

The Crossings Curriculum of 1983-93—a Retrospective.

Colleagues,

Last week's retrospective into one of the full-blown courses that were once part of our Crossings daily work—from 1983-1993 —teases me into some show-and-tell of more of what we did way back then. During that decade we worked up a curriculum of 21 courses, many of them taught several times. The students who signed up were “grown-ups” from all walks of life and across the ecumenical spread. Some were retirees, most all college grads, some with post-grad degrees—now and then a parish pastor. They were all serious about theology.

During the final years of that decade Webster University, here in St. Louis, listed our courses as credit courses in their own “Religious Studies” department and Bob Bertram and I became adjunct professors at Webster. They were listed with a “500” number to indicate that they were (ahem!) upper class offerings, and thus these credits could be transferred to seminaries for those of our students who later were heading that way. And a handful did just that.

All of the courses had the same format as described last week with Course #513, with four segments unfolding through the semester.

FIRST SEGMENT was study of a specific Biblical book focused on a key text in that book. Initially (for the first 14 courses) these were key texts from the lectionary appointed for festivals within the church year. When we ran out of festivals, we glommed on to other prominent Biblical texts for the final seven courses—#515 to 521.

With the biblical reference in the course title came the theological focus for study that term. Course #501 was "Crossings from Luke: Getting God's Peace to Earth." And the explicit "Biblical source" in Luke was the lectionary Gospel for the Nativity of our Lord, Luke 2:1-20. Yes, we parsed that text according to the 6-step paradigm, and then traced those primal Lukan themes elsewhere in Luke's gospel.

SECOND SEGMENT was to examine a "sample from church history" where this Lukan theology surfaced. We chose the Franciscan movement from the middle ages. After getting to know St. Francis and his followers, we then asked: How, in the Franciscan movement, did Luke's "theology of peace on earth" succeed (or not succeed) in being crossed into the church and world of that day?

THIRD SEGMENT looked at a "sample of recent theology." In Crossings from Luke it was 20th century "Liberation Theology." After reading some of the major theologians of the movement, we asked the same question of them as we did of St. Francis. How well (or maybe not so well) did Luke's theology of peace on earth fare in the work of liberation theologians?

FOURTH SEGMENT in #501 consisted of student presentations of their research on some slice-of-life today that they tracked and then crossed with Luke's theology of peace, aided and abetted by whatever might be useful from St. Francis and the liberation theologians.

Two such essays that I remember for #501 were:

- Nuclear Deterrence and the Peace Laid in a Manger
- Peace on Earth: Bethlehem and the Belleville (IL) Police Force

Here are the catalog course descriptions for the whole curriculum.

Course 501. Crossings from Luke: Getting God's Peace to Our Earth.

[Luke 2:1-20. Gospel for the Nativity of our Lord]

A study of how in the Biblical Tradition (in this case, the Gospel of Luke) Messianic peace supplants fear and poverty; how later in that same tradition (the Franciscan movement in the Middle Ages, today's Liberation Theologies) oppressor and oppressed are reunited; how the same peace "crosses" over into the most unreconciled sectors of contemporary life.

Course 502. Crossings from Isaiah: The Birthpangs of Justice.

[Isaiah 43:1-7. OT reading for the Baptism of Jesus]

A study of how in the Biblical Tradition (in this case, the Prophet Isaiah) the pain of God gives birth to justice; how the suffering servant justifies both victims and villains (in the theology of the council of Nicea, today's theology of the cross); how that same costly justice "crosses" over into realms of injustice in contemporary life.

Student Presentations:

- Faux Pas at Bhopal: The Union Carbide Disaster and God's Suffering Servant
- Messianic Justice and the Missouri State Penal System – Mary Russell

Course 503. Crossings from II Corinthians: Righting History's

Wrongs.

[II Corinthians 5:11 – 6:2. Ash Wednesday]

A study of how in the Biblical Tradition (in this case, the Second Letter to the Corinthians) the wrongs of human history are rectified in Christ's atonement; how later in that same tradition (the theologies of Anselm and Abelard, today's Process Theology) the righteousness of God outdistances wrong-doing; how the transaction of the Cross works to make right what is wrong in contemporary life.

Student Presentations:

- Violence and Reconciliation: A Battered Wife's New Creation
 - Who am I? An Adoptee's Search for Roots and Reconciliation
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Course 504. Crossings from John: New Birth and New Priorities.
[John 1:1-18. Second Sunday after Christmas]

A study of how in the Biblical Tradition (in this case, the Gospel of John) confused priorities are re-ordered by the Word becoming flesh; how later in that same tradition (the Lutheran Reformation, today's neo-orthodoxy movement) God's glory in the flesh re-prioritizes human options; how the same rebirth of persons and options "crosses" over into the confused priorities of contemporary life.

Student Presentations:

- Rearranging Priorities after the Heart Attack
- Can a Soldier be Saved? Priority Pressures in Today's Military – [by USAF Lt. Col.]

Course 505. Crossings from Matthew: Relocating Authority.
[Matthew 2:1-12. Epiphany of our Lord]

A study of how in the Biblical Tradition (in this case, the Gospel of Matthew) authority foundations are rearranged by the Messianic kingdom; how later in that same tradition (Augustine, the crisis at Canossa, the Kirchenkampf during the Third Reich) authority confusion gets sorted out by the authority of the crucified; how that same authority “crosses” over into the most contrary authority structures of contemporary life.

Student Presentations:

- Relocating Authority in Today’s Roman Catholic Church
- Servant Authority in a Supervisory Role

Course 506. Crossings from Psalms: What Makes the Rejects Sing?
[Psalm 118:1-2, 15-24. Psalm for Easter Sunday]

A study of how in the Biblical Tradition (in this case, the Book of Psalms) the experience of rejection turns to joy; how later in that same tradition (the Wesleyan movement, today’s black and feminist theologies) the rejects, excluded by the establishment, find a new song; how that new song “crosses” over into the most despairing sectors of contemporary life.

Student Presentations:

- Rehabilitating Rejects: The Children of Divorce
- The Christian Sanctuary Movement: Futures for Those with Futures Foreclosed

Course 507. Crossings from Ephesians: Hope Needs Success.

[Ephesians 1:16-23. Ascension of our Lord]

A study of how in the Biblical Tradition (in this case, the Letter to the Ephesians) human hopes are regrounded in the success of the resurrected Jesus; how later in that same tradition (Kierkegaard, today's theologies of hope) hope grows in otherwise hopeless situations; how the same hope "crosses" over for success in the face of despair occasioned by contemporary life.

Student Presentations:

- Success for the Hopeless: Ephesians and Adolescent Suicide
 - Therapy and Absolution in an Alcoholic Family
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Course 508. Crossings from Philippians: Winning by Losing.
[Philippians 2:1-11. Passion Sunday]

A study of how in the Biblical Tradition (in this case, the Letter to the Philippians) the divine Loser wins; how later in that same tradition (the theology of Irenaeus in the second century, Tillich and Niebuhr in the twentieth) that strange economy of winning by losing recapitalizes all sorts of losers; how that winsome economy still "crosses" over into the world of the loser in contemporary life.

Student Presentations:

- Winning by Losing: a Vocational Case Study
 - Gains and Losses in the ICU: Hi-tech Medicine and the Last Enemy
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Course 509. Crossings from Hebrews: How Sympathizers Survive.
[Hebrews 4:14-5:10. Good Friday]

A study of how in the Biblical Tradition (in this case, the Letter to the Hebrews) the divine co-suffering of the priestly Jesus bestows survival on suffering humanity; how later in that same tradition (John Calvin, the Council of Trent, today's ecumenical theology) that priesthood extends through ministry and sacraments; how that same mediatorial suffering "crosses" over for human survival in the pathos and pathology of contemporary life.

Student Presentations:

- The Priesthood of Psychiatry in Today's Conflict about Healing
- Suffering and Survival: Christ in the Midst of the Farm Crisis

Course 510. Crossings from Acts: Hearing the Healing. [Acts 2:1-21. Pentecost]

A study of how in the Biblical Tradition (in this case, the Book of Acts) divine healing comes through such lowly acoustical means as speaking and hearing; how later in that same tradition (16th Century Jesuits in China, today's inter-religious dialogue) the well-chosen name or words can be so universal as to heal the conflicts between diverse ethnic and language groups; how the same healing or holiing language "crosses" over into the most alien sectors of contemporary life.

Student Presentations:

- Healing the Language of the Liturgy: The Case for Inclusiveness
- Hearing the Healing Despite the Block of Neurosis

Course 511. Crossings from First Peter: Unshaming the Suffering.
[1 Peter 4:12-19. Holy Innocents, Martyrs]

A study of how in the Biblical Tradition (in this case, the First Letter of Peter) suffering loses its stigma under a glorious Name; how later in that same tradition (the “Age of the Martyrs,” in recent theologies of “confessing”) suffering is dignified by the One it resembles; how the same dignity “crosses” over into the lives of suffering and ignominy today.

Student Presentations:

- Unshaming the Suffering of Spouse-Abuse
- Unshaming the Suffering Environment: The Gospel and Ecology

Course 512. Crossings from I Corinthians: Saving Human Culture by the Cross.
[1 Corinthians 1:18-25. Holy Cross Day]

A study of how in the Biblical Tradition (in this case, the First Letter to the Corinthians) the Cross of Christ critiques human culture in order to save it; how later in that same tradition (the culture-theologians Origen and Chrysostom, their counterparts in the 20th century) the cross serves to save subsequent human achievements; how that same cross saves amidst the manifold salvation projects underway in contemporary technological societies.

Student Presentations:

- A Technology for Witness in a High-Tech World

Course 513. Crossings from Revelation: Surviving the Apocalypse
[Revelation 12:7-12. St. Michael and All Angels]

A study of how in the Biblical Tradition (in this case, the Book of Revelation) cosmic calamity and crisis exempts no one, yet survival is open to everyone via the pre-emptive apocalypse of Cosmic Christ; how later in that same tradition (Medieval mystics, 20th Century Apocalyptic artists) survival is celebrated in the very face of catastrophe; how the same Cosmic Christ copes with our apocalypse now.

Student Presentations:

- Redeeming American Pop Culture from Demonic Possession
- Crossing Salman Rushdie's Demonic Verses with Apocalyptic Good News

Course 514. Crossings from Romans: Faith Has What it Takes
[Romans 3:19-24. Festival of the Reformation]

A study of how in the Biblical Tradition (in this case the Letter to the Romans) faith first receives, then uses the power of God for salvation; how later in that same tradition (the Reformation era, today's ecumenical dialogues) faith's power is celebrated in the face of constant challenges to its validity; how the same faith works to empower people today to live in the face of monumental odds to the contrary.

No record of Student Presentations available.

[From here on we moved outside the lectionary for the texts we used as Biblical groundings.]

Course 515 Crossings from Favored Texts of the Reformers

A study of how in the Biblical Tradition (in this case the Psalms, John and Romans) the Gospel of justification by faith as God's cruciform promise elicits trust, and from that trust generates new life; how later in that same tradition (16th century church history, today's attempts for fresh articulation of the Gospel) God's promise holds true in the face of "other" promises, how the same promise works faith and life today in a world awash in a sea of promises.

Student Presentations:

- Justification and Just Wars: Operation Desert Storm
- The Justification of Sonya in Dostoyevsky's Crime and Punishment
- New Age Religion: How Good is its Good News?

Course 516. Crossings from II Corinthians: Holy Spirit, Healing Spirit, and Human Holiness

A study of how in the Biblical Tradition (in this case II Corinthians 3-5) the Holying Spirit restores human life to holiness by extending Christ's work of salvation; how later in that same tradition (Hispanic spirituality, today's feminist spirituality) this same Spirit of Christ resurrects humankind from the most dismal dilemmas into lives of spirit and truth, how the Holy Gust (sic!) continues revivifying the winded today.

Student Presentations:

- Spirituality in the Indiana Jones Movie Trilogy & Corinthian Spirituality
- The "Twelve Step" Spirituality of AA and God the Healing Spirit :

Course 517. Crossings from Galatians: Jesus means Freedom

A study of how in the Biblical Tradition (in this case the Letter to the Galatians) faith in the Gospel brings with it freedom, freedom in the place we least expect it, freedom vis-a-vis God; how later in that same tradition (today's Black Theology and our planet's own freedom as discussed at the Rio Earth Summit) that freedom undermines creation's bondage in the most surprising places.

