

# #759 Grace, Truth, and Glory

There's nothing like coming home for Christmas. For me, that homecoming always includes the services at Messiah Lutheran Church in Fairview Park, Ohio, with a Christmas sermon (or, if I'm really lucky, two) from Jerry Burce.

This year was no different, and I want to share with you the sermon that Jerry preached not on Christmas Eve but on Christmas Day. From the vivid images of his introduction, through to the resounding proclamation of the good news in his conclusion, he held us congregants in thrall. We left with a refreshed and renewed understanding of those words of St. John that we've heard so many times before, those words whose re-hearing is a homecoming of its own: that "we have seen his glory, the glory as of the Father's only Son, full of grace and truth."

So, I send this Christmas homily along to you today with a prayer that it will leave you, as it left us, in awe at the glorious miracle that God has accomplished for us through Jesus Christ.

Peace and Joy,  
Carol Braun, for the editorial team

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## Grace, Truth, and Glory A Christmas Day Homily on John 1:1-14

*And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of the Father's only Son, full of grace and truth. – John 1:14, NRSV (variant)*

It's astonishing how many sermons are lurking inside this one fairly short sentence. There's time this Christmas morning for

only one of them, of course, and a briefer one than that. So let me focus today on the glory the writer is talking about.

It was 17 years or so ago when I finally learned what "glory" means. I've told this story before, so please bear with me if you're one of those who have heard it already.

The year was 1995. One of the most exciting teams in the history of baseball was packing Jacobs Field in downtown Cleveland day after day, and day after day the crowd would stay till the last pitch was pitched, because you never knew what the Indians might do. From top to bottom the lineup was packed with high-percentage batters. Among them was a young fellow, just breaking into the major leagues. His name was Manny Ramirez, he of the sweetest swing that I for one have ever seen.

Came a day against the Oakland A's when the Tribe was down a run in the bottom half of an extra-inning game, with two outs, one man on base. Oakland at the time had a pitcher who, over his career, had come to define what a closer is. His name was Dennis Eckersley. He was now in the twilight of his career, but even so, hardly anyone that year was getting the better of Dennis Eckersley. So when Manny Ramirez stepped into the batter's box the city watched more out of duty than of any sense of expectation.

What happened next helped define the entire season. A fastball sped in low and inside, exactly where the pitcher wanted it. Manny swung the bat, and lo, there was the ball shooting hard into the left-field bleachers. Two runs scored, and that was the game. On TV that night you could see the pitcher twirling around to follow the ball as it sailed over his head. As it did you could see him mouth a word. What he said was "Wow!"

It hit me later that I had just witnessed the definition of "glory." Glory is people saying "Wow!" Glory is people being

stunned by something extraordinary. Glory is the quality shared by the crashing thunderstorm on the one hand, the exquisite snowflake on the other. Glory is the aftermath of the exquisite performance, the perfect creation, the monumental achievement, the crushing victory. Glory is people talking and pointing and after that recalling. Glory is yours truly, the most casual fair-weather fan a team was ever cursed with, still recounting a certain moment in a certain game that happened almost twenty years ago. Though come to think of it, real glory is the expert opponent, in this case Dennis Eckersley, pausing to honor and admire what has just taken place even as it sends him to defeat.

We have beheld *his* glory, says the writer of the Gospel. Translation: "We looked, we saw, and we all said 'Wow!' And years and years later we were are all still talking about it as the one thing we've seen that we hadn't seen before, nor have we seen it since in anyone other than this Word-made-flesh, Jesus is his name."

In the great Christmas account that Luke wrote—we listened again last night—we heard at least four "Wows." There was the "Wow!" of angel armies singing their joy when the other angel broke the news that Christ was born. Then shepherds said "Wow" as they hurried off to find this Savior Christ was born to them. Once they got there and told their story "all they that heard it marveled," that is, they all said "Wow." Then came a final "Wow," this one again from shepherds as they headed back to their fields "glorifying and praising God for all that they heard and seen."

St. Matthew tells of another "Wow!", this one uttered by strange men from a land far, far away, now kneeling before a little Jewish baby and presenting him with gifts for a king.

St. John says his "Wow!" about the man the baby grew into. He

was, says John, like no else. What set him apart was the way he dealt with us, the way we watched him operate with other people too.

It was a gracious way, perfectly gracious. It was a truthful way too, and perfectly truthful.

Never before, says John, had we seen those two things come together in one and the same person. Overflowing grace, overflowing truth, the two encountered simultaneously, in every moment we spent with him. Had we not seen, we could not have believed it. It changed the way we think about God.

After all, grace is one thing. Truth is another. As a rule, in our usual experience, grace and truth don't walk hand in hand. They don't coexist. They simply can't.

As a rule, in our usual experience, grace will stop where truth begins. As a rule, truth cancels grace. It makes it impossible.

So, for example, in a courtroom. As the proceedings open, grace is in charge, or at least it's supposed to be in charge. In our usual language we call it a presumption of innocence. Maybe the person accused deserves this, maybe he doesn't, at this point we just don't know. We grant it anyway. That's grace. Meanwhile the lawyers stand and start digging for the truth, or at least that's what they're supposed to be doing. At some point the jury heads off to decide what the truth is. The moment it returns the day of grace is over. Now truth takes center stage. If the verdict is not guilty we let the fellow go not because we want to, but because we have to. The truth requires it. Or again, if the verdict is guilty, no judge in the world is free to set the sentence aside merely because he's kind, merely because he wants to. Truth, remember, owns the field at this point. Grace is in the locker room, taking a shower, waiting for another day, another moment, when truth is up for grabs.

It's that way too, of course, in more ordinary affairs, as in the relations we enjoy, or don't enjoy, with most any other human being. I presume, graciously, that she's a good person who thinks well of me if she thinks of me at all, and that's how I treat her. It's how she treats me in turn. With grace. But the better we know each other, the less we'll rely on gracious instincts to get along. Now truth will start controlling how we react to each other, each of us responding as the other deserves. And if, in the emerging of truth, she learns that I'm a jerk, we don't see each other anymore. That's how it works.

What stuns us, John, says, is how it didn't work that way with Christ. Nor does it now.

Instead he saw us, he knew us. The truth of who we are was ever before his eyes. The whole truth. Nothing less than the truth. Even so he called us friends. Even so he treated us as brothers. Even so he invited us, outrageously, to think of each other as sons and daughters of the Most High God.

In the person of this Jesus grace and truth were always side by side, never one on center stage while the other lurked in the wings. Instead, says John, we can't recall a moment with him that was less than truthful, nor any moment that was less than graceful. While we were still sinners he loved us to his death.

Enter the glory, as in glory like no other, unmatched and everlasting. On the third day the Father said, "Wow." We saw that too, says John.

Today we're still sinners. In this day of his life, Christ loves us still with a love that wraps the Father's "Wow" around us all.

My turn, says John. "Wow!" And in saying that today, he invites us all to say it with him.

And he invites us to say it all the louder, the more it sinks home that in this Jesus we see the very heart of God and the person of God's Son, the one and only. Who but God, after all, can be so truthful about who we are, and yet so gracious that he'll stick with us in life, and in death?

Who but God, the one who made all things, through whom all things were made—who but true God from true God can bear with us as he finds us to be, doing that in the utter certainty that we'll one day be the glorious creatures he turns us into?

Who but God can give a wrinkled, decaying person—I just turned 60; I know whereof I speak—the power to look in a mirror today and to see in it the honest and truthful reflection of nothing less than a child of God, dear beyond all understanding to the Father's gracious heart?

Who but God can make us strong to name and treat each other as brothers and sisters of the Most High God, and to do this both in truth and in spite of the truth? Who but God can authorize you to call me a saint when you know me to be sinner? Who but God can let me name the sinner in you though the Spirit of Jesus has stamped you as a saint?

"Wow!" says John. And today, this Christmas Day, it's our turn to say it too.

"Wow!" What wondrous things our God has done for us in Jesus Christ. What impossible things he'll do in us and through us as his Spirit shapes our hearts and teaches us to trust him.

What a gift our God has given us in the marvel of his Son, the Word made flesh, who dwells with us today against that other day when at last he'll bring us home.

Isn't that, after all, why grace and truth in wondrous

combination spilled into the world when Christ was born? For your sake, for mine? To get sinners like us, by grace, to the home reserved for God's true children?

Wow!

Merry Christmas indeed!

Jerome Burce  
Messiah Lutheran Church  
Fairview Park, Ohio

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## **#758 Christmas Preaching in the Wake of Sandy Hook**

Colleagues,

Shame on the preacher who attempts this Christmas Eve or Day to dodge the horror of Sandy Hook. She will prove herself a fraud.

On the other hand, woe to the Christmas preacher who tries to address it. He's facing some fiercely hard work at the moment, with no guarantee that what he says will be heard or appreciated. Still, it's got to be done. God's essential response to horror of every kind is the Gospel of Jesus Christ. It falls to God's preachers, he and she alike, to put that out there as a genuine response that anchors hope and merits trust. Why does God send us into pulpits if not, like the Bethlehem angel, to "good-news" the stricken with "a mega-joy for all people," said joy replacing a "mega-fear" of the kind that coursed through gun-ridden America like a tsunami this past

Friday.

