truth about ourselves. The real wilderness is we, disguised as citizens, harbored within the city limits.

Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem):

Worse yet, deluded about our safety inside our civilized sanctuaries, we are less and less able to repent, let alone repent "for the forgiveness of sins." Who needs that anymore? In fact, with our walled-in safety and conveniences repentance and absolution seem almost quaint, unsophisticated, a throwback to primitive times – to "the sticks."

Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem):

Worst of all, the very architecture of our cities, figuratively speaking, gets in the way of our seeing the most important parade ever to drive through our world: the arriving Savior. His offbeat parade route is hidden from view by the walls and the high-rises and the closed doors and the corners we build. Our buildings and boulevards might as well be mountains and valleys

and twisting canyons, considering how little we can “see” over them and around them and below them to the procession passing us by, “the salvation of our God.” With such uneven terrain, such poor visibility, it is the city really which symbolizes the real “wilderness,” though it thinks of itself as quite the opposite, an oasis of strength and safety.

Prognosis

Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution):

So where does the arriving Savior make his entry? Significantly, not in the city but out in the wilderness, to which the city-folk had to make a long humiliating trek, out from behind the false safety of their culture, and then only to hear not the Savior himself (not yet) but merely his wild and woolly advance-man, a tough-talking desert preacher named John, to whom – and not to Caesar or Herod or Caiaphas – “the word of God came.” Was this meant just to bring the high and mighty down low, to repentance? That, too, definitely. But finally, as we know from what comes later, it is to people as they really are and not as they ought to be, as sinners in their “wild”-ness and their be-“wild”-erment and their God-“desert”-edness, that the Savior comes at all – straightaway and on the level. Why else would he come to “forgive?”

Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution):

Better yet, the baptizing which John performed (and which we perform still) floods away – dare I say bulldozes? – those mountains and valleys and bends inside the sinners which might obstruct their “seeing the salvation of God.” For that is what baptism is for, for the seeing by faith, for enabling sinners to recognize the Savior for who he truly is. And thanks to baptism,

what we see is what we get, “the forgiveness of sins.”

Final Prognosis (Eternal Solution):

Best of all, those who came out to the wilderness and heard John “preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sin” did not remain there. The baptized are not hermits and recluses, escapees from civilization. On the contrary, they return to the city, yet not as they left it but as transformed and transforming, as creative subversives. That’s where, back to civilization – “Herod being tetrarch of Galilee” – that John himself eventually returned, and finally laid his head. So did the coming Savior.

[BULLDOZED BY BAPTISM \(PDF\)](#)