Student Presentations:

- Christ's Healing Freedom from the Bondage of Child-Abuse
- Christian Freedom in the Pyramid of Corporate Management Structures

Course 518. Crossings from Mark: How Nobodies Become Somebodies

A study of how in the Biblical Tradition (in this case the Gospel of Mark) nobodies (lepers, outcasts, sinners of all sorts) become somebodies when they encounter Jesus and his own God-forsaken nobodiness on the cross, how later in that same tradition (Father Damian's ministry to lepers and Sojourner Truth's bold witness and Palestinian Liberation Theology) nobody-ness is trumped by Christ as his disciples turn people of no value into God's own children, how that same transformation happens today.

Student Presentation:

- "You've Picked the Right One, Baby:" A Crucified Lord for the Pepsi Generation

Course 519. Crossings from Genesis: From Old Creation to New Creation

A study of how in the Biblical Tradition (in this case the first three chapters of Genesis) God's creation, initially very good, but now groaning, longs for the renewal that came in Christ; how later in that same tradition (the First Article of the ecumenical creeds, today's ecological theology) creation's redemption is enacted, how Christ's merciful lordship renews creation in our day.

Student Presentation:

- Symphony of the New Creation—Care & Redemption of All that God has Made

Course 520. Crossings from the Acts of the Apostles: The Gospel in Dialogue with World Religions

A study of how in the Biblical Tradition (in this case the mission sermons in the Book of Acts) the Good News of Christ moved across boundaries with its mercy-offer of something genuinely "good" and genuinely "new," how later in that same tradition (subsequent mission history, today's Christian-Buddhist dialogue) that Gospel continues to move onward, how that Gospel is moving today into the most surprising new places generating Christian communities of faith and love.

No record available of Student Presentations in this course.

Course 521. Crossings from the Psalms: Sin, Suffering and Survival.

A study of how in the Biblical Tradition (in this case the 7 Penitential Psalms) God's mercy meets humans in their sin and their suffering and brings healing, how later in that same tradition (Paul Gerhardt's hymnody during the 30 Years War, Christians involved in today's high-tech health care) divine mercy opens doors for sufferers' survival, how Christ continues healing sinner-sufferers in the ministry of "little Christs" today.

No record available of Student Presentations in this course.

So much for the archival record.

One more item. We thought about it then, and now the thought returns: What if theological seminaries took this format for their educational programs, what sort of parish pastors might that create? Deep down that really was our dream. D.v., I may just ruminate on that some more next week. If you have some thoughts on the topic, send them in.

Peace and Joy!

Ed Schroeder

P.S. This coming Sunday, March 27 marks the 90th return of Bob Bertram's birthday. He died 8 years ago just two weeks before his 82nd. In the year 1921, March 27 was also a Sunday. It was Easter.

Six Hundred Sixty-Six: Some Reflections on that Apocalyptic Number

Colleagues,

Six Hundred Sixty-Six Thursday Theologies. That's a lot of Thursdays. Nigh on to 13 years' worth of them. Six Hundred Sixty-Six Thursdays ago was May 14, 1998, the day ThTh Number One was posted. If curious, here's where you can still find it: <https://crossings.org/thursday/1998/thur0514.shtml>

But you readers know that the number 666 has a much more ancient heritage. And not a happy one. It's apocalyptic. E.g., in the last book of the New Testament, "The Revelation [apocalypsis in Greek] to John" (13:18) we read: " . . .the name of the beast or the number of its name . . . is six hundred sixty-six." The scholarly consensus for the number 666 goes like this: "In Hebrew and Greek, letters were used also as numerals. Each name had a numerical value, calculated by adding the numerical value of the letters. 666 is the numerical value of NERO CAESAR." [HarperCollins Bible Dictionary]

But we don't have to go back to Nero for apocalyptic history. Apocalypse is now. Just look at the pictures coming our way from Japan, New Zealand, Northern Africa, the Middle East in the past few days. The tectonic plates bordering the western Pacific are moving with the same catastrophic consequences as John sees in the planetary collapse unfolding before his eyes And the human-tectonics currently unfolding on the surface of the African and the Arabian plates are in their own way as lethal as is the bobbing and weaving of the skin of our planet.

And there's also the unraveling, of social and economic "tectonics" (root word in Greek = building materials) in the USA. They too have their own apo-calyptic [= "take away the veil" in Greek] character, unveiling what's been hidden in our capitalist and democratic way of life, so that all may see—well, maybe not all, but a few more of us—that our nation too is not "heaven on earth."

The major difference between St. John's apocalypse reportage and what we're getting unveiled in today's apocalyptic messages is that John is addressing the Christian community. His message is to Christ-followers living in the midst of chaos. Often because their Christ-confession triggers lethal reaction from others living alongside them on the same tectonic plate. That too is going on right now in our world. See the last In-betweener posted a few days ago to the listserve telling of Christian martyrdom today on the African plate.

John, the Un-veiler, is not intent on showing us "Ain't it awful!," but he speaks as Christ's apostle to Christ's disciples facing persecution, yes, martyrdom, as the social and physical world around them—the human tectonics as well as the planetary ones—go topsy-turvy. And many will indeed die. Bizarre as the images are in that last book of the Bible, it speaks to such a time as this. Bizarre is what's before our eyes too.

During the early years of the Crossings Community Inc.—somewhere around 1983—we offered semester-long courses, every one of them titled according to this formula , "Crossings from [a Biblical book]" —and then after the colon, a phrase pin-pointing a major theme in that Biblical book,. Sample (our first-ever course #501) "Crossings from the Gospel of Luke: Bringing God's Peace to Earth." Each course focused on a significant text from that book—all of them taken from the church lectionary. You can guess what the Lukan "significant text" was from the title, namely,

Luke's Christmas story in chapter two. [Our course numbers got up to 521.]

After we'd been at it a few semesters, we tackled The Revelation to St. John. It was course #513 "Crossing from Revelation: Surviving the Apocalypse." Here is the course description [Bob Bertram's distinctive prose]: "A study of how in the Biblical Tradition (in this case, the Book of Revelation) cosmic calamity and crisis exempts no one, yet survival is open to everyone via the pre-emptive apocalypse of Cosmic Christ; how later in that same tradition (Medieval mystics, 20th Century Apocalyptic artists) survival is celebrated in the very face of catastrophe; how the same Cosmic Christ copes with our apocalypse now."

Course #513 began with the lectionary text for the Feast of St. Michael and All Angels (September 29). That text is Revelation 12:7-12. It goes like this: War broke out in heaven. Michael and his angels fighting the dragon and his angels. Dragon is defeated, thrown down to earth. Identified with three names: Devil (= "destroyer" in Greek) Satan ("prosecuting attorney" in Hebrew), Deceiver. And then comes the heavenly voice interpreting what happened. "Now the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God and the authority of his Christ have come, for the accuser of our brethren has been thrown down, who accuses them day and night before our God. And they have conquered him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, for they loved not their lives even unto death. Rejoice then, O heaven and you that dwell therein. But woe to you, O earth and sea, for the devil has come down to you in great wrath, because he knows that his time is short!"

As in all of these semester-long courses, we spent three weeks on the Biblical text analyzing it in terms of its own 3-step diagnosis and corresponding 3-step prognosis. Someday I should dig that up and pass it on to you.

Major “Aha!” was Bob Bertram’s discovery that when Luther preached on this text he presented Michael, not as a winged figure, but as Christ himself, God’s major “angel” (= messenger) to embattled humankind. And that rendering arises from the very Hebrew word Michael. Mi-cha-el is actually three words, a full sentence, in a question form: Mi (who) cha (is like) el (God)? Answer: For any and every Christ-apostle the answer is: the crucified and risen Messiah, aka Jesus Christ. And the “war in heaven” before the throne of God, where the destroyer-accuser-deceiver is defeated, is Good Friday/Easter. The rest of the Rev. 12:7-12 text is about the consequences. Defeated before God’s own tribunal as the sinners’ Prosecuting Attorney, the destroyer/deceiver is still active on earth continuing his daily work, challenging their trust in Christ by having his “angels” (=messengers) do the accusation, demolition, deception—the tectonics of apocalypse now.

Remedy? “Conquering the dragon –again and again, day after day—by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony.” Something like this: Though still beset by all manner of sinful left-overs in my life, I’m nevertheless clean by virtue of Christ’s sacrifice. This daily “word of witnessing” to my own self and to the world around me is at the core of Christ-coping with apocalypse in any age.

[For a full 24-page essay on Michael, see Bob’s “Spirituality is for the Angels – The Angels of St.Michael.” on the Crossings website.]

After the first three weeks getting our groundings, we then spent two weeks looking at samples from church history where this text’s substance figured prominently. In this case it was the apocalyptic theology of Thomas Muenzer, one-time student of Luther at Wittenberg, who later deserted his mentor (for being a “softie” in the face of the political and social evil of the

day), and with sword in hand joined the Peasants Revolt, which led to his own demise. We also studied Albrecht Durer's woodcuts for the Book of Revelation to learn his theology of apocalypse.

Third segment was two weeks attending to 20th Century Apocalyptic artist Francis Coppola and his blockbuster movie (1979) "Apocalypse Now." We also studied Picasso's Guernica painting from last century's Spanish civil war. Coppola's grisly rendering of the Vietnam War, with its sub-theme of the destruction that this war was doing to the Americans who were engaged in the ghastly destruction of Vietnamese land and people—Agent Orange, My Lai, etc. Coppola retells Joseph Conrad's 1902 "Heart of Darkness" novella with its apocalyptic exposure of the dark side of European colonization while exploring the three levels of darkness that the protagonist, Marlow, encounters: the darkness of the Congo wilderness, the darkness of the Europeans' cruel treatment of the natives, and the unfathomable darkness within every human being for committing heinous acts of evil. Coppola substitutes the words American for European and Vietnam for Congo and lets the cameras roll.

But then comes this add-on: Apocalypse Now for Americans back in the homeland included those 50,000 body bags flown back for burial—and what Coppola didn't know then, but we know now, namely, the more than 50,000 suicides of returned V-N veterans, who ostensibly "survived" and came home uninjured. Watching the movie and crossing John's own apocalypse with it was, as you can well imagine, not light-hearted classroom banter.

That much of the course—Revelation 12, Muentzer & Durer, Coppola's movie—was the first half of the term. For the last half students presented papers wherein they "crossed" the set of texts above with some "apocalypse now" in the culture, the

world, their own lives today. It was an exercise in the standard Crossings paradigm: “Grounding” from Rev. 12 and the other texts we’d examined; “tracking” a current slice-of-life that signaled apocalypse now; finally “crossing” the two into each other.

I remember two titles presented in that first class.

- Crossing Salman Rushdie’s “Satanic Verses” with the Apocalyptic Good News
- Redeeming American Pop Culture from Demonic Possession

And here is the fuller text from one student presentation that I found in the #513 file folder:

APOCALYPSE NOW compared to Apocalypse Then (Rev. 12) Francis Coppola’s retelling of Joseph Conrad’s HEART OF DARKNESS in the film makes one obvious change and one not quite so. Obvious is the move from Africa to SE Asia and the Vietnam war. Kurtz is again the mystery figure at the end of the long, long search up a long, long river into the jungle. The less obvious switch, I think, is that the mystery character Kurtz is not only a figure for the Horror, Horror in the heart of every human. (Reader’s Encyclopedia: “The ‘heart of darkness’ is the jungle, and the primitive, subconscious heart of man.”)

Coppola’s movie proclaims this to be the heart of our nation, the United States. His movie takes off the veil (apo-calyypse) of a whole people, us, as that people was exposed in the Vietnam war. We are just as jungle-minded as the folks whose home is the jungle. We are worse even, as the VN war showed. Kurtz discovered it with the force of a “diamond bullet through my forehead. They were stronger than us . . . more moral and at the same time able to use their primordial instincts to kill without judgment. It’s judgment that defeats us.” By which I take him to mean that we judge ourselves civilized, advanced, etc., and them primitive/backward. Here Coppola’s Kurtz pushes

back the veil to expose the heart of our darkness. We are righteous (and thus, as with the Pharisees in the N.T. gospels, "need no repentance.")

In that un-veiling the themes of Rev. 12 surface. The four key activities of the Evil One show up: DECEIVING, TEMPTING (maybe), DESTROYING God's creation (diabolos-work), and ACCUSING, even rightfully accusing those whose "judgment" renders them as superior and the others as Gooks.

I say maybe on the "tempting" item, since in the Bible it is usually (or is it only?) believers in God's gospel, God's word of mercy/forgiveness, who get tempted. The evidence is unclear in the movie whether there are any folks who do get tempted to brutal and absolutely insane killing AND are thereby being led by THE tempter no longer to trust the word of their baptism as true for them (Cf. Jesus' own temptation in last Sunday's Gospel pericope).