Preachers in America faced a similar challenge 11 years ago. It was the Christmas after 9/11. Minds were still seared with images of the falling towers, or worse, of people plummeting to their deaths from towers burning and about to fall. How was a baby in a manger both good and newsy enough to handle that? I dug into my own files yesterday to recall what I said. Then I passed it along to my partners on the editorial team. One of them urged me to share it with you. So here it is.

Will the rest of you find anything in this old sermon that's of use for your labors this week? By all means draw on it if so. Do any of you have further and/or better insights on this week's good-newsing task that others might profit from, me included? Get them to us within 24 hours and we'll circulate them.

Meanwhile we invite prayers from all our readers for people whose sorrow today is so woefully deep: stunned and heartbroken parents; children suffering nightmares; a town weeping like Rachel for its little ones. They belong to a nation so paralyzed by wrath and sin, suspicion and fear, that it will not act effectively as other nations have to prevent more horrors like this. May God have mercy. May we who trust him find strength in his Advent promise of all things made new.

Peace and Joy,  
Jerry Burce, for the editorial team

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**Sermon for Christmas Eve, 2001**  
**Messiah Lutheran Church, Fairview Park, OH**  
**Text: Luke 2:1-20**



## **Subtext: 2 Cor. 5:20b**

*See how God invites you in many ways. He places before you a Babe with whom you may take refuge. You cannot fear him, for nothing is more appealing to man than a babe.... Who is there whom this sight would not comfort? –Martin Luther*

+ In Nomine Jesu +

Let us pray. Come, Holy Spirit, in your great mercy. As we gaze on the baby lying the manger, soak our minds and hearts in the sweet joy of what all this means. Amen.

I begin with words I could not say were it not for Christmas: grace to you and peace from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

I've been thinking a lot these days about my good friend Joe. Joe was a member of the parish I served in Connecticut, before I came here. He was a gift from God, somebody who knew and trusted me enough to comment honestly about my preaching from time to time. Joe told me once that he wished I would quit depressing people on Christmas Eve.

Now if Joe were still the Joe I knew, he would not be at all happy, I think, with what I'm about to say to all of you tonight. I'm going to say it anyway. The Word of God quite frankly leaves me no choice.

I understand, I think, what Joe was driving at back then—1993, it was. I remember sympathizing with him at the time, though in a helpless kind of way. I think Joe wanted his Christmas sermons to be like a first-rate Christmas concert—you know, the kind where you sit back and you get to hear wonderful old things wonderfully sung or said all over again, and for just a moment—a sweet, wonderful moment of blessed amnesia—you get to forget how cold, how dark, how painful, how ugly the real world really is.

This is by no means a bad thing, by the way. We all need a break, now and then, from bitter truth. So much of what we Americans do and treasure most at this time of year is expressly designed, I think, to give us exactly that kind of break. Call it Christmas, call it Hanukkah, call it Kwanzaa, call it Ramadan, I suppose. For that matter go with flow and call it simply "the holidays." It's as if the entire nation comes together to swallow a sort of spiritual Percocet during the waning days of December. We cap it off with a grand national party on New Year's Eve, college football finals to follow on New Year's Day. Then the day after that we all go back to work—those of us who have a job to go to, that is. Those of us who aren't too sick or feeble to work, that is. Those of us, that is, who aren't languishing in prison because we proved to be too evil for all the rest of us to endure, and now we cannot go to work.

Be this as it may: no matter where or how we are, come January 2nd when the pill wears off we are all certain to find that not a whole lot has changed since December 2nd, when the break more or less began.

Come January 2nd the bad boss will still be bossing badly.

Come January 2nd the lousy professor will still be teaching poorly.

Come January 2nd the playground bully will still be pushing weaker kids around.

Come January 2nd the shaky marriage will still be quivering. The troubled child will still be driving its parents to distraction.

On top of all this, come January 2nd there will be Christmas bills for lots of us to start paying. Etc. etc.

Oops.

In my mind's eye I'm seeing Joe—the Joe I knew that is—starting to frown. I'm doing it again, aren't I. I'm breaking the rules of break time. Already I'm talking way too much about the kind of things we're supposed to be taking a break from tonight. Especially tonight. Right?

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Here is what I would say about that to Joe tonight if only he were here so I could say it to him.

First, I'd say "Joe, the people I'm talking to tonight are in fact a whole lot wiser than you and I were in 1993. Oh, there are always wise people sprinkled here and there in every congregation, but something happened in this year of our Lord 2001 that made almost all of us wise. Wiser by far than we ever wanted to be."

All of you know what I'm talking about, don't you.

You simply can't see all those images of September 11 without coming to some kind of new understanding about what we and all the world really need. What we *don't* need is another Percocet kind of Christmas—two weeks of pain relief and nothing more. We all do understand that, don't we? Pain relievers by themselves are fine, except when the patient is dying. What we and all the world require right now is a Christmas cure. How else will people ever stop their hating? Of course nothing ever gets cured—no kind of cure is ever properly promised—unless you've gotten to the root of the disease.

"Isn't that right, Joe." I would say.

And then I would say, "Joe, isn't it so that the lead-in to the Word of God at Christmas has always been depressing?"

Were all the rest of you listening carefully to the account as we heard it read just now?

Do you think all those people flooding the roads of ancient Palestine in the dead of winter were happy to be out there? Do you think they weren't muttering darkly to themselves about that idiotic emperor and his stupid decree?

Do you think the innkeeper was at all pleased when this guy with the hugely pregnant wife came pounding on his door in the middle of the night—as if he couldn't see the no vacancy sign, for crying out loud?

Gentlemen, do you think Joseph was thrilled to bits about listening to his wife deliver her baby in a cow shed? Do you think he wasn't scared to death by her screaming? Do you think he wasn't ashamed to death as a husband, a provider, when those holy screams kept being punctuated by the heehaws of a donkey?

And I would say to Joe, “Do you think, Joe, that your namesake didn't stand there in that stable doing his level best to choke down a big, thick, gagging throatful of anger at God?”

He was, after all, a pious man. We know that. Back home in Nazareth he went to synagogue the way most of us at Messiah go to church, faithfully and regularly. Pious people know they're supposed to love and trust God. They're not supposed to judge him. They're not allowed to be mad at him. Yet how can this good man Joseph help it on this first Christmas night? Isn't God behind all these things that are happening to his beloved Mary? So why hasn't God had the sense and the decency to make better arrangements for her? How dare he allow her to wind up in this stinking stable?

I'll bet Joseph was depressed that night. Depression, say the psychologists, is swallowed anger. If looking squarely at the

ugliness of our own reality leaves us depressed, the way it did my good friend Joe, that's because we too are angry at somebody, capital "S", is that not so?

Has anybody here not wondered why God, supposedly in charge of the world, didn't do a better job last September of keeping planes from flying into buildings? How about we start there?

And what might happen, I wonder, if everybody in this room, older than 10, was asked to sit down right now with a piece of paper and start making a list of all those things about yourself, your circumstances, or the world at large that you would change if you were God? How long would it take you to reach a thousand items? How fast can you write?

Go back now, and in your mind's eye start checking the items on your list that are deadly serious: the lost job. Aunt Sally's cancer. The ingrained habit you just can't shake. How about the big broad things, like starving children, or easy abortion, or global warming? Are not these things the equivalent, for you, of your wife having her baby in a dirty stable? How often have you prayed to God to change and correct them? A thousand thousand times, of course you have. You're a pious, faithful person, like Mary's Joseph. Your parents taught you well. As all the saints have done in all the ages you too have prayed to God, again and again, and still these things you hate so much have yet to go away. No wonder you turn blue when a callous preacher sees fit to bring them up all over again. On Christmas Eve, no less. What time is this to be remembering how mad I really am, deep down, at God.

If Joe—the Joe I knew that is—were here tonight, I'd tell him this. I'd say "Joe, if you want something to be depressed about, consider well what Martin Luther once pointed out, only hardly anyone has ever paid attention. So long as God is only way, way

up there where Caesar reigns and far beyond, you and I, the little people down here, will never love him, we will never fear him, we will never ever trust him. We won't be able to. So long as he is only there, and we are here, struggling through the lives he stuck us with in this broken, ugly world, then we will always be somehow angry with him, we will always be calling his judgments into question. Which means that we will always be sinning against him. Which also means that we will always be giving God all the reason he needs, and then some, to be fierce and angry and oh so deadly with all of us in turn.

"So long as he is only there, that is."

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So tell me. Are we starting at last to understand why Jesus was born?

I'm not saying this to Joe, now, by the way. I'm saying it to you.

For all my life I've been surrounded by women, first a mother and four sisters, then a wife and two daughters, to say nothing these days of secretaries and Messiah School teachers. Over the years I've noticed this fascinating phenomenon. Show a woman a baby or the picture of a baby, even, and it's like hitting a button. (Guys, you know what I'm talking about, don't you.) All in an instant they soften, they glow—and they all say "Aaaaw." Or some such thing. We men and boys crack jokes about this, of course; it's part of our male shtick. But when all is said and done you women have our number. I know you do. We too turn to butter in the presence of a baby.

On the night Jesus was born, a little group of people gathered around his manger bed. Then they looked down, directly into the face of God, and they all said, "Aaaaw." And for the very first time in their troubled, sinful lives, they found it absolutely

impossible to be angry with God. Instead they loved and adored him. At last they could.

This includes, of course, those impious, brutish shepherds who had just been scared to death out there in the fields, where the angel had caught them venting their anger at God under the cover of darkness, the way we all do when we think no one is looking.

What a fantastic present God gave the shepherds that night. Instead of death for the treason they were committing as they carped about his ways, he gave them life, he gave them peace, he gave them joy. He caused them to melt like butter, the way men do. You and I both know that's what they did as they stood there, looking at the sweet and precious face of Jesus, their God and Lord. They were saved that night. For the first time ever in their sorry bitter lives, those shepherds glorified God. Even better, they enjoyed him.

Of course all this would be nothing more than another Percocet, a fleeting moment of relief in the human story of pain and anger with God were it not for the fact that the baby grew up. Then, as you know, he did two things.

First, he started the work of fixing the world up here at the level where you and I can see it. He healed lepers. He made crippled people walk. He turned greedy rascals like Zacchaeus into first-rate philanthropists.

But second, and far, far better: our Lord Jesus Christ both tackled and finished the work of fixing things for us deep down at the foundation, where the real trouble lies. He forgave our sins. Then he let us pour out our anger and frustration with God on him, which is what we did, when we crucified him. But he also absorbed God's anger with us. "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" That's what he screamed, as he hung there dying. It was my death he died, and also yours. Therefore his Easter is

my Easter. It's your Easter too.

Luther calls this the wondrous sweet swap. The horrible stuff that is ours becomes Christ's. The marvelous stuff that is Christ's becomes ours.

On account of all this another miracle is about to happen right here, in this place, though hardly for the first time. Before the night is out you will have the chance not only to see God, but to hold God, and to put God in your mouth. Here God will be, for you, in the flesh and blood of Jesus, hidden in the form of bread and wine. I hope you will come with haste to see him. And when you hold him there, cradled in your hand, if you don't say "Aaaw," I hope at least you'll say "Amen." If not out loud, then quietly to yourself.

For here is God, the Lord of heaven and earth, making himself entirely helpless and at your disposal, in Jesus, for Jesus' sake.

Or again, here is God, making like a big brother come home for the holidays. He puts his arms around his little sister and he gives her a warm, tight squeeze. "Don't be afraid," says God to us all. "Tonight no one will hurt you. As for tomorrow I will never let you go.

"And as for all those things," says God, "that still need fixing—in your lives, in your world—trust me please to do it in my own good way, in my own good time. Better still, how about you approach them no longer as things to depress you, to make you sullen and angry with me. How about you trust my love for you in Jesus so well that you start instead to tackle them as opportunities to serve as my heart, my mouth, my hands in the world, fixing where and how you can, but always and in everything letting it be known that my love for all people in Christ Jesus is both everlasting and beyond question. You be the



one to help them all say Aaaaaw and Amen.”

Isn't that what the shepherds did as they headed home to their fields, glorifying and praising God for all things they had heard and seen?

Tonight it's our turn.

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By the way: I would say all these things to my good friend Joe tonight, only I can't. Joe got sick four years ago, or was it five, and then he died. He was barely in his 60's. I know as I stand here that he died in the Lord. This means, of course, that there is nothing I can possibly say on a Christmas Eve that will ever again depress him. To tell the truth, Joe knows far better than I do tonight what the love of God in Jesus is finally all about. In the back of my mind I hear him singing with the angels.

Merry Christmas, Joe. To you, his sisters and brothers in Christ, a Happy New Year.

May the peace of God that passes all understanding keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.

+ Soli Deo Gloria +

Jerome Burce  
Lakewood, Ohio

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## #757 Book review—THE DIVORCE

# OF SEX AND MARRIAGE by Robert W. Bertram

This week's Thursday Theology is a review of *The Divorce of Sex and Marriage: Sain Sex*, written by Crossings co-founder Robert W. Bertram and edited for posthumous publication by Dr. Michael Hoy, pastor of First Evangelical Lutheran Church (ELCA) in Decatur, Illinois, and former editor of the Crossings newsletter.

Our reviewer is Dr. Kathryn Kleinhans, Professor of Religion at Wartburg College in Waverly, Iowa. Kit is well known to many in the Crossings community for her memorable presentations at Crossings conferences and for several guest posts at Thursday Theology during Ed Schroeder's years at its helm. Kit is an alumna of Seminex, with firsthand knowledge of Bob Bertram as a teacher and thinker. That closeness allows her, in this review, to communicate with Bob across the years—to anticipate his likely responses to her criticisms of his argument, and to answer those responses clearly and frankly.

The book, by the way, is available for a \$10 donation to Crossings. Please include \$3 for shipping and handling, and send your request to [clessmannATcharterDOTnet](mailto:clessmannATcharterDOTnet). You can support the ministry of the Crossings Community with a tax-deductible donation via PayPal, (use link at bottom of page). And don't forget to register for the [Crossings Seminar](#), January 20-22 in Belleville, Illinois.

Peace and Joy,  
Carol Braun, for the editorial team

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***The Divorce of Sex and Marriage: Sain Sex***  
**By Robert W. Bertram, edited by Michael Hoy**  
**Chesterfield, MO: Crossings Community, 2012.**

Bertram has a rich vision of God's gracious will for human sexuality and/in marriage. The two are intertwined in such a way that he sometimes refers to them as a verbal unity, SexMarriage. Those familiar with Bertram's theology, either directly or through the ongoing work of the Crossings Community, will not be surprised to discover that his intent is to "cross" SexMarriage, that is, to bring it and its participants to their knees, to the cross, and thence on to resurrection. This goal explains the subtitle of the book, "Sain Sex," which draws on the Old English word for blessing or making the sign of the cross.

A central theme in Bertram's vision is that SexMarriage is not just what we make of it but what God has made of it. In a characteristically invitational turn of phrase, Bertram claims that couples do not so much live into the "one flesh union" that their Creator intends for them but rather that they live out of it. Bertram aptly cites a Bonhoeffer wedding sermon on this point: "Until now, you've been held together by your love, but from now on your love will be held together by your marriage."

Bertram's understanding of SexMarriage is set squarely within his understanding of Christian community. Christians who are joined to the body of Christ are so joined bodily, not just spiritually, and thus are joined also to those other Christians who are part of the body of Christ. SexMarriage, then, is not just a private concern but an embodied reality. The sin of any and each of the members is borne by the whole body. Moreover, when we receive the body of Christ in the Holy Communion, we receive back our own redeemed bodies and also the bodies of our neighbors. This multilayered corporeality keeps us from making either too much or too little of our own physicality, including

our sexuality.

Bertram names his theological approach in this book “a hermeneutics of repentance.” Drawing on Jesus’ admonition about those who focus on the speck in the eye of others while ignoring the log in their own eyes, Bertram identifies our preoccupation with the sexual sins of others as a distraction from our own sinfulness, not only sexually but overall. He uses this preoccupation as a hook to pull all of us sinners equally into the ring, where we soon find that our judgment of others boomerangs back on ourselves. The particular hook or speck on which the book hangs is “homosexualism,” the term Bertram uses to identify the practice of homosexual sexual behavior, rather than the orientation. Divorce, he states, once served as this kind of hook but no longer fulfills this function effectively because it has lost its scandalous character. Bertram’s use of homosexualism is strategic; he is clear that it is not the point of the book. The point, rather, is to offer a retro-“speck”-tive analysis of heterosexual marriage.

Despite Bertram’s high view of SexMarriage and his desire to invite his readers to live out of this understanding, the book has some significant flaws.

#### *Initial diagnosis:*

The book’s framing premise is dated. According to Bertram, most Americans reject homosexual unions, and even homosexuals themselves are settling for civil rights instead of continuing to press for the validation of their unions as marriages. The debate, he says, is “fizzling,” and its proponents “show signs of giving up” in “despair” (13). While this may have been accurate when Bertram was working on this manuscript over a decade ago, it is certainly not the case today, with same-sex marriage now legal in nine states and the District of Columbia,

and with Gallup reporting approval for same sex marriage at 50% or more for the last two years. (Currently, same-sex marriage is also legal in eleven other countries on four continents.)

I knew Bob Bertram well enough to know that if he were here to comment, he would deflect the statistics by saying, "Yes, there is increased recognition of same-sex 'marriage,' but it is understood and advocated for primarily as a matter of equitable legal rights rather than as the One Flesh Union that marriage truly is." I counter this anticipated criticism by pointing out Bertram's own acknowledgement that heterosexual couples also fail to understand and claim One Flesh Union as the basis for the plausibility of their marriages, settling instead for an understanding of marriage as public commitment. Indeed, it is this desexualized understanding of marriage that Bertram aims to critique. But if, as Bertram argues, marriage is more than what its heterosexual participants claim for it, then the fact that homosexuals might also not claim enough for marriage is not, in and of itself, an adequate basis for rejecting the validity of same-sex marriage.