Might one say: "Now war arose in Vietnam, the US and its agents fighting against the VC/NVN. And the US forces (with umpteen times the advantage over their foes) fought and fought, but they were defeated, and thrown out of VN and there was no longer any place for them in all SE Asia."

Although intrinsically no more evil than the dark hearts of generic humanity, the United States had let itself be deceived into its moral superiority. The US had taken its civilized advances (especially its the high-tech war machinery, and chemistry, used in VN) [Question: is the chopper the high-tech "angel" on the US team in this apocalyptic war?] and thrown them against the enemy. But it was thrown out of VN, as a deceiver, a messenger of that ancient serpent, who is called Diabolos (=destroyer) and Satan (Accusing Prosecuting Attorney) and the Deceiver, doing all three of these before the whole

world.

In VN that one was thrown down and the whole world saw it, but for self-deceived Americans – only rare ones saw it. For Kurtz and maybe most of the soldiers and protagonist Willard, it was sometimes yes and sometimes no.

There is no conquest here by the blood of the Lamb. The best resolution or redemption offered is the Aha! that drives Kurtz, his encounter with more-than-human Horror that deceives the whole world. Kurtz at least saw it and stopped denying it. Willard's long journey to get to this Aha! ends ambiguously, as though Coppola were saying: And you, too, movie viewer, will you join in Kurtz' admission?

No cosmic accuser gets thrown down, Kurtz' protestations about judgment notwithstanding. Nobody conquers the darkness. Rather it's vice versa. People do love their lives unto death, and with the senseless deaths that they inflict and that get inflicted on them, death conquers all. There is no rejoicing at all (just hell-raising USO shows, etc.) and the great wrath persists with no signal that its "time is short," let alone that "he knows it."

Except for the geographical names, how much of this analysis would need to be changed to "cross" Rev. 12 with national life in the USA today?

The response of the mayor of Tokyo to the cataclysm in his country came near to being a Biblical crossing of its own, though I don't know if these scriptures bear any weight for him or not. He may well have been just reflecting on karma (aka in the New Testament "life under the law.") Yahoo! News reported this:

“The outspoken governor of Tokyo, Shintaro Ishihara, told reporters Monday that the disaster was ‘punishment from heaven’ because Japanese have become greedy.”

Once his words circled the globe and the blogosphere, and he was roundly “accused” of all sorts of things, he promptly retracted them. But too quickly. Apparently he did not have Michael the Defense Attorney at his side to cope with the prosecuting attorneys (maxi-plural!) posting their charges against him. Yet this he could have said, even without Biblical reference: If tectonic plate shake-up and its consequences won’t get us to stop and think, what will? The issue is not “what caused it?” but what message—if any—did we hear coming out of the chaos. Did anything about us or our world get unveiled before our eyes?

To come to closure, take another look at Bertram’s course description for #513.

“A study of how in the Biblical Tradition (in this case, the Book of Revelation) cosmic calamity and crisis exempts no one, yet survival is open to everyone via the pre-emptive apocalypse of Cosmic Christ; how later in that same tradition (Medieval mystics, 20th Century Apocalyptic artists) survival is celebrated in the very face of catastrophe; how the same Cosmic Christ copes with our apocalypse now.”

1. Cosmic calamity and crisis exempt no one. Whether catastrophic or quietly, death comes to all.
2. Yet survival is open to everyone. That is the claim of the Christian Gospel.
3. It comes via the “pre-emptive apocalypse” [one of Bertram’s favorite phrases] of Cosmic Christ. The opening words of the last book of the Bible are NOT “the apocalypse (veil-removal) of world history.” Instead, they

are “The revelation (veil-removal) of Jesus Christ.” Jesus’ “pre-emptive” apocalypse occurs in the cosmic stuff taking place on Good Friday and Easter Sunday. Some of the reports in the four gospels even signal a rumble going through the creation at that time (earthquake, midday sun disappearing, dead coming from the graves). It’s pre-emptive quality lies in this, that entrusting yourself to the Jesus engineering this apocalypse, you are already “home-free” from any and all apocalypses yet to come your way. That is survival big time!

4. Christians celebrate this big-time survival in the face of every catastrophe.
5. Needed in order to do just that is practice, help from one another, to use the same Cosmic Christ to cope with our apocalypse(s) now.

“Six hundred sixty-six,” the name and number of the destroyer, deceiver, accuser, are the final words in Revelation 13. The very next words that come as chapter 14 opens are the testimony, mentioned in chapter 12, which trumps that name and number: “Then I looked, and there was the Lamb, standing on Mount Zion.” Good words for survival in every apocalypse. Also good words for bringing ThTh #666 to closure.

Peace and Joy!
Ed Schroeder

A Homily for Ash Wednesday

Colleagues,

Here is Jerry Burce’s homily for the beginning of Lent in the

year of our Lord 2011. Jerry is a member of the pastoral staff at Messiah Lutheran Church, Fairview Park, Ohio.

Peace and Joy!

Ed Schroeder

A Homily for Ash Wednesday on 2 Corinthians 5:20-21

“So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.”

In Nomine Jesu

What a bitter thing we are about to hear. Dust you are. To dust you shall return. It means what you think it means. We are going to die. No ifs, ands or buts. A child in kindergarten got the message in our service here this morning. She began to cry, and there was terror in her cry. My heart bled for her, but there was nothing I could do. The word stands. We who fear God, or try to, are not allowed to hide it.

We are going to die because God says we have to. He insists on it, in fact. He insists on it because he knows us too well. He knows that we cannot and will not quit with our sinning. We will always second guess him. We will always presume to know better than he does. We will never love him with all our heart, our soul, our strength, our mind. We will never love our neighbors the way we love ourselves. We don't know how to. We frankly don't want to. And so we must die.

There is a strange mercy at work here, a mercy not soft, but hard and cutting like a diamond. In his mercy, God refuses to

inflict me on the rest of you forever.

In his mercy, God refuses to let THIS sinner continue thinking that HE rules.

In his mercy, God insists that there be at length an end to my sinning. He insists on this also for his own sake. He above all deserves a Sabbath break from me and my ways. Therefore, in God's mercy, I must die.

This is a mercy of God that I frankly hate with all my heart. You hate it too-at least as it applies to you, and to such other sinners as you more or less treasure.

Of course my hatred and yours does nothing at all to dislodge the word of God, which abides for ever. To the contrary. It serves instead to make that word more certain. All flesh is grass, and all its glory like the flower of the fields. Dust you are. To dust you shall return. No ifs, ands or buts. Die you must and die you shall.

The awful word tonight is simply this. Face up to it. Get used to it. If it drives you to cry out in terror, so be it.

And yet St. Paul will say to all of us tonight, "Be reconciled to God."

That is, quit hating God. Quit fighting against God's Word. Quit loathing God's ways. How shall I do this? How on earth shall you?

Answer: on earth in the person of Christ Jesus was God's own solution to the impossible conundrum of our sinning.

Here is a mercy stranger by far than the mercy by which God kills me.

On earth in the person of Jesus-begotten of God-was a God-given chance for all of us to take out all our sinners' wrath, all our sinners' fear and desperation and to pour it out in a deadly attack on the person of God himself.

This is what we did. We killed the Son of God. What more can sinners do to God? Let there be an end to our hatred of him.

Again, on earth in the person of Jesus-born of Mary-was a God-given chance for God to pour out all his wrath, all his frustration on the head of one of us who, even so, would not turn against him and start to hate the ways of his strange and awful mercy.

Because Jesus died our death; because Jesus kept that faith with God that you and I can never keep: therefore God decrees that Jesus' resurrection will be our future.

Because of Jesus God now sees fit to make this promise: your death and mine will be for him an excuse to make us brand new, forever able to love him and to enjoy him as the holy angels do.

And he asks us tonight simply to trust this. He asks us to do this for Jesus' sake. He asks us to remember how much we matter to him, our sin notwithstanding. He asks us to assume that this promise of his is every bit as true, every bit as certain, as that first, that deadly word we will hear tonight.

Should you choose to come up here tonight for the imposition of ashes, you will hear that first, that deadly word. But on your forehead will be traced the sign of the cross, that same sign under which you were baptized into the everlasting promise of your Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

When you get home tonight, look in the mirror. Look closely at the sign. Remember why you get to hope in God despite your

present sin, despite the sinners' death that you will die. Then make it your project this Lent to trust the everlasting love of God for you in Christ. Make it your project this Lent to war, not against God, but against your sinners' instincts to fight with God. Make it your project this Lent to love and honor God in new ways, through a life worthy of God's wonderful promise and your magnificent calling in Jesus Christ your Lord.

Soli Deo Gloria

On Not Losing the Cross in Today's Debate on the Atonement

Colleagues,

Bill Yancey is my pastor at Bethel Lutheran Church in St. Louis. Years ago I was on the committee for his doctoral dissertation. His is one of the four (only four!) doctorates granted by Seminex in systematic theology. Bill has appeared in ThTh postings before.

See <https://crossings.org/thursday/2007/thur020807.shtml> for one example. Today's post is his review of Gregory Anderson Love. LOVE, VIOLENCE, AND THE CROSS: HOW THE NONVIOLENT GOD SAVES US THROUGH THE CROSS OF CHRIST. Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock. 2010. Paperback. 316 pp. [Retail Price: \$35.00 Web Price: \$28.00]

Peace and Joy!

Ed Schroeder

Gregory Anderson Love introduces LOVE, VIOLENCE, AND THE CROSS: HOW THE NONVIOLENT GOD SAVES US THROUGH THE CROSS OF CHRIST with William Butler Yeats' image of a center unable to hold. The center for a cohesive Christian theology is the cross of Christ. Without this vital center, fundamental Christian doctrines, like the trinity and salvation, fly apart. Love tells us first why and how the center came apart. He then identifies three flawed attempts to establish an alternative center. Finally, he offers five models which restore the cross to its salvific center. Post script: The center holds.

Why has the center fallen apart? Because the prevailing interpretation of the cross and atonement, from the middle ages, through the Reformation, up to the present, has undermined the purpose of Jesus' crucifixion to save persons. The penal substitution theory, in the lineage of Anselm's satisfaction theory, emphasizes retributive justice designed to save God's holy sense of justice. In addition, according to the penal substitutionary model, God motivates more by fear and threat than by mercy and forgiveness and so appears to be violent, even while sending a non-violent son. A conflicted God becomes an ambivalent figure, untrustworthy to save.

In Part One, Love, a Presbyterian pastor and theologian, cites Presbyterian theologians Charles Hodge and John R.W. Stott to describe the theological issues behind the penal substitutionary theory. They ask: How can a just God be merciful to sinners? The answer: A substitute must suffer the requisite penalty for sin. The conclusion emerges that God wills the death of Jesus. We are left with a violent image of God.

In Part Two, Love cites those whom he characterizes as the "sharp critics" of the penal substitutionary theory. Examples of sharp critics include Roberta Bondi, Marcus Borg, and Dorothea

Solle. Love also draws upon CROSS EXAMINATIONS, edited by Marit Trelstad, to illustrate the sharp critics' position. Rather than seeing the cross as an event of salvation, the sharp critics view the cross as abusive and a source of violence. They reject the notion that the suffering of an innocent one is redemptive. These critics emphasize Jesus' life and ministry as the transformative events for humanity. Contrary to the theology which they critique, God is not responsible for Jesus' death. The crucifixion is a political act. The image of God is a loving one.

Love also draws upon the critique of Eugen Drewermann, a German Catholic theologian new to the North American theological context. The story of the Fall forms the foundation for Drewermann's psychoanalytic theology. He claims that the Fall inserts fear instead of trust into humankind's relationship with God. The temptation is to fear instead of trust God. After the Fall, humankind's unconditional relationship with God becomes conditional. According to Drewermann's interpretation the penal substitutionary theory encourages the very temptation it proposes to overcome: God cannot be trusted.

Love presents his own response in Part Three. He is in agreement with the sharp critics in their understanding of God as non-violent with no desire for retributive justice. However, he retains the centrality of the cross of Christ as salvific. Love also agrees with much of Rene Girard's argument which identifies violence as the fundamental sin and sacrifice as a violent act against an individual or minority to prevent the violence of all against all. Like Girard and followers, such as S. Mark Heim, Love envisions a God who identifies with victims and rejects violence. How then, can the violent act of the cross save, he asks? On the cross, God endures all violence and sin, but in compassion puts an end to their power. The cross should not have happened, but it has saved everything. According to Love, "The

cross both is and is not the will of God.” The cross constitutes a new divine-human relationship, a gift of new creation from God.