Let's be clear: I am not arguing for the theological validity of same-sex marriage on the basis of state law or popular opinion. It is Bertram himself who presents public opinion as a warrant for his position, and he does this repeatedly. On pages 11-14, he describes declining interest in advocating for same-sex marriage. On pages 31-33, he finds significance in "the vast majority" recognizing that same-sex relationships are not and cannot be marriage. On pages 45-46, he moves from numbers to emotions, citing "the general antipathy" and "the deep-seated aversion" to homosexuality and same-sex marriage. Bertram's "speck to log" analysis requires as its starting point "an existing condition of people in large numbers passing judgment on a perceived wrong" (45), in this case, homosexuality. Even if the structure of the "speck to log" argument is valid, the

significant change in public opinion related to same-sex marriage challenges the soundness of the argument. (An argument is logically valid if the conclusion follows from the premises; a valid argument is sound only when all the premises are true.) Homosexuality seems to be losing the scandalous edge that Bertram had counted on for his retro-“speck”-tive examination of marriage itself.

*Advanced diagnosis:*

Assume, though, that Bertram’s strategy worked, i.e., that the notion of same-sex marriage is so obviously scandalous that it challenges us to reflect on what marriage truly is. This is Bertram’s stated intent, but does the end justify the means? I have serious ethical reservations about treating an entire group of people primarily as a foil for the edification of others.

In the introduction, Mike Hoy recounts a similar critique offered in a review of a Bertram article that presented an earlier form of this argument. Bertram’s response was that the reviewer had missed the point, which was not about gays and their relationships but about bringing heterosexuals and heterosexual marriages under the same judgment. I’m not sure the critique can be dismissed so facilely. The “speck to log” hermeneutics requires, Bertram says, something that scandalizes most of us. Imagine this argument being written in the 1950s, with not divorce as the “speck” but interracial marriage. Would we accept an argument that repeatedly refers to the illegitimacy—the impossibility, even—of interracial marriage, but claims to do so not with any disrespect intended to interracial couples but only so that we can think more critically about our own marriages? I think not. Early in this book, when Bertram refers to a declining interest in same-sex marriage, he writes, “To which we dare to say, I hope not insensitively, So what” (13). But this strategy is insensitive

to the lives and the relationships of gays and lesbians. Brushing that aside with a mild disclaimer hardly mitigates the ethical concern.

In setting up his hermeneutics of repentance, Bertram says that his focus is on heterosexual society's judgment of homosexuals, a judgment that he intends to have boomerang back on the judges themselves. Although the logic of Bertram's "speck to log" hermeneutics suggests that homosexuals and heterosexuals are equally subject to God's judgment, his language about homosexuality often suggests an unequal critique. (Indeed, even the use of the term "homosexuality" to refer to sexually active gays and lesbians has prejudicial connotations.) "Gay marriage is morally far too suspect" not to judge (34), according to Bertram. The unequal critique is most troubling in the latter sections of the book, when Bertram refers to the forgiveness of sinners like "the adulterer or the practicing lesbian or the abusive husband or the idolatrous heterosexual couple" (81), and our bodily solidarity with "fellow sinners ... that may include homophobes and gays and abusers and adulterers" (84). Are all sinners? Yes. But if Bertram genuinely means to focus on the whole person as sinner, as he says, it rings false when he groups gays and lesbians consistently with adulterers and abusers. If the point he is intending to make is that all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God, then why not include in the same category of sinner the happily married couple celebrating their 50th anniversary? True, Bertram mentions "the idolatrous heterosexual couple," but their appearance on the list is qualified by their idolatry, whereas the inclusion of the lesbian on the same list is qualified simply by the fact that she is "practicing." The truth of our shared status as sinners *coram Deo* does not justify the rhetorical inclusion of sexually active gays and lesbians on a list with those, like adulterers and abusers, whom we

censure *coram hominibus* for specific sins that cause identifiable harm to others.

*Final diagnosis:*

Finally, and most seriously, the book relies too heavily on unsupported assumptions and anecdotes rather than on careful argument. In Part One, Bertram writes, "I must be careful not to win my case by how I pre-define my terms" (38). Unfortunately, he proceeds to do just that.

Bertram begins with the assumption that homosexuality is sin. His larger point in doing so is wrapped up in the question "Whose sin?" by which he intends to refer both to the Christian community as bearers of one another's sins and also to Christ as the one who finally bears the sins of all upon the cross and forgives them in the embodied fellowship of the Holy Communion. This larger point, however, is about people. All of us, both homosexual and heterosexual, are sinners in need of God's gracious gift of forgiveness. But in focusing on homosexuality, which he defines as the sexual practice of homosexuals, Bertram seems to be reverting to a ranking of actual sins rather than our shared status as original sinners. Again, let's be clear. I am not here simply assuming that homosexual sexual activity is not sinful, nor is it my role as a reviewer to make an argument for that position. I am pointing out that Bertram's book relies heavily on assumptions rather than on argument.

In addition to the assumption that homosexuality is, in and of itself, sin, Bertram also makes assumptions about what constitutes marriage. Bertram's understanding of SexMarriage describes a reality that is physical, bodily, sexual, as well as a commitment of lives and wills. "Marriage, whatever else it is, is plausible sexual union" (4-5). "What marriage truly is," according to Bertram, is "a union in which sexual 'acts' do



define sexual 'being' after all. Precisely by the lovers doing what they do, carnal as that may be, they come to be what they are: a one-flesh union" (63). However, Bertram assumes that the insertion of a penis into a vagina is the only sexual activity capable of uniting two people in a one-flesh union. He asserts that in order for sexual activity to be unitive, "the partners do need to be 'made for each other,' at a minimum genitally" (67). Although he encourages us to read Genesis 1-2, his primary warrant seems to be a natural-law reading of Romans 1. Even here, Bertram admits, one needs to "puzzle out" the answers from the creation (24), but he fails to do so in a systematic way. Rather than making a careful argument, he points to the Scriptures and to heterosexual genital "complementarity" and proceeds as if these have self-evident meaning.

Again, I knew Bob well enough to know that were he here he would accuse me of not taking sexual intercourse seriously enough. I respond by asking whether he might be defining sexual intercourse too narrowly. Our preference for euphemisms is not helpful here. While some medical dictionaries define intercourse as the insertion of a penis into a vagina, others define intercourse as sexual activity involving the genitals of at least one person, thus acknowledging a larger category of sexual behavior comprised of oral-genital intercourse, anal-genital intercourse, etc., as well as genital-genital intercourse. Bertram assumes the former, narrow definition. He makes passing reference to "alternative orifices and penetrations" as a "substitute for intercourse" (62) but does not even consider the possibility that such sexual activity could be unitive. Martin Luther argues, in *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church*, that a woman who marries an impotent man is not really married but simply sharing a roof with her so-called husband. Would Bertram argue similarly that a woman who marries an impotent war veteran, for example, is not and cannot be truly married without

penis-in-vagina intercourse? In such a case, might not other acts of sexual intimacy serve the same unitive function? I am not arguing for an understanding of marriage that is asexual (a straw man Bertram sometimes raises). I am not claiming that all sexual acts are equal. I am arguing that Bertram cannot simply assume and assert, without argument, that penis-in-vagina intercourse is a sine qua non of marriage, even SexMarriage. Sexual consummation of love, the mutual belonging of spouses one to the other in body as well as in daily living—these are at the heart of the vision of SexMarriage that Bertram is inviting us into, but Bertram has not demonstrated that they are reserved exclusively for heterosexuals.

Bertram's conclusion, which he anticipates from the very beginning of the book, is the story of a married couple whose son is dying of AIDS and a lesbian couple who are friends of the family. At the climax of this particular story, the lesbian couple offer to swap their king-sized bed for the twin beds in which the married couple have been sleeping. This exchange comes after they have all shared together in a bedside Holy Communion in the hospice where the son is dying. This is clearly a powerful story for Bertram, and one to which he has alluded anticipatorily from the beginning of the book. But the example of one lesbian couple's choice to give up their shared bed is simply not sufficient warrant for Bertram's claim that God "returns" heterosexual unions for our redeemed use but does not so return homosexual unions.

At several points in the book, Bertram refers to his vision of SexMarriage as an invitation to be considered by his readers. He encourages us "to re-imagine the truth about SexMarriage" (8), to come to "a fresh and free conception of marriage" (37). In the end, he admits that his writing is "faithful speculation," not proof (88). I affirm Bertram's desire for a renewed vision of marriage for Christians. What I find unpersuasive is his

conclusion that a redeemed understanding of marriage is available only for heterosexual couples. He has not so much concluded this as assumed it from the start and then taken the reader on a circumlocutious journey toward that end. This fault is not the result of the posthumous editing of an unfinished manuscript; it is the result of Bertram's own unquestioned assumptions, his reliance on rhetoric rather than argument, and his inability to imagine an even larger possibility for SexMarriage than his exclusively heterosexual model.