By siding with Girard and Drewermann, Love challenges theologians for whom a necessary feature of any atonement theory is its ability to solve the internal conflict within God between justice and mercy. However, Love disagrees with the sharp critics who see the cross as the epitome of violence, not the end of violence. The cross is unnecessary for the sharp critics, Love argues, because they are not sharp critics of the human condition. Their analysis assumes greater agency for the person in his or her salvation. Jesus becomes just one of many exemplars who can provide the wisdom and encouragement for the joint effort of salvation. Jesus as great teacher, or a loving role model, will suffice. The cross slips away and with it most of the central doctrines of Christian theology, asserts Love.

To maintain the integrity and necessity of Christ and the cross, Love insists on a more radical analysis of the human condition. He retains a sense of sin in which individuals stand accused of violence against God and others with no internal resources “to save.” While God remains opposed to humankind’s destructive ways, this is not a wrathful God needing to be satisfied, but a compassionate God offering salvation as a gift. Love recalls the story of Peter’s denial of Jesus to illustrate Jesus’ saving action. Before Jesus (“coram deo”), Peter stands accused as the one who has denied Jesus and abandoned him to the violence of the crowd and death. We all stand in Peter’s spot. Jesus, however, gazes upon us with compassion and forgiveness. Jesus bears the death we fear and inflict, but in exchange offers transformative forgiveness and new life.

With St. Paul, Love maintains a scandalous specificity for the person of Jesus Christ who relates to the depths of our human

condition even unto death, and retrieves us with forgiveness and compassion. By sending Jesus, the first person of the trinity is intimately involved with us in the salvific enterprise. God's honor, sense of justice, and holiness, need no saving. We do. When God is no longer an ambivalent figure, conflicted within God's self, the cross is lifted up as the action to save humanity.

In Parts One and Two, Love clearly describes penal substitutionary theory and its critics. In Part Three (Chapter 6), he offers his own argument for the rejection of a violent God while retaining the saving event of the cross. In some respects the book could have concluded here. Although the five atonements models he develops to illustrate his position contain many insights, they blend together so that individually they do not quite achieve the distinctiveness the author proposes. Furthermore, it is not always clear that Love differs from the sharp critics in understanding Jesus as more than example. How is humanity empowered to accept the gift of the new creation brought by Jesus? How are we empowered to receive the gift of life which we could not accept prior to the cross? A more systematic emphasis on the empowering force of forgiveness which forges transformation in persons and establishes new relationship with God would counter the impression that Jesus is only an example of new life, rather than the agent of change.

Love's book insightfully joins the current conversation about atonement theories and the meaning of the cross of Christ. He uses movies, literature, and history to illustrate the human condition and need for salvation. These stories provide analytical intimations for our own political and personal relationships. What does it mean to live in a society in which doctrine or ideology often overcomes the needs of persons? Does the penal substitutionary model mirror a fundamental socio-political model of a domineering parent (read patriarch) who

rules by fear and violence?

At root, Love's radical theological purpose is described by the book's subtitle: "How the Nonviolent God Saves Us through the Cross of Christ." Love seeks to replace Protestant theology's fundamental paradox (paradigm) without mitigating humankind's need for the cross of Christ. The paradoxical problem of how a just God can be merciful to sinners is replaced by how the violence of humanity toward God and persons is overcome by the crucifixion. God's identity changes from ambivalent to explicitly nonviolent, and the necessity of the Christ shifts from satisfying a problem within God to working the radical transformation of persons.

Rev. William Yancey, PhD
February 2011

[PS from ES. Herewith a teaser. What is Luther's atonement model in his explanation of the Second Article of the Creed in the Small Catechism? "I believe that Jesus Christ, true God begotten of the Father from eternity, and also true man born of the virgin Mary, is my Lord. He has redeemed me, a lost and condemned sinner, purchased and won me from death and from the power of the devil, not with gold or silver, but with his holy precious blood and his innocent suffering and death, so that I may be his own and live under him in his kingdom and serve him in everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness; even as he is risen from the dead, lives and reigns to all eternity. This is most certainly true."

Justification – Jargon or Jewel?

Colleagues,

Richard P. Jungkuntz, of blessed memory [1918-2003], was one of the major confessors (and also, casualties) in the Missouri Synod Wars of 40 years ago. One distinction he held was that not just once, but twice, he was sacked by Jacob A.O. Preus from his position in the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod. First one came when Preus became president at the LCMS seminary (Springfield, Illinois) where Jungkuntz was already on the faculty and his New Testament scholarship and Lutheran confessional commitment “got him in trouble with the boss.”

Rescued at that time by LCMS president Oliver Harms, Richard became the chairman of the synod’s prestigious Commission on Theology and Church Relations. However, when Preus later on became president of the Missouri Synod—in a coup that unseated Harms—Jungkuntz once more became persona non grata, and soon was looking for work. He completed his long years of church service as Provost at Pacific Lutheran University in Tacoma, Washington.

Richard once told me that he had this recurring dream: He dies and meets St. Peter at the Pearly Gates. Just as Peter welcomes him and swings open the gate, out from behind Peter jumps Jacob Preus slamming the gate shut, shouting “Oh no, you don’t!”

After the 1974 explosion in Missouri, Jungkuntz served as chair of the Seminex Board of Directors.

His son Richard W. D. Jungkuntz, a Seminex grad, has been going through his father’s papers. He sent me this one on justification—about which he says “I can find neither the date

when, nor the audience to whom, Dad presented this. But if you want to distribute it to our Crossings crowd, here it is."

It's too good to stay behind the gate, so for this week's ThTh, here it is – for you.

Peace and joy!

Ed Schroeder

"Justification: Jargon or Jewel?"

By Richard P. Jungkuntz

We propose in these days to talk together about "justification." For four and a half centuries Lutherans have been saying that this is the article of faith by which the church stands or falls. But if this is really so, as I for one believe it to be, then surely something very strange, not to say dismaying, is afoot when we see how small and insignificant a role the article of justification really plays in the life of the church today.

And this is the case, it seems to me, whether you look at our theology, our pedagogy, our pastoral practice, or our personal day to day living. How remote in fact the notion of justification by faith is from our actual churchly as well as individual thinking and doing becomes quite evident also in the clumsiness and stumbling futility that characterized our occasional spasmodic efforts to make this cardinal doctrine somehow "relevant" – as they say – in a world of revolutionary change, technological expansion, social upheaval, and all the rest of our contemporary apocalyptic realities.

And let me add at once that I am all too painfully aware of how aptly such terms as clumsiness and futility may apply to the very presentation of the topic that is being offered now to you

at this conference. But this fact is really not so much an excuse, as it is a reason, and a good one too, for making the effort at all. Our inadequacy and awkwardness in relating the article of justification to all Christian doctrine and to all of Christian life is going to be overcome, if indeed it will be overcome at all, not by embarrassed evasion nor by mindless repetition of once potent formulation long since martyred by evisceration, but only under God through the effort to deal with it afresh in all candor and concreteness.

Such an effort cannot be carried out alone. It simply will not come off as a solo, virtuoso performance. It can succeed only in the fellowship of believers. It requires mutual correction, mutual assistance, mutual trust and encouragement. And it cannot be done in one shot, nor in three. It takes a lifetime of ongoing common effort and commitment. But a beginning can be made at any time; it can in fact be made right here. So let's.

For a number of reasons the concept of communication is, I think, a good one with which to begin our discussion of "Justification: Jargon or Jewel?" Some of these reasons, I hope, will become clear as we go along. One of them, perhaps the most obvious though not necessarily the most important, is the plain fact that for fifty years or more the church has to a very great extent simply not been communicating to anyone but herself when she talks about justification. And precisely to that extent all her talk, however pious, has been jargon, [in Hamlet's words] caviar to the general.

What has happened, of course, is that the operational meaning of the term has, in American usage, come to differ widely and variously from its "exegetical" or Biblical "proper" usage. Robert Schultz's CRESSET article describes some of the ways in which the meaning of "to justify" has changed in our vernacular from the connotations it bore in the 16th century, to say

nothing of what it meant in New Testament days. Offhand it might seem, in view of this fact, that the logical thing to do is simply to correct people's notions of what "justify" or "justification" really means, at least when used in a Biblical or theological way.

Unfortunately, the trouble is that it is simply and universally impossible to legislate the meaning of language. Words will continue to mean nothing else but what their popular usage compels them to mean. Certainly in a sermon or commentary on a particular Biblical text in which a specific term occurs it is entirely appropriate to explain as accurately as possible just what the expression originally meant for the writer and his readers. [Perhaps in our discussion later it will also be possible to do that here.] But normally the content of Biblical teaching is best conveyed by immediate translation into language that is current and readily understood without elaborate linguistic legerdemain. Relying on your indulgence, therefore, I shall for the present by-pass the lexical issues connected with the doctrine of justification, and move directly into the question of its significance for human communication as such.

Whatever it may mean specifically and in detail, the justification of the ungodly proclaimed by Holy Scripture (cp. Rom. 4:15) unquestionably has to do with a matter of personal relationship, most immediately with the relationship between man, the ungodly, and God, but at the same time with the interpersonal relationship between man and man.

The paradigm of all interpersonal relationships is the relationship between God and man that is defined by the Second Person of the Holy Trinity, the eternal Word of God that became incarnate, historically personal, in Jesus of Nazareth. "In the beginning was the Word," says St. John, "and the Word was with God, and the word was God,...and the Word became flesh and dwelt

among us.” This corresponds to the testimony of the writer to the Hebrews: “In these last days [God] has spoken to us by a Son,...through whom also He created the world. He reflects the glory of God and bears the very stamp of His nature.”

In Jesus Christ, therefore, God has made preeminently clear that the primal relationship between Himself and man is dialogical. Overused though the term may be, “dialogue” is in fact what God aims to establish with men. He is first and foremost DEUS LOQUENS, the God who speaks, as every page of Scripture testifies. All creation is a vast, ongoing response to God speaking. But above all, man is the creature who is meant to listen to God speaking and to respond to the God who addresses him.

This fact can hardly be over-emphasized. If we think of man simply as a creature capable of “knowing,” we see him standing over against whatever else that there is as over against things. All other creatures, animate and inanimate are merely the object of his knowing; his act of knowing requires no interaction with them. When, however, with Scripture we regard man, not merely as a knower, but as a listener, then we see him engaged in his proper role, i.e., in person-to-person relationships. You know THINGS, but you listen to SOMEONE. Listening is the human activity that relates you as a person to some other person who opens himself to you by speaking.

Above all else, listening is the activity that relates you to God. For when you listen to Him, then suddenly He ceases to be a distant object for your pious meditation, He ceases to be safely enclosed in a chapter of dogmatics. Instead He becomes for you what He is indeed, a Person who calls you personally, who summons you to respond. And thus you yourself become a person. You acquire identity and selfhood in being addressed and in responding. In short, dialogue with God is the process through

which you become who you are.

But God does not deal with you nor with anyone in isolation. God deals with man, not as an entity by himself, but as an intersocial being who is always involved in many human relationships. The Biblical story of creation makes this clear from the very start, and our observation serves only to confirm the fact. Man's personal structure is dialogical. That is to say, he becomes what he is as a person out of the continual dialogue in which he is involved with others.

What a man knows or thinks he knows as a basis for decision and action, the way he feels or thinks he ought to feel under given conditions, the very words with which he expresses his thoughts but which have already shaped and limited his thoughts even before they come to expression – all this, without which he would not be the person he is, has been woven into the fabric of his personal being only through his relationship in dialogue with father and mother, brothers and sisters, teachers and friends, and countless others who as persons themselves have come close enough to touch him with their address and response. In short, man becomes a person only in community. It is for this that God has made him. But here precisely is also man's problem.

On the one hand, he truly longs to be a real person, he deeply desires the sense of personal identity. But as soon as he listens to God speaking to him, and summoning him to respond, then what a moment ago had been his desire and longing is turned into fearful obligation. The God who made him is continually calling him to account. His Creator is demanding that he really be someone, that he be the person he was made to be, that he respond to His Maker by corresponding [pun?] to Him. But man does not, for he cannot. Hence there is no justification for his existence. No matter how he keeps score, no matter how he figures it, his life always adds up to zero before God. There is

no way he can justify himself. His justification can come only from beyond himself, from someone other than himself. Ultimately it must come from God.

And so it does. If Holy Scripture is clear on anything, it is clear in its unanimous testimony that God Himself has acted decisively in His Son Jesus Christ to justify the ungodly. In other words, God Himself has accepted the existence of ungodly man; He has let it make a difference to Himself and to His own existence. The existence man cannot justify God has judged and condemned once and for all in Jesus Christ. In Jesus Christ He has Himself embraced this human existence all the way to its dead end in utter alienation from friend and foe and heaven itself.