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## **#756      Book      review—BROKEN HALLELUJAHS      by      Christian Scharen**

This week we bring you a book review by Ed Schroeder. Ed wrote it for submission to *Missiology*, the journal of the American Society of Missiology, and he passed it along for us to preprint in Thursday Theology. Enjoy!

Also, at the end of Ed's piece, please find an important reminder about the upcoming [Crossings Seminar](#), "Good News We Don't Want to Hear: Preaching to a Skeptical World," which is now only a month away, and which is free for all seminary students. Please [register](#), bring a friend, and spread the word!

Peace and Joy,  
Carol Braun, for the editorial team

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***Broken Hallelujahs. Why Popular Music Matters to Those Seeking God.***

**By Christian Scharen**

**Grand Rapids, Michigan: Brazos Press**

**2011. 184 pp., paper, \$17.99**

Popular culture as mission field—that's Scharen's agenda. "This book has two things at its heart. First, writing a solid biblical theology for engaging popular culture. Second, getting a sound method for engaging the voices of popular culture where God is already at work reconciling the lost, healing the broken and speaking the truth of life" (22f.).

So the dipsticks for evaluating the book are: How solid is that biblical theology? What is God actually doing "already at work" in pop culture? Is the biblical "reconciling, healing, truth" of God-in-Christ "already at work" in the voices of pop culture? And if not, or if not very patently, then just what is the work that God, "already at work," is doing there?

Scharen begins with depth probes into a wide range of popular music, and into the lives of the folks creating that music—folk, rock, jazz, blues, hip-hop, postrock and postclassical. All of that (first four chapters) under the large umbrella of "God in Popular Culture." That cultural tracking then gets "crossed" with an evangelical Anglican theology of culture stemming from C. S. Lewis. Second umbrella for the final three chapters: "Popular Culture in God."

My surprise, as Scharen's fellow Lutheran seminary prof, was that Luther himself gets only a one-liner mention (136) in the entire book. But then I looked at the first chapter again and was reminded how this book got started. Scharen was invited to

speak at a “very” evangelical college on “Faith and ‘Secular’ [not Christian] Pop Music.” For these folks, C. S. Lewis was a known entity, and a “good guy,” while Luther was doubtless unknown territory. “This book is...a continuation and deepening of the conversation” that started that night at that college (17). Lewis is this book’s canon theologian.

Scharen “aims to reorient Christian imagination” (99), to replace the “constricted” imagination (often found among believers at the conservative end of the Christian spectrum—James Dobson, his example) that is so “certain” about the boundary line between sacred and secular, sinner and saint. “The question at the heart of this book is how to find—or better yet, how we are found by—a God of promise and mercy who offers all of us an imagination deep and substantial enough for the struggles the world faces in our day” (17). He finds this God of promise and mercy “already present even in the darkest spaces of abandonment...the cries of suffering” coming to us in today’s pop culture.

“God’s already present” in pop culture is almost a mantra for Scharen. It pops up everywhere. Another example: “to articulate a theology of culture that calls us to trust God’s presence in the midst of a broken creation, listening to its cries, and ultimately dying for the sake of those cries, working reconciliation that offers a promised new day of shalom for all” (24).

Here’s where my (and Scharen’s too) Lutheran heritage asks: Yes, God is indeed present throughout creation, pop culture included. It’s always Creator-connected, whether the creatures in the culture (especially the human ones) admit that or not. But not all that God-connection is grace-and-mercy connectivity. The Creator is also the Critic, also uses the artifacts of creation to criticize, even criticize to death, the images of God who are

assigned by the Creator to be creation's caretakers. Pop culture is included in that sentence.

C. S. Lewis's evangelical Anglicanism goes a different path here from evangelical Lutheranism. His theology of the cross, a term dear to Scharen throughout the book, moves toward being a theology of suffering and God's presence therein. Not so, Luther's version. Coping with God the critic is at the center of Luther's cross-theology, but hard to find in Lewis's. And equally faint in the theology of the cross at the core of *Broken Hallelujahs*.

That theme, "God already present" as critic, surely needs attention, when you're discussing popular culture as mission field. It calls for even further reorientation of imagination. Dare I say: more biblically reoriented?

Yes, God is already at work in every culture before the explicit Gospel gets there. But the "grace of our Lord Jesus Christ" is not identical with the "grace" whereby God continues creating and nourishing the creation and its cultures. And when God's presence becomes God's critical presence, that's not grace of any sort—and Christ's grace for sure not.

Isn't this a more "solid biblical theology"? It's not just to be found in Luther's private imagination. It's in the imagination of the writers of the NT. There the "image" is called the "wrath of God," a term used both by St. Paul (many places) and even St. John (3:36) for God the Critic, for what's also going on with "God already present" in the world.

Doesn't this primal biblical theology caveat the author when he calls us to "trust God's presence in the midst of a broken creation"? Yes, God is present in creation's brokenness—giving us our comeuppance. Trust that? The mission-Gospel calls the broken ones to trust an alternate message, one that trumps the

message arising from that broken creation. Namely, trust God's promise and presence in Christ, and do so in the very face of that other message with its signals of God the Critic—also “present” in folk, rock, jazz, blues, hip-hop, postrock and postclassical.

That part of his own heritage would help Scharen expose this “other,” even “alien” (as Luther called it) work of God also “present” as he tracks “God in Popular Culture.” Subsequently, God the Critic in pop culture then calls for an even larger “Good News,” a more fulsome theology of the cross, in order to get “Popular Culture in(to) God's” Christic work of Un-broken Hallelujahs.

Maybe that's Scharen's next book.

*Edward Schroeder (St. Louis, MO) was a “convert” to missiology late in his 50 years as prof of systematic theology in Lutheran schools. Now in his antiquity, pop culture still largely eludes him.*

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**Reminder from Cathy Lessmann:** The [Crossings Seminar](#), **Good News We Don't Want to Hear: Preaching to a Skeptical World**, is a month away! [Register now](#) and invite someone to come with you.

This is a seminar as opposed to a conference. With the main goal of utilizing law-gospel theology, this seminar intends to teach, practice, and utilize the Crossings six-step method for reading the Word and the world. It will be led by Sabbatheology (text-study) writers plus Ed Schroeder (the original Sabbatheology writer). Additional presentations include “Using the Crossings Law-Gospel approach in Sermon Writing,” “How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Matrix,” “It Can't be THAT Bad! Why God's Deadly Diagnosis of our Human Condition Matters,” “Crossing the

Gospel of Luke: Crucial Clues for Preachers and Hearers,” plus a roundtable on “How to Tell the Difference between a Bad Sermon and a Good One.” We will also watch the movie Carnage and use it to illustrate crossing Word and world.

**Request:** Please help us get the word out. Most specifically, it would be helpful if you could send out an announcement via your local synod listserv. Below is a reminder that Steve Kuhl, our president, sent to lay ministers in his synod. You could tweak what he has below and use it.

Thanks, and Peace to You,  
Cathy Lessmann  
Dear Partners in the Gospel,

Below is an announcement about the upcoming Crossings Seminar on January 20-22 (Sunday through Tuesday). It is designed to help clergy and laity practice the art of interpreting Scripture and reflecting on daily life through the lens of Luther’s Law-Gospel outlook by way of a unique six-part method of reflection developed by Crossings.

The Seminar begins with dinner on Sunday at 6 p.m. and ends at 1 p.m. on Tuesday. **Scholarships available for Seminary Students (including interns) and first call pastors and for anyone on the basis of need. “Ask and you shall receive!”**

Learn more by clicking on the URL below. If you have questions you may also contact me by email [sckuhl@stritchDOTedu](mailto:sckuhl@stritchDOTedu) or by phone 414-410-4631 (office).

Advent blessings,  
Steve Kuhl  
President, The Crossings Community

**Good News We Don’t Want to Hear**



## **Preaching to a Skeptical World**

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## **#755 A Perfect World**

This week's Thursday Theology is by Steve Albertin, another member of the editorial team whose work often appears in this space. It's a short homily that Steve gave on Matthew 5:38-48 at the Fourth International Crossings Conference this past January. Although it's not an Advent sermon, it's well suited to this time of year, because it touches on that great Advent theme of looking forward to the age to come, when all things will be made perfect and new.

Peace and Joy,  
Carol Braun, for the editorial team

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## **“A PERFECT WORLD” Matthew 5:38-48**

### **Crossings Conference**

**Tuesday, January 24, 2012**

### **Prayer at Midday**

**Steve Albertin**

These are some of the most well-known words in all of the New Testament. “Turning the other cheek” and “going the extra mile” have almost become clichés. They are startling, surprising, unsettling...and dangerous. I would like to have a dime for every time I have heard some streetwise realist complain, “Pastor, maybe you could live that way in a perfect world, but not in the real world.”

The entertaining National League infielder and hall-of-fame baseball manager Leo “The Lip” Durocher put it well once when he tried to motivate his players by reminding them that “nice guys finish last.”

What do you do when someone breaks into your home and threatens the life of your family, when someone attacks you in a dark alley, when someone tells lies about you in order to ruin your reputation? Turn the other cheek, go the extra mile, and give the thief not only the keys to your car but your checkbook as well? This might make sense in a perfect world but not in the real world.

The law of retribution, *lex talionis*, “an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth,” cited by Jesus, actually makes much more sense. It was a humane way to make sure that punishment remained proportionate to the crime committed. Without it violence would only escalate. It was an enlightened attempt to restrain the impulse for revenge. There is always a danger that our

retaliation will be more severe than the hurt inflicted. When somebody does us wrong and we seek to get back, get even, and get our pound of flesh, there is always the temptation to make that one pound of flesh into two or three pounds of flesh. We reason, "This will teach the bully never to do that again."

We are all for law and order, a strong police force, and getting what you deserve, until the flashing red light appears in our rearview mirror. We are all for getting what you deserve until we are the ones who can't pay back what we owe. We are all for retaliation until we discover that retaliation only escalates and worsens the conflict. When differing opinions become bloody lips and black eyes, we wonder what happened.

As if this was not enough, Jesus makes matters worse by forbidding the retaliation that seems so justified. Jesus pulls out the rug from under us just when we thought we were learning how to survive in a world where evil must be resisted and getting what you deserve is a way of life. Jesus switches course midstream. He decides to drive the wrong way on a one-way street. He tells us that we ought NOT to give others what they deserve. He wants us to give gifts to those who will never thank us. He insists that we care for those who don't give a rip about us. He expects us to cooperate with those who want to destroy us. You don't just let your enemy strike you on the cheek, you offer him the other one as well. If a stranger wants your coat, you don't just let him have the coat. You take him home and let him pick from your closet. If the boss forces you to walk one mile, you don't just go the one mile. You volunteer to go a second mile...without pay. You don't just love those who are nice to you. You love those who would kick dirt in your face, who would rob you blind, and who might even take your life. You love your enemies.

What is going on here? In what kind of world does Jesus think we

live?

Unless...what Jesus is talking about here are not demands that we must meet or rules that we have to follow. What if the perfection that God demands is the perfection that Jesus gives? What if, contrary to what we can see, feel, measure, and calculate, we do live in a perfect world?

That startling promise is what lies hidden behind the seemingly impossible and irrational demands of Jesus. What Jesus demands FROM us, He does FOR us. He would turn the other cheek, go the extra mile, love His enemies, pray for those who crucified Him and suffer the consequences. He seemed like a fool. He naively believed in perfection in the midst of an imperfect world. He trusted in God when everyone else wanted him to retaliate. So, God raised Him from the dead confirming Jesus' faith. Jesus was no fool and had every right to believe that he could change the world, forgive our sins, and give us the perfection He demands.

We receive that perfection at the font, the table, from the Scriptures, in this imperfect world whenever the perfect Promise is spoken. Despite our imperfections, Jesus declares us perfect. A perfect world begins.

Trusting that promise, Jesus' unreal demands become tantalizing promises.

Someone strikes us on the cheek. They expect us to come back swinging, hoping that we do so that they will feel good about hitting us again. What if we turn the other cheek to the one who struck us? What if we gift the one who was secretly planning to steal from us? What if our enemy discovers that we are praying for him? We will begin to disarm him. It will no longer be so easy for him to think of us as his enemy. Miraculously, as if it were a miracle worked by God himself—which, of course, it is—our enemy begins to think of us no longer as an enemy but as a

friend, even a brother or sister. Who else would love him this way? Certainly not his enemy, but Christ and those who are his disciples do.

And suddenly the perfect world that seemed so farfetched is real, here, among us already...now!

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*The Divorce of Sex and Marriage: Sain Sex*, a new book by Robert Bertram, is now available for a \$10 donation to Crossings. Please include \$3 for shipping and handling, and send your request to clessmannATcharterDOTnet.

You can support the ministry of the Crossings Community with a tax-deductable donation via PayPal (click icon below).

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## **#754      An      Observation      on Bertram's First Question**

Colleagues,

In this week's Thursday Theology (arriving a few days late, thanks to the pleasant diversions of the Thanksgiving holiday), my fellow editor Jerry Burce follows up on [ThTheol #752](#), in which Ed Schroeder reflected on the Crossings Six-Step Method. Starting with Mark's story of the widow's mite, Jerry focuses on the first of Bob Bertram's six questions for analyzing a biblical text: "Who in the text has a/the problem?" By considering the relationship between the reader and the text, Jerry develops his own interesting variant on Bob's original question.

Peace and Joy,  
Carol Braun, for the editorial team

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## An Observation on Bertram's First Question for Any Text or Sermon

1. For the background to the following, see the posting of two weeks ago, [ThTheol #752](#).
2. While you're at it, refresh yourself on [Mark's version of the widow's mite](#). Then read a [sermon on this text](#) that Bob Bertram preached to a seminary audience in the 1980's. (My thanks to Chris Repp for bringing this to my attention—and yours?—in a recent [Sabbatheology](#) post.)
3. Tongue in cheek: if you read or re-read all of the above you'll have already gotten as much sustenance as a follower of Thursday Theology can reasonably expect from a single week's serving. What comes next may seem superfluous, like the dessert the waiter tries to push on you even though you're already stuffed with soup, salad, and entrée and would just as soon quit. Still, here goes.
4. I've been writing text studies for Crossings for about ten years, using the six-step analytical schema that Ed Schroeder rehearsed for us in the aforementioned ThTheol post. I know the drill inside out. I was refreshed even so by Ed's fresh description of it, in which he focused on the questions Bob Bertram asked as he devised the method and then put it to work. Shortly after ingesting this I heard from someone else who found it helpful too.
5. In thinking since about Bob's six questions, I catch myself echoing Orwell's pigs in *Animal Farm*. "All questions are equal, but some are more equal than others." To my mind the More Equal question is Bob's first. That's because it functions without fuss or ado to put the reader

of Scripture on the right track, the one that allows Scripture to do what God gave it to do, i.e. to herd her into the arms of God's Christ and the benefits, both to her and to others, that emerge from that embrace. Not that the subsequent questions aren't essential in getting her there. But unless the first question is asked, she won't think to explore the others. She might even make the common error of supposing that ancient texts are irrelevant to a contemporary sophisticate like herself.

6. The beauty of Bob's first question in such a case is that it invites a modicum of curiosity. Most of us like puzzles, even ancient ones. We're also nosy. So how better to ensnare some engagement with the text, or with a preacher's droning about the text, than by asking as Bob does, "Who has the problem here?"
7. Will it surprise this reader to discover that *she* has a problem there? For her sake, one hopes so.
8. That said, Bob's question, certainly in Ed's sharper rendering of it, seems expressly designed to postpone that discovery. Recall how the question was cast: not merely "who has the problem," but "*who in the text* has a/the problem." Why the modifying phrase? I hazard the guess that Bob-and-Ed inserted it with a second type of sophisticate in mind. Where the first glories in her disdain, the second exults in his piety. Where the first fancies herself beyond the reach of a hoary text, the second imagines himself in wholehearted submission to it; and in his self-regard he'll even disregard its ancient character, construing it instead as God's direct address to him, and a wholly welcome address at that.
9. For such a reader the sharpened question serves to pull his nose out of his own navel, forcing him to pay attention instead to the operation of God's Word in the lives and hearts of other human beings, specifically the

ancient ones who inhabit the text he's reading. Will this happen? Again one hopes so, for his sake. Perhaps the outcome will be a truer encounter of the Word of God at work in him. Perhaps he'll even get beyond his bemusement at the sight of Moses, Isaiah, the Bethlehem shepherds, and Simon the fisherman writhing on their bellies when God talks directly to them for the first time. And if, for the first time, he starts to fear God himself, blessed be he. Who knows? He might for once find Christ of real use.

10. Back to the sharpened question, "Who *in the text* has a/the problem?" Were Bob with us still I would want by way of follow-up to ask him a counter-question. I'd even pose it using his own diction. "Who-all is in the text?" That's what I would ask.
11. Who-all indeed? When, for example, one reads that text in Mark about the widow, who-all is standing there, and of them who has a problem? I posed that question recently to a thoughtful Bible class, and in response got as complete a list as I've heard. "The widow," said one. Obvious, yes. "Strutting scribes." That's obvious too. "The disciples have a problem." Not quite so obvious, perhaps, but even so, someone had spotted how they ooh and ah over big donations and are blind to the widow's total giving. Then came the kicker: "Jesus has a problem." Call that the home-run answer, all bases cleared. Or are they?
12. After all, is it not the case that this and every other text is somehow occupied not only by the original cast but by the uncountable multitude of every person who has ever read and reacted to it, or ever will? To be sure, you don't see them. They stand or sit in the unlit shadows, as audiences do. But sometimes you can hear them. Now they clap, now they hiss, now and then they groan or cry. Rarely do they laugh. Someday I'll want to ask the Playwright if that bemused him. We do know that the



Playwright keeps notes on audience reaction. He says so.