Thus in the very judging of it He has affirmed as valuable to Him the existence that negated all values. Now for man to be justified is to accept God's acceptance, not for one's own merit or worthiness, but alone for Jesus' sake. In Christ Jesus God gives back to man his unjustifiable existence – justified. And the way it happens is the way of dialogue: God speaking, man listening. For "justification is no psychic change; it is a word of God spoken to the sinner" and heard by him.

[Question: Did Richard leave us the full manuscript? Seems to end abruptly. Given my long association with him I can't imagine him stopping there without adding a few paragraphs on faith (sola fide—faith alone) as the avenue whereby the heard-word of justification becomes true for me, my new relationship with God. Perhaps from frequent prior practice he just ad-libbed such a conclusion. When I mentioned this to Richard, Jr., he suggested: "for Dad that would probably have been another whole lecture." ES]

Richard Jr. then adds:

Here are some bonus notes at the end of Dad's presentation:

1. Fundamental idea among Greeks is that DIKAIOUSYNE [regularly rendered in English as either justification or righteousness] is a virtue natural to man
2. Fundamental to OT usage is notion of RELATIONSHIP
3. OT includes BOTH FORENSIC & SOTERIOLOGICAL element
4. Nexus between "justice" and "salvation" is found in idea of COVENANT
5. DIK = chesed, emuth, mishpat!
6. Synagogue basis is doctrine of MERIT
7. Synagogue had difficulty reconciling God's JUDGMENT & His MERCY
8. NT usage outside Paul = human behavior in HARMONY WITH GOD'S WILL, uprightness of life
9. Matt. makes DIK a GIFT OF GOD John. makes it result of union c. X
10. James makes 1st distinct move toward Pauline concern by putting good works under heading of divine, not human, righteousness.
11. James' plea is that faith not be substituted for work, but for faith that produces right kind of work!
12. Paul reaches NEW truth of right. of God; new relationship c. God uses sacred word of Judaism in service of his polemic vs. the Jewish conception of the law TRUE: Only the righteous can have fellowship but no effort on man's part qualifies; only God's sovereign grace in X FOR man
 - 1a. not only individual but affecting whole race
 - 2a. God's r. is DYNAMIC
 - 3a. occurred at PARTICULAR TIME, PLACE
 - 4a. JUSTICE & MERCY in one

- 5a. FORENSIC – yet contrary to rules – paradox parabolic
- 6a. more than forgiveness : RENEWAL
- 7a. OBJ. achievement & SUBJ. approp. BY FAITH
- 8a. characterized by HOPE
- 9a. mystic union
- 10a. power of new LIFE
- 11a. NOT a “virtue”

on “punishment” as part of DIK – concept in Kittel’s Woerterbuch
“Righteousness”

p. 12

p. 56f

p. 67

p. 68

cf p. 70 on fluctuating meaning

p. 71 top!

Seminex Profs and the Downfall of LSTC and the ELCA

Colleagues,

On the Lutheran Forum website these days Crossings shows up in the conversation. The line is drawn back to Seminex, and that offbeat seminary, which closed shop in St. Louis way back in 1983, is portrayed as the villain that ruined the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) in 2009. I kid you not!

But it was not all of the Seminex community that did this. It was just ten of the professors, dismissed as false teachers by their mother church (Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod), who were

then welcomed into the Lutheran School of Theology in Chicago (LSTC). Welcomed as an attractive treasure—but really a Trojan horse. For once inside the guarded citadel, these teachers stepped out to fling open the gates to liberal theology, especially its virulent anti-nomianism (=disrespect for God's law), thereby eviscerating the “L” word in LSTC—and even more mind-boggling—decimating the entire ELCA! Once more, I kid you not.

What triggers this LF website extravaganza is the Fortress Press book by James Burkee: “Power, Politics and the Missouri Synod-A Conflict that Changed American Christianity.” Burkee has unearthed documents that expose the seamy side of the “Wars of Missouri” back in the 1970s. He tells all.

Robert Benne (prof at the ELCA's Roanoke College, director of the Center for Religion and Society) was asked for a pre-publication blurb for the book, and that has led to what he's now put on the LF website. It is Benne's own version of what happened in Missouri in those days, culminating in the dire consequences that conflict had for the ELCA, consequences coming from the seminary-in-exile (Seminex) that came out of that Missouri Synod conflict.

Benne claims (see the citations below) that these Seminex profs, “refugees” who migrated to the LSTC, are the ones who did it. Namely, wrecked the ELCA. Their Trojan horse strategy first infected LSTC with anti-nomianism and its libertine ethics. Their venom then spread far and wide throughout ELCA leadership folks. So wide in fact that it finally succeeded in conning the majority of the delegates at ELCA assembly 2009—hundreds and hundreds of them—to say Yes on the homosexual-hot-potato when they should have said No.

Carl Braaten has said the same thing in the several pages he

devotes to Seminex in his recently published autobiography. Braaten too portrays the Seminex profs who came to LSTC as the ones who swept the ELCA into thumbing its nose at God's law. They engineered the anti-nomian takeover of the denomination.

The Seminex profs who came to LSTC in 1983 were Mark Bangert (Music and Liturgy), Paul Bauermeister (Pastoral Care), Robert Bertram (Systematic Theology), Bob Conrad (Christian Education), Bill Danker (Missiology), Frederick Danker (New Testament), David Deppe (Practical Theology), Kurt Hendel (Reformation History), Ralph Klein (Old Testament), Edgar Krentz (New Testament). By now some have died. So I asked those who remain—all but one of them retired—about the Benne/Braaten claim. Is it true?

So far two have responded. I have their permission to pass their words on to you. But first I'll copy below some of Benne's statements.

Peace and Joy!
Ed Schroeder

Bob Benne's words on the Luth. Forum website:

when I survey the damage done to the ELCA by the Seminex/AELC [=Association of Evangelical Lutheran Churches, LCMS congregations also dismissed from the LCMS during those days] leadership that migrated from Missouri to the church bureaucracies and seminaries of the ELCA. it has made a "long march though ELCA institutions" that has given a significant push to the ELCA's journey to liberal Protestantism. the Missouri liberals lost one skirmish to powerful conservative insurgents in Missouri, but were crucial in winning another from powerless conservatives of the ELCA. Now they are free; they will have no more enemies from the right. The home-grown radicals of the LCA and ALC were joined by the Seminex/AELC contingent to overwhelm the staid

old voices of the LCA and ALC. The latter didn't have a chance against the young radicals. The "march through the institutions" radiated from Chicago to many synods, agencies, colleges, and seminaries. Just as I was leaving the Lutheran School of Theology in 1982, an interesting conversation took place in Carl Braaten's Irving room. The question before the group was: in view of the demise of Seminex, how many of its professors should LSTC take? I argued that taking more than two or three would dramatically alter the seminary. LSTC wound up with over a half dozen, if not more. Before long they were the dominant faction.

the seminary's faculty-led democratic tradition soon became a top-down chain of command, fully attributable to the new faculty. Their liberalism gradually pervaded the seminary. not one of the deployed former Seminex faculty wound up on the side of the traditionalists in the run-up to the Churchwide Assembly to 2009. Except for Paul Hinlicky, I cannot think of one theologian from the Seminex/AELC stream that did not support the revisionist pressures working within the ELCA. there is something about those Seminex/AELC types who have taken leadership positions in the seminaries, colleges, bureaucracies, and synods of the ELCA that has bent them toward the revisionist side. Was it because their tormentors were from the right and they could recognize no dangers from the left? Was it that they had become battle-hardened by earlier struggles and were very adept at maneuvering for power? Was it those German genes? Or was it because they were liberals from the very beginning. . . .?

HENDEL

Dear Ed, While I have had a series of email conversations with Carl Braaten about the ELCA's ministry decisions, I have never engaged him regarding the claim that he makes in his autobiography and which Benne is apparently repeating now.

I will not speak for my colleagues. They can obviously do that for themselves. In my teaching and preaching I have focused on the centrality of Christ and the

gospel. While I have never espoused or promoted an antinomian position, I have stressed that the second use of the law is particularly crucial, both for the effective proclamation of the gospel and for our understanding the Lutheran heritage. I also explore the Formula of Concord's third use of the law. I am clearly not denying the efficacy or necessity of the first use of the law by focusing especially on its chief function. As I affirm the significance of the law and its necessary dialectical relationship to the go spel, I do emphasize that the gospel is God's ultimate good news to humanity. I have also stressed Luther's insistence that the gospel is the hermeneutical key to Scripture and, hence, also of the law. None of this indicates that I am either a gospel-reductionist or an antinomian. Rather, I believe that I am faithful to the Lutheran understanding of the purpose and efficacy of Scripture, to the Lutheran confessional heritage and to Luther's own faith convictions and theological method.

I really have no idea why Braaten ascribes so much influence to us in shaping the assumed heretical stances of LSTC or of the ELCA. We have, of course, taught at LSTC for a good number of years, and we have made our voices heard. We have also been active within the ELCA, but not in unusual or normative ways. I suspect, therefore, that leaders within the ELCA and our other colleagues at LSTC would describe our roles and impact in ways that differ significantly from Braaten's assertions. I would hope, of course, that they would characterize our contributions in a much more positive way.

Bob Benne had, of course, already left LSTC by the time we arrived, and I do not think that he has engaged us or our theological perspective in any significant ways over the past quarter of a century. It may be, therefore, that his perspectives are shaped largely by Braaten's.

I doubt that a response to Braaten or Benne will have a positive impact or change their perspectives.

Dear Ed: Thanks, I think, for alerting me to Benne's piece on the Forum website. That led to Hinlicky's review, which I had seen before.

First, on the dissertation on LCMS to be published by Fortress. I read this piece several years ago since an electronic copy was making the rounds. It is a wondrous piece, but totally devoid of theology—by intention. Hence the absurd criticism by Benne that there was no theological defense by the moderates in Missouri is nonsense. This bloke teaches at Concordia Milwaukee and hence he had to avoid theology if he wanted to keep his job. The dirt he dug up and the connections to right wing political extremism are amazing.

Second, on how “we” took over LSTC. The ten of us have had an enormous impact on LSTC although we have not taken it over (and I promise not to take over the ELCA). I suspect that impartial observers would say that if anything the Seminex contingent was centrist at LSTC, at times even conservative. In the early 90s part of the faculty wanted to call Elizabeth Bettenhausen to the faculty and the other part wanted Reinhard Huetter. The issue was the Lutheranism of the two candidates, sadly lacking in the former, with Braaten strongly an advocate of Huetter, and I think all of the Seminex faculty voted with him. It was a long, drawn out battle, and the decision was finally to call Huetter on a non tenure track. Braaten was fed up with LSTC at that time and walked off in a huff.

Ironically, Seminex was his ally on this issue. Without Seminex Bettenhausen would surely have been called. Ironically, again, Huetter eventually left LSTC for Duke, where he became Roman Catholic! So much for his great Lutheranism.

Third, on the third use of the law [=ethical guidelines for the Christian life]. I still am affected by my Harvard mentors who saw the Decalogue at least as a guide to the redeemed. The top two professors were both Presbyterians. Of course 8 of the ten commandments name a specific thing you can't do, leaving much of life to “living righteously” loving God and the neighbor, or faith active in love. E.g. all the sixth commandment prohibits is the sleeping with another person's wife—hardly a comprehensive guide on sexuality. The only positive commands are the Third—rest on the Sabbath day, which none of us observes (however much we may honor preaching and the Word) and the 4th, which I think was

addressed to adults and admonished them to care for the elderly—good news for our aged bad situations.

A classmate of mine recently attended a symposium at Concordia Seminary, Fort Wayne, and heard ELCA denounced for denying the third use in its sexuality decisions. The question before the ELCA house was what seven biblical passages meant back then and what help they might give us today in wrestling with homosexuality and other sexual issues. [Rejecting] Third use in the LCMS means—IMHO—that you don't buy our legalism.

When the Concordia Seminary (St. Louis) presidency was vacant a few years ago, I offered myself as a candidate with a promise to bring back the good old days. Somehow that plan fizzled.

The 2011 Crossings Conference and President Obama's Address. Part III

Colleagues,

Here are a few more responses that have come in on the topic above.

Peace and Joy!

Ed Schroeder

ONE

Ed – I don't think the problem is praying "God bless America". I think the issue is that the phrase has become so hackneyed it is no longer prayer. And, perhaps worse, we have forgotten that, as prayer, we are really asking God to bless us so that God will use us to be blessings for others. Instead, the mantra seems to be that we are reminding God that we deserve His blessing because we are the exceptional ones. John Munding

TWO

I'm very grateful you continue to edit and write Thursday Theology. The substance is almost always enlightening, and the form – a message from you – always generates memories of the more than 40 years you have taught, scolded, and inspired me. I do read the postings – after converting them to a Word document and printing them out on paper. And I think about them. Here are my thoughts about Matthew 4:12-23 and President Obama's "God bless America."