13. But if the Playwright is keeping notes, doesn't that oblige us to do the same?
14. For now I want simply to observe that tracking the reactions of hearers and readers is of the essence in getting to the heart of Bob's first question. One might do that by posing a sub-question, subsequent to the initial asking. I'd put it this way: "Now that you're 'in the text,' what problems are you having?"
15. "Tracking," by the way, is a piece of Crossings jargon, as anyone who has sat through a session on Crossings methodology will testify. This too is one of Bob's terms, or so I believe. Meticulous and orderly thinker that he was, he worked hard to segment it as Stage Two in an engagement with a biblical text, the thing one got to when one had worked through a Grounding, where Grounding means picking one of the obvious players in the text and asking the six analytical questions of that person. Then and only then does one turn to members of the audience and draw them into the conversation.
16. But that, it seems to me, is somewhat too neat for real life, or more precisely, for the way the Word of God, cast in those ancient texts, goes to work on real human beings. I'd argue instead that the text read, heard, or otherwise observed, produces an instant reaction in whoever witnesses it and adds that reaction immediately to the data the interpreter is dealing with.
17. Or to put that another way, it's not possible to read the text without finding myself somehow "in the text," the Lord of the text looking on as he does in that story of the widow.
18. Isn't that, moreover, what the text's Lord is riveted on in his own real-time observation of a real-time engagement with this or any text? Isn't my reaction, or yours for

that matter, the problem he's chiefly interested in as the hearing unfolds? Isn't that the immediate issue he wants the death of Christ to cure and resolve?

19. For what it's worth, no one I know of has ever understood this better than Bob himself. Look again at that sermon I pointed you to in par. 2 above. Notice in particular how the people he's preaching to are enmeshed as deeply in the text—and as problematically—as people can be. Then notice how it's for them in particular that Christ gave his life.
20. Christ gave that life, of course, also for the proud readers, whatever form their pride may take, she fancying herself immune to the Word, he pretending to obey the Word, no questions asked. Do I assume as a user of Scripture that any text, properly read or preached, will somehow serve that saving objective through its specific operation on them, Step One involving a first poke that punctures pride, or at least annoys it? If so, my own first asking of any text will supplement Bob's with a pointed variant: "What's *my* problem in this text? What's yours?"

Jerome Burce

24 November 2012

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# #753 Thankfulness

Colleagues,

This week's Thursday Theology, like last week's, comes from Ed Schroeder. It's a short essay on thankfulness, first published in 1991 in *Lutheran Women Today*, and still available in the Library section of the [Crossings.org](http://Crossings.org) website. In it, Ed reminds us that faith comes before thankfulness and makes thankfulness possible—a good thought to keep in mind as the Thanksgiving holiday approaches in the United States, and as we peer into our own hearts in search of the gratitude we're expected to profess at this time of year.

By the way, Ed himself reprinted this same essay in [Thursday Theology #441](#) back in November of 2006, adding some thoughts on biblical words of thanksgiving.

Peace and Joy,  
Carol Braun, for the editorial team

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## **Thankfulness: An Apostolic Afterthought?**

**Edward H. Schroeder**

**[Printed in *Lutheran Woman Today* (Sept. 1991) p. 5-8.]**

“And—oh yes—be thankful.” These words, tacked on almost as an afterthought, are a loose translation of the apostle Paul's words in Colossians 3:15—his well-known advice about new life in Christ.

Thankfulness an afterthought? For Christians, that can hardly be true. Or can it? Before we answer, let's examine some New Testament accents on gratitude, thanksgiving, and being grateful—all biblical words that are variations on one “loaded” biblical Greek word, *eucharistia* (which goes back to the Hebrew word *todah*-more about that later).

Gratitude. First off, let it be said that gratitude is not an attitude in the New Testament. Nor is it something we do because of the way we feel. It is, rather, an action, a public event. The gospel calls us to thankfulness regardless of how we feel about things, including our feelings about ourselves or about those who receive our gratitude.

The same is true, for instance, in the New Testament Greek term *agape*, which is not a feeling or attitude of warm fuzzies toward someone. Instead *agape* is the word that describes concrete help given to someone in need, despite how we might feel about that person. The meaning of *agape* becomes clear when our Lord bids us to love our enemies, to do genuine good for those whom we clearly don't like. Even if people are out to “do us in,” we are called to be Christ's agent and do good for them. So it isn't gratitude, but something else, that motivates people to “do love.”

Thankfulness. The same is true for thankfulness. Thankfulness is, in fact, an “after-thought” in that it comes after, or second, in the sequence of Christian living. Faith comes first. It is important to get that sequence straight and understand the reason for it. Let me illustrate what I am talking about with an example from my childhood.

At Trinity Lutheran Church in rural Coal Valley, Illinois, where I grew up, we sang an old hymn each year during Lent that had Jesus saying these words to us: “I gave My life for thee; What

hast thou giv'n for Me?" That hymn brought shudders to me every time I heard it. It shattered. For no matter how hard I tried, my "gratitude attitude" was trivial when compared to Christ's cross.

Christ had done so much for me, the hymn reverberated, and now it was my turn. And it sure sounded to me as if Christ was asking for equity. When instructed that I should do this or that "out of gratitude," I could only look inside myself and verify that, sure enough, I was "out of" gratitude. Not just fresh out. Constantly out.

Through years of grappling with God's gospel, I now know the missing link in the sequence from that piece of childhood piety: faith. I knew Christ had done all that stupendous stuff for me, but somehow it didn't seem to count if I didn't fork over something comparable in return. My constant dilemma was that I was out of gratitude. Small wonder—faith was missing!

Thankfulness is not, strictly speaking, a response to the gospel. Faith is—and the only proper one. The gospel does indeed call for a response. But the response it calls for is this: Trust me. The Lutheran confessions hold that the gospel is a promise. But before we can give thanks for promises, we have to trust the promises. Gratitude is a consequence of trusting. So the Christian sequence is, rightly: Christ's promise to us, our trusting that promise, then the fruits of faith—a veritable garden of them—one of which is "and—oh, yes—be thankful."

My move from childhood piety to understanding later in life is the switch from what, in theology, we call law-imperatives to grace-imperatives. Or, more simply put, from law-commands to grace-commands. Both commands issue from God, so we dare not say that people initiate the law-commands, while God initiates the other kind. No, both come from God. The big difference is that

Christ is in the second set, and not in the first set. And what a colossal difference that is! Law-commands have a prior condition to them: "If you do this for God, then God will do that for you."

Remember the lawyer in Luke 10 who wanted something from God—eternal life—but kept trying to justify himself, finally asking, in effect, "Who is this neighbor I am supposed to love?" In the Good Samaritan parable that follows, Jesus is trying to tell him—and all of us who will listen—that God-in-Christ acts first, justifying all of us who are "half-dead" in our sins. We all need to be rescued from our own ditches, as different as these may be between individual sinners. Then are we freed, and grace-filled, to see that we are neighbors to all kinds of people. We can perform actions of thankfulness and helpfulness, in faithful response to God and on behalf of others.

For in the grace-commands, Christ is primary and comes first. The commands that follow Christ are the consequence—not the condition—of the divine action. The grace commands read like this: "Since God-in-Christ did such-and-so, therefore you do so-and-such." Listen to the pattern in this classic grace-command: "...in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself... [therefore] be reconciled..." (2 Corinthians 5:19-20). Notice the grammatical pattern in this grace-command: There is a causative character in the first clause: Since / because God was in Christ reconciling the world, therefore be reconciled to God. Whereas the grammar of the law-command is: If you...then God.... In the law-command, God responds to my action. In the grace-command I am responding to God's action in Christ. Thankfulness is like that too. It's in the grammar of grace-commands.

But we are not called upon to do something for Jesus. Jesus is not the beneficiary in the action commanded. Nor are we the beneficiaries. As in the parable of the Good Samaritan, other

people are the beneficiaries of those actions. (Compare Ephesians 2:13-22.) And all of the action issues out of God's grace-initiative, flowing from folks who trust it.

The law-commands are something we've "got to do;" the grace-commands are something we "get to do." The former involves coercion, even if it is the gentle coercion of "look at all the goodies you'll get." The latter has no coercion at all, but rather Christian freedom! The former lays assignments upon us with built-in sanctions; the latter opens new doors for innovative sanctification. We get to choose the good we are eager to do for another! Thanksgiving is one of the grace-commands that no one can really tell us how to do, though conversation within the Christian community can help shape us as we seek to do our faith-filled response.

Perhaps my earlier words about the "gratitude attitude" were overstated. Attitudes are important for how we live and act. But if our attitudes, even our grateful ones, remain only inside us and are linked to how we feel, then Christian thanksgiving is not yet happening.

The book of Psalms grasps the point well when, in Psalms 106, 107, 118, and 136, it repeatedly advises us to "go public" with our faith-filled response: "Oh, give thanks to the Lord." Why? "For God is good." How good? Good enough that "God's mercy endures forever." Thanksgiving really is an after-thought, for it is after encountering God's mercy in Christ, and trusting it, that we go public. In biblical thanksgiving, there is always an audience, for someone outside the thanksgiver is on the receiving end when thanksgiving happens. And that Someone Else is not just God, but all the other folks round about who are listening in on this public announcement.