As I've been studying Matthew's Gospel the last few months, I've come to see that the writer is reminding his audience that God is creating a New People (as evident in the genealogy – a genesis, if you will) with a New King, a servant king who gives up his life as a ransom for many. This new servant king is leading a new exodus (Matthew 2) and is God's "fresh growth" or new branch from the tree cut down.

Perhaps this is good news that could lift the spirits of at least some Americans, a promise of a different kind of blessing for ourselves and others.

With Matthew's first readers, we Americans share a sense of

dislocation. The Twin Towers – and other versions of our Jerusalem temple – have been destroyed. Like Matthew's leaders, many have been forced to move to Galilee and other physical and emotional places. Lost jobs, lost homes, and lost friends. Some of us feel oppressed by Pharisaic "Tea Party-ers." The shadow of death – especially as our entire population ages – casts a pall over our society.

But in Matthew's Gospel, it's exactly in Galilee where Jesus does his teaching and healing. Those regions that, in Isaiah's time, first experienced God's abandonment are now the first to participate in God's new reign of mercy and forgiveness. Isn't it possible that such mercy and forgiveness – Jesus' promise from the cross to his fellow criminal and the promise of Jesus at the very end of Matthew's Gospel, "I am with you until the end of the age" – would be enough to make us a "great people" however the global economy shakes out?

Thanks for encouraging me to put these thoughts on paper.

*Stephen Hitchcock
Senior Manager of Special Projects
Bread for the World*

THREE

[Jim Squire, you readers may remember, was the guy at last month's Crossings conference who volunteered to engage in TRACKING his daily work at Boeing Aircraft on their F-16 fighter project. When the conversation moved to CROSSING Jim's slice-of-life at Boeing with the GROUNDING text from Matthew 4, Jerry Burce jolted all of us a bit by asking whether the F-16s weren't after all God's F-16s. Jerry later expanded on what was behind

that question. I passed his words on to you in last week's ThTh. After reading Jerry's addendum Jim has sent me additional thoughtful reflection of his own self-tracking and self-crossing. I have his permission to pass them on to you. I'll first reprint Jerry's text--then Jim's]

BURCE

Ed, I fear you may have misinterpreted the question I shouted out during your probing of Jim about whether the F-16s he helps to fashion are God's F-16s. The point was not at all to spring him from a D-3 morass [=the Biblical text's deepest diagnosis] but rather to exacerbate it. (I should have clarified on the spot, yes.) For doesn't the terror and wrath of D-3 arise precisely from understanding that there's no out whatsoever, not even the one that says "OK, I'll quit my high-paying instrument-of-death job and go work in a soup kitchen instead?" Time was when the guys most to be pitied were the ones who churned out chariots for Nineveh and Babylon.

On the one hand they're making the very tools God will use to carry out his judgment, so that in making them they're serving God. On the other hand they'll catch it in the neck for the devastation and murder that their chariots cause, woe being unto Nineveh and Babylon for their pride and cruelty. In other words, judgment if you do, judgment if you don't, with wrath and gnashing of teeth at God for the bind he puts you in.

Isn't that what Jim and his co-workers face, and not just them but all of us who are caught up in the empire's service these days, if only as taxpayers? Judgment if the army you help to underwrite gets used. Judgment too if it doesn't get used.

It would have been interesting indeed to hear Jim ruminate along such lines.

SQUIRE

Ed, I don't know if I caught either what Jerry's meaning was that day, but his clarification makes sense to me. In a way, he did capture my dilemma – a dilemma I haven't been all that aware of. I think my stated lack of pacifism lends itself to this. Those F-16s may well be God's F-16s. That is not at all inconceivable to me. There is evil in the world, and while the war machine is not the solution to evil, it conceivably is God's method for restraining evil.

The other horn of the dilemma of course, as Jerry pointed out, is that it is extremely hard for us to use God's F-16s and other weapons without doing evil ourselves. I have no illusion that the F-16s will never, in the hands of those whose training my software expertise contributes to, be used to flatten villages or suppress dissent. It pains me deeply to confess that if any of these F-16s fall into the hands of Israel, innocent Palestinian lives will probably suffer at some point in time. It pains me not only on behalf of those Palestinian lives (and livelihoods), but also on behalf of Israel, a country I fear is plunging into an abyss. You want to see a people with a terrible dilemma on their hands, it's Israel.

My dilemma seems like a walk in the park by comparison. God's chosen people feeling a sense of duty to protect what Yahweh gave to them feeling that they have to do so by killing their bitter enemies, the descendants of Ishmael – between a rock and hard place is what I would call it. A people participating in their own moral destruction, feeling like they have no choice in the matter, having to rationalize it in order to sleep at

night.

I guess in a small way I have to do the same. As I think I stated to you during an intermission that day, as much as I hate the destruction of war, the last thing I'm interested in is building powerfully destructive flying machines and then failing to train those who fly them properly. Either F-16s are purely instruments of evil, completely abhorrent to God and he will send people to destroy them, or else he calls people to fly those F-16s, and he calls people like me to support those who train pilots to fly them, so that they know how to fly them safely – perhaps even to fly and operate them so that only those who deserve it feel their “godly” wrath.

It's a muddle. I definitely feel that this world contains people and organizations that need to be restrained physically, else the world shall fall into the abyss (I think I'm grabbing that word from Bonhoeffer's Ethics, but I'm not sure). I'm definitely thinking of his reference to 2nd Thessalonians and Paul's explanation of “the one who now restrains” the mystery of lawlessness. I think this world is still haunted by that scenario, and while I have little faith in any government's (including our own) integrity to use that restraining power properly, I don't feel that taking that power away is going to make things better, unless there is a godly force to give it to (and that kind of talk conjures up all kinds of ugly, perverted images of the Christian paramilitary variety anyway).

What is worrisome to me – now that you've got me dwelling on this – is that I don't really have much confidence that this divine authority (Paul called it the sword in Romans 13, I believe) is in the hands of faithful servants. Bonhoeffer teaches us that such authority can be abdicated, at which point it becomes the responsibility of those called to try their best to take it from the government. The only example I'm aware of,

as you may recall, still involved the participation of military types leading duplicitous lives – and of course they were ultimately unsuccessful.

*So, while I cannot support fashioning an ideological opposition to F-16s, neither can I offer a feeling of confidence that F-16s will keep the world safe. They *can* keep the world safe, but will they? And I'm not simply asking if F-16s are "enough." I'm afraid they might be subverted into instruments of evil. I also cannot offer any assurances that I am equipped to assess these possibilities and know whether or not to act. It is frankly easier to just blindly do my job responsibly and "trust" that the F-16s will be put to noble use, though the object of that "trust" is not necessarily worthy of it.*

*Yours in Christ,
Jim Squire*

The 2011 Crossings Conference and President Obama's Address. Part II.

Colleagues,

None of you (so far) accepted my invitation at the end of last week's ThTh post to cross President Obama's State of the Union address with Matt. 4: 12-23, the focal text for last week's Crossings conference. Possibly because this week is Egypt-week. So I shall either have to do it myself or change the topic. Or

do a bit of both.

I did get a few responses. Two of them cautioned me to be less certain, less Jeremiad-driven in crossing my own nation with the three diagnostic X-ray images we'd uncovered in Matthew 4:12-23 at the just-completed Crossings conference. They were the deep, deeper, deepest malady-mirrorings that Steve Kuhl had mined for us from the Matthean text: Business as Usual; (even worse) Sitting in Darkness; (worst of all) Dwelling in the Region of Death.

The caveat and caution expressed in ThTh 659 about the national mantra, "God bless [the people of] America," elicited second opinions, and an occasional Nathan-to-David finger-pointing, e.g., "You seem to take delight in the Jeremiad." Which may have more truth in it than I'm willing to admit.

Then came these lines:

"We in the church are the ones who bear a great debt of guilt, because we have been so ineffectual in helping our neighbors understand the dire straits they are in. So, yes, I will continue to ask God to bless America and not be overly critical of Mr Obama, even if he doesn't understand what he says in asking for that blessing ... and I believe that the greatest blessing God could confer on us as a nation is a realization of how much we stand in need of his forgiveness for wasting our gifts, not caring for the poor, thinking that our armies can protect us if we are not truly in pursuit of justice as mirrored, for example, in Amos. "

Blessed with repentance! Yes, indeed, God bestow this blessing on us.

Back to "taking delight in the Jeremiad." Yet I don't think I "delight" in jeremiads any more than ancient Jeremiah did with

his 52-chapters-long State of the Israelite Tribal Union message. With him too, tears were more appropriate.

I was also warned of the dangers of being a prophet, especially a self-designated one.

I have no memory of receiving a call to the office of prophet. Amos's line is my line: "I'm not a prophet, not even a PK, a prophet's kid." True, my vision may be impaired. But seems to me it's nothing special. Nothing exceptional—either plus or minus. No clairvoyance, no superman's eyesight. The crossover from the Word of God to the world of my country is simply there. It comes off the page, both of the scriptures and the daily newspaper. They intersect. They cross each other. The Biblical precedents, the Biblical per-spective—literally, "seeing through"—on world history chronicles just that: God seeing through world events, finally God seeing through us enveloped in those events.

My Doktorvater Helmut Thielicke regularly spoke of the Hebrew prophets as reporters on Israel's history, reporters with eyes wide open. Events rolled past, rolled over, the people of Israel, but they regularly were blind to what was actually happening. So God sent them prophets, sometimes actually called "seers," to tell them what they were not seeing, what was REALLY going on, namely, what God was doing in that history—to them and in the world around them.

But the prophets' efforts seldom succeeded. The rare exception is in the book of Jonah, but there it is the UNCHOSEN people, the citizens of Nineveh, The God-ignorant, who finally "see" the light. For the chosen folks, the supposedly exceptional ones, the pattern persists that is the drumbeat in the book of Amos chapter 4: "I did this, and this, and this to you, for you—and yet you did not [see it, and] turn around."

Another commentator said:

Concerning God not blessing America, I fear we are getting into the "I know what god is thinking/doing" business. Not possible. The prodigal in the pig pen was being blessed by God, although he surely didn't think so at the time. As for America, as long as God is hearing our prayers, He is blessing us. Please, let's not do God's work for Him. He is quite capable. And as we know, regarding history both in and out of the Bible, His way of blessing, like everything else He does, is beyond our comprehension.. Please, let God be God.

Which prompted me to post this message in return:

Dear Pastor X, Don't quite agree on that.

Not everything God does throughout the scriptures is "beyond our comprehension." Much of it God "reveals" but human blindness persists. Therefore, as Jesus says, you find the blind leading the blind. Which is, I suggest, Jesus' mantra for human history in the old creation. Also America's. Why shouldn't his word apply to our people too?

God's blessing (and cursing) business has rather specific parameters according to both the O and NT. God reveals, but folks are blind, ears stuffed up, hearts hardened. The signals don't get through. Especially with reference to what's going on in the world, the issue is "reading the signs of the times." Some folks never seem to do that, read them right. E.g., Pharaoh himself with ten shots at "seeing" what was going on—God NOT blessing Egypt—and he never really did.

The constant drumbeat of most of the OT prophetic books is just

that: the chosen people NOT seeing what God is plainly doing in their history, even when the prophets, who DO see it, try to tell them what they ought to be seeing in the world-events that roll over them. E.g., Amos with the Northern Kingdom folks chapter 4:6 ff. Jesus with his critics. Mt. 16:3. Hitler-era German folks, Christians included, who didn't read the Hitler-era aright—that God was NOT blessing Germans with the Fuehrer's leadership, but destroying them.

I can't imagine Bonhoeffer saying yes to your proposal. Especially "Please, let's not do God's work for Him." I thought that just because humans are created to be God's images—and all the more so when sinners get the "right to be called children of God" (John 1:12), that this was our calling—doing God's work in the world, esp. articulating God's word—of law (mirroring to the world the divine diagnosis that worldlings need to see and hear) and of Gospel (what God in Christ offers the same worldlings to see and hear—and trust).

God is sending us American folks our own set of plagues—Tucson, Katrina, al Queda, drug-addiction, health-care crisis, Wall Street greed, our own Iraq/Afghanistan/Pakistan self-destruction, the national debt, Abu Graib, Guantanamo. Where is there any political leader or, even more tragic, any Christian pastor, who says anything about it, about what God is doing here—definitely NOT blessing America?

Sure, these may in some respect be "natural," but Who is orchestrating the sequence? Who of God's images is telling even church people that the same God who used Nebuchadnezzar (the rod of God's anger, ala Isaiah) against the Israelites, is hammering us with similar rods/plagues today? Especially we preacher types are following the path of silence, and our children/grandchildren, who will have to live in the apocalypse that always comes after such blindness, will learn the meaning

of “visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children to the third and fourth generation.” Will they not point their finger—God’s own finger of judgment—at us: Why were you so blind? Didn’t you read the Bible? Didn’t you believe what you read?

That may not all be “perfectly” clear, but totally opaque it surely is not.

I’ve been in error before, and that could be true this time too. But if the Christian scriptures suggest a “happier” reading of human history—ours included—I’d like to learn where those texts are for greater clarity about the Word of God “crossing” the USA.

*Even in the face of those realities,
Christ’s peace and joy! E.S.*

In last week’s post I mentioned a question coming from the floor as Ron Neustadt and I were doing show-and-tell on phase two and three in the process, namely, TRACKING Jim Squire’s high-tech job at Boeing working on F-16 fighters and CROSSING him at that very slice-of life with the Matt. 4 text we had for our conference. The question was: “Aren’t those F-16s God’s F-16s?” It came from Jerry Burce. He sent me this addendum:

Ed, I fear you may have misinterpreted the question I shouted out during your probing of Jim about whether the F-16s he helps to fashion are God’s F-16s. The point was not at all to spring him from a D-3 morass [=the Biblical text’s deepest diagnosis] but rather to exacerbate it. (I should have clarified on the spot, yes.) For doesn’t the terror and wrath of D-3 arise precisely from understanding that there’s no out whatsoever, not even the one that says “OK, I’ll quit my high-paying

instrument-of-death job and go work in a soup kitchen instead?" Time was when the guys most to be pitied were the ones who churned out chariots for Nineveh and Babylon.

On the one hand they're making the very tools God will use to carry out his judgment, so that in making them they're serving God. On the other hand they'll catch it in the neck for the devastation and murder that their chariots cause, woe being unto Nineveh and Babylon for their pride and cruelty. In other words, judgment if you do, judgment if you don't, with wrath and gnashing of teeth at God for the bind he puts you in.

Isn't that what Jim and his co-workers face, and not just them but all of us who are caught up in the empire's service these days, if only as taxpayers? Judgment if the army you help to underwrite gets used. Judgment too if it doesn't get used.

It would have been interesting indeed to hear Jim ruminate along such lines.

[Btw. Jerry was the first presenter at last week's Crossings conference. His "Setting the Foundations: How Distinguishing God's Law and God's Gospel brings Jesus' Real Benefits to Bear on Real Lives in the Real World" is so super I'll put in a plug for it here. To have it before your own eyes, GO to the Crossings homepage Click on Conference. Click on Papers. Click on 2011. Scroll down to "Setting the Foundations." Jerry also has a sidebar on "enabling grace" (mentioned above) as grace "not yet good enough" for what needs to be done. While you're at the 2011 site, look at the rest of what's there. Solid stuff built upon the foundations that Jerry so masterfully laid out for us.]

So much for feedback.

If we take President Obama's message as his own "tracking" of American common life today, how might that look when "crossed" with the Biblical "groundings" in Matt. 4:12-23? Steve Kuhl's sextet for the grounding was: Business as usual. Sitting in darkness. Region of death. Kingdom of God. Repentance and faith. Fish for people.

So possibly something like this:

THE BAD NEWS

Step #1: Facing economic hardship? Stick with business as usual. Produce more money. Money will make things happen. Money, nowadays not even paper with numbers printed on it, but just electronic elves bouncing back and forth between computers through cyberspace will do the trick. The law of "pay-back" (God's law of pay-back) has been repealed.

Step #2: "Sitting in darkness." Illusions, illusions, illusions. Especially the illusion that no attention to consumption and greed is necessary.

Step #3: "Sitting in the region of death." Aren't all those national plagues death messengers? Surely not life-messengers, not blessing-messengers. If God's no longer blessing America, what's the other alternative?

THE GOOD NEWS

[Might one be so bold in secular multi-religious (and irreligious) America not only to do the diagnosis above, but also offer the Gospel's new prognosis to an entire nation? May seem impossible, yet that's what Jonah did for Nineveh, proclaiming God's word—diagnostic and prognostic—to a nation for whom Israel's God of mercy was an unknown god? It has happened

in more recent times, in the USA, when President Lincoln called the nation to a day of repentance in the midst of the Civil War—and Congress went along with it.]

How to proclaim good news to a nation is at root finally no different from proclaiming it to an individual, for the nation is people. The formula is quite simple: offering the merits and benefits of Christ to folks in need in such a way that (quoting Burce) “brings Jesus’ Full Benefits to Bear on Real Lives in the Real World (of America).”

Possibly something like this:

Step #4: If you’re going to invoke God to bless America as your final words to the American people in your State of the Union address, what all are you asking for? The Christian answer is: you are asking for the Jesus-rescue from the “reign of death.” In NT vocabulary that is “the Kingdom of God,” God’s mercy-management offer to folks mired in the reign of death, who have “No Exit” signs posted on every wall.

Step #5: The common creed we Americans share is bereft of any space for repentance. If nothing else, from the greed which even the secular analysts said was the deeper diagnosis of Wall Street’s debacle. And if you’re going to talk about faith “in government,” or in the God our dollar bills say we trust, then what’s called for? The answer is in the two imperative verbs sprinkled throughout the NT: “REPENT and TRUST the Good News of the Kingdom that has arrived in Jesus.”

Step #6: Everybody is following somebody. “Come and follow me,” is the Jesus invitation. And everybody is always fishing for something. Infiltrate daily life “fishing” of business-as-usual with people-fishing, If it’s hard to envision this on a nationwide scale, at least the “already fished” folks could huddle, fashioning nets explicitly for their fellow citizens

using Matthew's six spools of thread for the catch.

Is there a nationwide way to “fish for people” so that they do indeed survive – possibly even on into eternity? That's what the already-netted will be talking about. But suppose Nineveh won't have a re-run in America. Suppose it won't happen that “everyone . . . believed God, proclaimed a fast, put on sackcloth” and the king, going one step farther, “sat in ashes.” Then what? Then Luther's counsel could be the topic within the network, counsel he offered when 600 thousand Muslim troops stood outside the gates of Vienna in 1529. A Christian remnant does the Nineveh script and God may, just may, let the “repent and believe” of a few count for the rescue of the many. It's happened before.

Peace and Joy!

Ed Schroeder

P.S. Anybody out there want to volunteer as speech-writer for President Obama and offer him a text for this sort of message for next year's State of the Union?

The 2011 Crossings Conference and President Obama's Address.

Colleagues,

President Obama concluded his message to the nation two days ago with the standard mantra for such occasions: “God bless the United States of America.” Sad to say, it ain't gonna happen. Curmudgeon though I may be, that conclusion is not original with me.

If the Bible is any kind of yardstick for God's blessing business, it ain't gonna happen. Claus Westermann (Biblical super-scholar of my younger years) showed us that God's blessing-business is—in Lutheran lingo—God's left-hand operation. It's a consequence of good behavior, good performance. It's getting your just deserts. It happens because God sees to it that in God's old creation righteousness is rewarded and wickedness punished. Both individuals and nations. [Remember the ancient meaning of "nation" (Latin) is not a governing state, but the "tribe, race, people" being governed]. So if a nation is getting clobbered, God has closed down the blessing-business. Once a nation becomes an empire, it's super-grim. There's no Biblical example of God ever blessing empires. They always get "weighed, and found wanting."

As if that's not bad enough . . . Sadder still is that neither the American president, nor the American people seem to have any clue that God is not blessing America right now and that there are no grounds for expecting God to stop non-blessing America. Also clueless are they—are we—to the fact that if God's not doing the blessing business, then there's just one alternative. And it is not that God has taken a holiday from doing any business at all. That never happens.

[Isn't this what that madman Jeremiah Wright, the president's one-time pastor, told him—yes, told the nation—before Obama was elected? Obama said no, Wright was wrong, was misreading the data. The American people agreed with Obama. How could God ever stop blessing America and revert to cursing instead? Nonsense. Other nations perhaps, but not America. We're different from "the nations"—even if the Bible does put us in that column.]

In last Tuesday's address Obama was not only speaking TO us Americans, but even more FOR us. Despite the Republican/Democratic gridlock in the very room where he was

speaking, both factions agree (as do the constituencies they represent) that these words of his are true:

- We share a common creed [Ah, but just what is it? Listen to the items below.]
- That creed sets us apart as a nation. [Does the judge of creeds (and nations) agree? Why then all our troubles?]
- We have broken the back of the recession. The worst of the recession is over.
- THE FUTURE IS OURS TO WIN.[a mantra throughout the address]
- We can out-educate, out-innovate, out-build the rest of the world.
- We Americans do big things.
- In America anything is possible.
- The Iraq war is coming to an end.
- [al Queda,] we will not relent, nor waver; we will defeat you.

Sobering notes were there, but the irony in them ignored.

We need to rebuild our people's faith in government.

How do you bring back faith when it has faded away? Rebuild faded faith in anything? That's fundamental theology. That's mission work. Obama didn't give any details that got below the surface for fixing this faith-fadeout.

And then this one, not disconnected to the one above:

We should have no illusions (about what it will take to get us out of our troubles).

But how many of those points above are not just that: illusions? Not just the president's illusions, but the illusions of the people (the nation), both Republican and Democrat. He did indeed not only speak TO the nation, but also FOR us. Those illusions ARE "the common creed we all share." Jesus once said something

about what happens when the blind lead the blind.

Many of you know that we've just held the fourth Crossings international conference here in St. Louis. It concluded Tuesday at noon. Too bad we didn't have Obama's Tuesday evening speech on hand for our final Tuesday morning session. Not that those final hours were dull. They were super.

- Jerry Burce showed us God's "economics" (sic!) of salvation running through the entire Gospel of Matthew.
- Steve Albertin took the NT text we'd been working with throughout the whole conference—Matthew 4:12-25, the gospel appointed for last Sunday—and "crossed" it over to his own life experience when folks in the congregation he was pastoring asked him to depart.
- Marcus Felde waltzed us through his current pattern—sometimes subtle—of Crossings-conscious parish education with a men's group and a women's group in the congregation where he is pastor.

You can see all these three presentations on the Crossings website soon. Also the other conference papers. Maybe they're already there now.

In the conference program as planned, these three Tuesday morning offerings were the icing on the cake. And yummy it was. But the cake (Sunday evening and all day Monday) was yummy too. Did we get done with the full baking thereof? No. Closure came too soon. Participants said so in their evaluations, yet they did enjoy snitching spoonfuls of batter as we were mixing it and also taking bites of the three layers that did get into and out of the oven.

The recipe was Bob Bertram's original three-layer cake called "Grounding, Tracking, Crossing." From way back in 1974. You can find it on the website On that homepage click on "Works of RWB" and scroll down to "Crossings, Inc. (Saint Louis): A Proposal."

Ron Neustadt walked us through Bob's Magna Charta for Crossings reminding us that the word "crossings" gets used in family shoptalk in several ways:

- name of a not-for-profit corporation: The Crossings Community, Inc.
- name for a way to do Bible study (the six-step probing of a biblical text wherein the final three Good News steps "cross over and cross out" the trio of Bad News that the text has exposed),
- finally another meaning, the ancient one Bertram was using in that document from 37 years ago. Here "crossing" designates the third phase in a sequence, the final layer of Bertram's three-layer cake. Here's what the three are:

Layer one: "Grounding":(=getting our own groundings for the project by retrieving the Bad-news/Good-news in the pantry of a specific Bible text.)

Layer two: "Tracking" some slice-of life today with the same intensity for the bad-news/good-news that surfaces in people's lived experience. Doing so either with a slice-of-life of some person, or of larger entities we encounter in today's world.

[Such "larger" turfs for tracking from Bob's 1974 list sound like today's front page:: main themes in present-day pop culture; new ideas on who ought to be educated and at whose expense; sex and the public mindset; current meanings of responsibility and authority; what health-care today understands by "health"; the new populism; secularity and American folk religion; the coming scarcity, frugality and asceticism; death

and dying; contemporary emphasis on being oneself; consumerism and participatory democracy; the high premium on being critical; pluralism as a life-style; Eastern religions in the West; how corporations are seeking social responsibility; the modern technology of managing people; money; confrontation as a mode of therapy, of evangelism, of political action; youth and aging; overcoming middle-class rage; female and feminine; what is news; ethnicity; violence; the way people care; work; humor and the holy; how government is being "by the people"; liberalism and conservatism.]

Layer three: "Crossing." Linking the findings from the first two layers into each other, accent on THE cross as the connector. [Here you need to think of the layers not stacked one above the other, but the first two side-by-side and #3 placed a-cross (sic!) them at the touch-point binding them together.

LAYER ONE AT THE CONFERENCE: GROUNDING

Jerry Burce took us through the Grounding part of the recipe, ringing the changes on law-promise lenses for reading the Bible as they come to us in New Testament scriptures and Reformation theology. Steve Kuhl then walked us through the Sunday Gospel (Matt. 4:12-25) according to the recipe, retrieving for us how in this text Jesus himself is doing initial diagnosis, advanced diagnosis, final diagnosis. And then retrieving (Steve liked that term) the text's own (Jesus' own) offer of a new prognosis to trump the dead end exposed in the final diagnosis. He concluded retrieving the wealth of good news offered by this text to cross over and cross out all three levels of bad news that the text had exposed.

His chosen terms for the sequence came from the text itself:

Problem: Business as Usual

1. Business as Usual: "Fishermen."
2. Obscurity: "A People Sitting in Darkness."
3. The Hold of the World: "Sitting in the Region of Death."

Solution: The Unusual Business of Christ

4. The Reign of Christ: "The Kingdom of Heaven" as the alternative to the "Reign of Death."
5. Repentance and Faith = the Miracle of Clarity: "A Great Light" as "Christ draws near."
6. "Follow Me. Fish for People."

Number 4 crosses over to #3, #5 over to #2 and #6 over to #1.

LAYER TWO AT THE CONFERENCE: TRACKING

Jim Squire, himself a long-term Crossings practitioner, volunteered to be the person for Tracking. Ron Neustadt was the tracker. He'd asked me to sit nearby "just in case." I did, but no "just in case" really showed up. Although this grey eminence, occasionally referred to as co-founder, didn't entirely hold his peace during the conference, the listed program leaders didn't need yours truly to extricate them from any sticky wickets. They are major league theologians.

[As the conference came to closure, one participant told me: Ed, you once spoke of the teachers during your student days by saying "There were giants in the earth in those days," and then you rattled off the names. Well, the age has returned. We have been hob-nobbing with giants again these three days. Even if their names do not yet (and may never) get international recognition.]

Ron got Jim to talk about his daily work.

What do you do all day there at Boeing?

What do you get for what you do?

Where does all that finally get you?

What's the best thing, the worst thing, about your daily work?

Jim gave straight answers, but because he knows the three-layer cake himself and bakes it often in his life and work, before long he and Ron were already baking the third layer: crossing his daily work with the Word of God, the specific text from Matthew 4 that had come out of the oven as layer one at the conference.

LAYER THREE AT THE CONFERENCE: CROSSING

1. Jim's life too is business as usual. Some of it rather exotic as he works in fine-tuning the training systems for F-16 military aircraft. Some of it exacerbating: hectic activities, big deadlines, de-bugging problems, pressures.
2. Sitting in darkness. Obscurity. "Sometimes it's kind of a blur." And then he unpacked that. Yes, the blur was not just his fast-paced daily work, but Jim's Christ-connection also encountered blurring amid all that hustle. Whose fisherman was he really? How could he be casting Christ's kind of nets for the people Christ was fishing for while working in all these networks and often being netted himself? Yes, Jesus in Matt. 4 was diagnosing disciple Jim too.
3. Did that leave Jim "sitting in the region of death"? Well, at that deep diagnosis level it got dicey. It regularly does. The audience got antsy too. You've got to trust someone to go to the depths with the diagnostic probe, even just one-on-one, let alone before an audience. But Jim is gutsy. He pressed on. Yes, Even as Christ-confessor Jim's "old Adam" was still hanging around (sometimes around his neck)—and God was unrelenting in handing out "dead-lines" to that "old Jim" too. When someone pushed him about his actual work with death-dealing F-16 fighters, he

paused. Was the region of death in his life really that big, that extensive, that it encompassed the very job itself? Audience participation joined in at this time. Possibly seeking to rescue Jim not only from the question, but from God the critic at that final diagnosis level. "We all pay taxes that pay Jim's salary, so we're all implicated." "Those F-16s are God's F-16s." "Go slow on that one. Remember Eisenhower's warning about the military-industrial complex becoming the destroyer of America. Destroyer is another name for God's opponent in world history, the old evil foe." We didn't wrestle that one to the ground, but Jim acknowledged that it was a question that he himself wrestles with.

4. Crossing the good news of steps four, five, and six didn't get equal time as the clock was running out. Yet Ron led the way in walking with Jim to #4, the good news of Christ's "unusual business" with Jim to pull him out of the "reign of death" in whatever manifestations it showed up in his life and work. They then scampered through the last two steps: (#5) on repentance and faith as Jim constantly re-connects, day in day out, with Christ's unusual business, and finally (#6) some specific instances where Jim can and already does "fish for people" out there at Boeing in, with and under all the business as usual that goes on there.

In groups of two or three with a Crossings veteran the participants did hands-on Grounding with other Biblical texts. That went well. But we didn't have program time for hands-on practice of Tracking and Crossing, layer number two and layer number three. We all did see it get done with Jim, and then in Tuesday morning's final session we listened to Steve Albertin track himself and cross himself with Matthew 4 as he took us with him through his own slice-of-life (slice-of-death?) when his congregation leaders sought to get rid of him.

The folks went home nourished, but we didn't get everything done. Participants didn't get practice in mixing the last two layers, didn't get hold of the cake-mixer to do the full recipe on their own. But they have seen it done. Next time

Suppose we had had Obama's "tracking" of America, his Tuesday evening State of the Union message, in hand. How might the six steps of the Matthew 4 text cross over to that nationwide slice-of-life? That's too much for today's ThTh edition. But if it doesn't get out of my craw, which it probably won't, you may hear about it next week. Possibly, "Winning the Future. Two Different Proposals. Both Very Theological." Should one or more of you want to try your hand at it, I could have a workless Thursday. Remember Matthew's sextet: Business as usual. Sitting in darkness. Region of death. Kingdom of God. Repentance and faith. Fish for people.

Peace and Joy!

Ed Schroeder

"What Do You Get When You Cross a Short Story with the Gospel?"

Précis of a presentation

by Rev. Dr. Marcus Felde of Bethlehem Lutheran Church,
Indianapolis, Indiana,

at the Crossings Seminar at Belleville, Illinois, January 25,
2011: "How Is Jesus Good for You, Really?"

[I am sorry that I am not able to reproduce my talk, which was filled with animadversions and other diversions. What follows should give you a rough idea of what I was up to.]

I propose that a useful means of doing the “tracking” and “crossing” which are part of the Crossings paradigm for getting the Gospel of Jesus Christ into people’s lives, might be to use short fiction as a source to illuminate the predicament(s) which the Gospel addresses.

At Bethlehem Lutheran Church, for the past year or so, our men’s Bible study group has been reading a series of short stories pulled from current issues of *The New Yorker* magazine. We have read about twenty stories, spending two-three weeks on each. We have renamed our group *Tuesdays with Story* to give some idea of what we are up to. (We meet every Tuesday morning at 6:30 AM.)

I have found that the stories are rich lodes of insight into human nature and relationships, and the problems which beset us. The characters in the story, even though they are often exaggerated and live in very different contexts than ourselves, bear many of the same burdens and ask many of the same questions as we do, seasonally adjusted.

We spend most of our time discussing the stories, always in a fairly casual manner. As we feel like it, we offer anecdotes or opinions. Towards the end of the hour, I generally make an effort to make a link to Christian faith, if it has not already been brought up.

At this point in our study’s history, I have not used the Crossings matrix in a deliberate manner to “track,” as we say, how God’s law might be operative at three levels in the people of the story. I am conscious of that, though, and sometimes my

comments or commentary are heavily dependent on it.

[There is also a Women's Bible Study which meets only twice a month, has recently begun reading some of these stories. In that group, I have deliberately used Celebrate inserts with the three lessons for that week, in order to make a connection between the two.]

The stories we have read for our Tuesday morning sessions are:

Indianapolis (Highway 74), by Sam Shephard

Alone, by Yiyun Li

A Death in Kitchawank, by T. Coraghessan Boyle

Free Fruit for Young Widows, by Nathan Englander

Baptizing the Gun, by Uwem Akpan (a Nigerian RC priest)

Trailhead, by E.O. Wilson

Hopefulness, by Ryan Mecklenburg (from The Atlantic)

Edgemont Drive, by E.L. Doctorow

War Dances, by Sherman Alexie

Victory Lap, by George Saunders

The Use of Poetry, by Ian McEwan

Uncle Rock, by Dagoberto Gilb

Foster, by Claire Keegan

Agreeable, by Jonathan Franzen

All That, by David Foster Wallace

An Arranged Marriage, by Nell Freudenberger

Premium Harmony, by Stephen King

To the Measures Fall, by Richard Powers

Blue Roses, by Frances Hwang

I.D., by Joyce Carol Oates

The Trojan Prince, by Tessa Hadley

Birdsong, by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie

The story "Victory Lap" was the subject of my comments and some discussion during the Crossings Seminar. That is because after

we had read George Saunders' story we had some correspondence with him which resulted in our having the privilege (next month) of hearing him read that story at nearby Butler University. He will also be our guest for a breakfast the next morning. We look forward to meeting an author whose work we enjoyed and found so stimulating.

My discussing that story here would not be meaningful without some knowledge of the story, so I will make only limited remarks specific to it.

The very title "Victory Lap" suggests that (at least) one of the characters in the story obtains a victory, and that is what we find. The young man, Kyle, rises above a very legalistic, rulebound life within which he has certain limitations and definite rewards (albeit small); in order to rescue his neighbor, a girl who has been his friend since sandbox days, from an abductor/rapist. He is victorious over his internal fear of breaking the rules, gallantly and speedily effecting her rescue. She, in turn, rescues him from the ignominy of becoming "someone who has killed a guy," by overcoming her fear to yell at him and prevent him from gratuitously smashing in the downed villain's head.

For Crossing purposes, it would be necessary to ask whether within the confines of the story the victories that are obtained are sufficient for all the problems we find. In fact, from our perspective, no. The evil in the world is only slightly dented by the "beautiful" thing the kids have done by being so good. Kyle returns to a morally stunted household, she to her nightmares. And the thug, well, he goes to jail very badly injured.

The author may see this as the best *he* can offer, in all honesty, in a world which an awful lot of "undeserved misery"

(his words) in it. Do we? Is not the even more magnanimous mercy shown to us by God in Jesus Christ somewhat similar to the restraint shown by Kyle at the last moment, in not killing someone we might wish he would just go ahead and kill? Is there hope for these people?

If there is not, then there is no hope for you and me, either. And our hope is not *only* that people will stop trying to abduct girls, but that people will be (and act like) children of a Father who makes us all brothers and sisters by sending his Son to rescue us. Christ runs a “victory lap” himself, binding the strong forces that make us prisoner . . . (You can do this just as well as I can.)

Such a *segue* from short story to the Good News may seem to do violence to the story. But our purpose in reading such stories is not merely to enjoy them, but to see in their light what God was going on about in Christ. Perhaps through seeing ourselves in the stories, we may learn better to see ourselves in Scripture itself, especially when Scripture uses law-language that we are experienced at dodging. The people in these stories *are us*. We know in our bones what Kyle dreads, when he fears being “ruined” by what he has done, or almost did.

I personally regard the reading of short fiction as a superb means of getting at the left hand of the Crossings matrix, the law side. I do not espouse drawing on the stories as a means of elucidating the right side of the matrix, because I think the temptation would be great to turn the story into a moralistic tale, with the ending being: everyone please act like the hero in this story. That is even true if the hero of a story like George Saunders’s “Escape from Spiderhead” actually sacrifices himself in order to save— or keep from being forced to kill—someone else. (Interestingly, he seems to save himself there by, becoming for an instant someone who has never killed

anyone—although he had, as a youth.)

I commend this experience to others. I do not think it depends much on what story you choose, if it has a rich, nuanced, compelling, insightful perspective on human life, it should work. If anything, I would recommend against using stories which offer too easy a link to Jesus' death on the cross, or even baptism, like Uwem Akpan's "Baptizing the Gun," in which . . . Hey, look it up for yourself. A subscription to *The New Yorker* is surprisingly cheap.

Plus, there are cartoons!

[WhatDoYouGetWhenYouCrossShortStorywithGospel \(PDF\)](#)