Even if no one thinks to ask us what is going on, we can tell

them anyway. Look what God-in-Christ has done for us! God gives us gifts in our lives. We receive them and we can give them away.

Thanksgiving is one Christian proposal for going public with what has been private experience. It's no big deal. It's simply faith in action proceeding from the center of our being to the edges of all the crazy-quilt patchworks that are our lives. Or as the apostle Paul might have put it, "Oh, yes—by the way—be thankful."

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## **#752 Six questions for any text or sermon**

Colleagues,

The item we send you today popped into our inboxes some weeks ago not as a submission to Thursday Theology, but rather as a contribution to a lively discussion that some members of the Crossings Board were busy with. It came from Ed Schroeder. The discussion had somehow gotten Ed to think back to long ago conversations between him and Bob Bertram that led to the so-



called Six-Step Crossings Method for analyzing a biblical text. So he jotted down some thoughts and sent them along. It seemed to us that many others would find them useful too, so here they are in a mildly edited version, square brackets indicating a couple of places where the editing was more than mild. We found particular value in Ed's focus on the questions to ask when tackling a text or responding to a sermon. That's why we took the liberty of highlighting them in this present version.

By the way, this comes to you on the 52nd week after Ed stepped down as chief writer and sole editor of Thursday Theology. It's been a year, in other words. What better way than this of bringing that year to a close.

Peace and Joy,  
Jerry Burce, for the editorial team

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1. The Crossings six-step sequence is not a proposal for a sermon outline, although it could also be used for that.
2. It is a proposal for studying a Biblical text in a way that will get the text's own message about a Problem, and about a Solution to that problem. Bob's old mantra: "The Bible is Problem-solving literature."
3. Best said, it is a proposal for what questions to ask of a Biblical text—and eventually of a sermon grounded in that text.
4. So first off the question: **Who in the text has a/the problem?** If there are several problem-people in the text, and different problems with the different people, then do this: pick one and stick with him/her/them as you ask the subsequent questions. Don't "invent" problem-people who aren't the text's own problem person(s).
5. What's the problem at first sight of the problem-

person(s)? Don't invent a problem that the text does not support. Stick to the text. Most often such a problem is some action/behavior problem, somebody doing the wrong thing. Bob's preferred caption for this was PRELIMINARY DIAGNOSIS.

6. Which raises the next question: **is it worse than that?** Therefore, Bob's question and caption "What's the ADVANCED DIAGNOSIS?" And here an explicit Lutheran angle comes to the fore. You expect—you "know"—that grounding bad behavior and action—bad thoughts, words, deeds—will be bad faith. Or no faith at all. Or faith in some false/phony god. So you look into the text to find where "verbs of the heart" show up—what people fear, or love, or trust, where folks are hanging their hearts on a false god. So that's what you look for as you check the text again. Sometimes it's "right there" in the given text. Sometimes you have, as Bob liked to say, "to run to the neighbor to get the needed cup of flour for your recipe." Here it means going to the surrounding context of the text where such signals of "bad" fear, love, trust show up. In Bob's first-ever published (I think) Crossings text study, of [Luke's Christmas story](#), he found five of the key terms for the six-steps right in language of Luke 2, but to get to the sixth term, the #3 diagnosis, he ran all the way to Luke 15. So for step two you seek the text's own terms, images, word-pictures for bad faith, love, hope, the wrong (even deadly) things to hang your heart on.
7. Which then comes to push the next diagnostic question. **And is it even worse than that?** Even worse that fearing/loving/trusting a false god? Isn't that already the FINAL DIAGNOSIS (Bob's term)? Not if you're working with Lutheran lenses. You then ask: What is TRUE God doing here—not to remedy the malady—but already operational in the mess that's being exposed in the diagnosis. **"What's**

**the God-problem?**—to use the phrase coined by Irmgard Koch (the only person who took every one of our twenty-one semester-long courses during the eras when we did such things!) What's the deepest problem that the problem-person(s) in the text are facing because TRUE GOD is operating in the picture—operating ON THEM—even as they hang their hearts on whatever false god(s) they are clinging to? This was a sticky-wicket as the Augsburg Confessing Lutherans arm wrestled with the Roman theologians way back then. Equally as sticky on the diagnostic side as “faith ALONE, trusting Christ's promise” was on the prognostic/Good News side. And no surprise—they go together. Siamese twins.

I remember a twentieth-century repeat of that 1530 hassle. It happened in 1958 at Valparaiso University. I was the new kid on the block, had been there only one year. Bertram was our theology-department chair. Somehow he finessed it and we began a dialogue series with the theology faculty at Notre Dame. This was long before Vatican II. We had home and home meetings. The first gathering was on baptism at their place. The second was on sin at our place. For that one both department chairs presented the papers, Bob Pelton, chair of the ND theology dept. and Bob Bertram of VU. Pelton presents first. Bertram follows. First response comes from Pelton to Bertram: “It can't really be THAT BAD, can it, Bob?” Bob had articulated the Augsburg Confession/Apology Article 2 on Sin. He had presented D-3 (diagnosis level three, the God-problem). Bertram's response to Pelton: “Well, Bob, it must have been pretty bad if it took the death and resurrection of the second person of the Trinity to fix it, right?”

8. Which is, of course, “necessitating Christ,” the

crucified/risen Messiah. It is the FINAL DIAGNOSIS that necessitates Christ, i.e. that makes Christ necessary if that diagnosis is to be remedied. So the mantra “necessitate Christ” is actually a piece of the diagnosis-side of the operation. As in, “this medical diagnosis of your strep-throat NECESSITATES such-and-so medication.”

9. The Augsburg term for the Christ-component on the Prognosis side is “USING Christ,” not wasting Christ, not bypassing Christ as you begin to articulate the GOOD NEWS. So having “necessitated Christ” in the FINAL DIAGNOSIS, there comes the task of concretely putting the crucified/risen one into the mix at this very point. Not just MENTIONING the crucified/risen Christ (as though that were what’s supposed to be necessary), but asking the next question directly and first of all of the text: **How does this text bring Christ over into the FINAL DIAGNOSIS scene to heal the patient now diagnosed so “finally”?**
10. This becomes the first prognosis step in the sequence. [And it should (in keeping with the medical metaphor) actually be called NEW PROGNOSIS. Since from the FINAL DIAGNOSIS just articulated, clinically speaking, there is already an implicit, sometimes explicit prognosis. Namely, what’s going to happen to this patient? Answer: dead, dead, dead.] In any given Biblical text the “Using Christ” may not be very explicit, so you may have to “run to the neighbor...”—even to the overall theology of the biblical book where the text comes from. Many a text that pops up for Sunday reading, even from the NT, doesn’t have “explicit Gospel” in it. That prompted Melanchthon’s mantra at Augsburg: in such cases, “add the promise.” For the promise is the overall Good News message of the scriptures. And remember; nowhere did Jesus (or Luther) ever say: “Just preach the text.” The assignment was/is: “Proclaim the Good News.” Even if your particular text is

skimpy on good news. Even if you don't even have a text right at the moment.

11. When you have the "use Christ" first-prognosis item specced out, you then ask: **Is the News even BETTER than that?** That's Step 5 in our pattern, Bertram's ADVANCED PROGNOSIS. And step five is always a "good news" alternative to the bad fear, love or trust of step 2 as we ran the diagnosis X-ray. So step 5 is asking for the text's own articulation of what happens WHEN the patient-with-the-problem, having heard the step-four good news, starts trusting it. Step 5 asks for the text's own terms/images/word pictures for FAITH, [where faith entails a] change in "person" that comes from actually "hearing the healing" (another Bertram phrase).
12. [Then comes step 6, which asks] **how such a "healed person" lives and acts as she returns to that world** where we started way back when we began the diagnosis.

Summa: The Crossings project is a proposal for how to interrogate a biblical text so that the full bad news and the full good news get brought to light in that text.

And it is also a proposal for interrogating a sermon based on that text with the same questions addressed to the sermon as it proposes to replicate with its audience what happened diagnostically/prognostically in the biblical text you started with.

Nobody says "you gotta" study a text this way, or preach a sermon with these specs in mind. [But we commend it as the best way we know of getting to the heart of what God is doing to us through texts as we encounter them.]

Edward H. Schroeder  
St. Louis, Missouri

## Post Scripts:

1. Three times in my working years I was asked to teach students how to preach, once in Addis Ababa, twice stateside. What's above is what I told 'em. It's also the sieve through which I passed the homilies they presented.
2. Historical roots for the younger folks: Concordia Seminary's Richard R. Caemmerer taught three generations of students a three-step method for analyzing a text and identifying key preaching ideas: malady, goal, and then means, as in means-by-which to get from the malady to the goal. "Explicit gospel" was Caemmerer's synonym for the third item. His student Bertram expanded on this, with malady specced out into three phases—bad actions, bad faith, baaaad God-connection.

Caemmerer's "explicit gospel," the means-by-which = Bertram's Step #4.

And Caemmerer's "two possible goals" for any sermon (a faith goal or a love goal) was modified by Bob as the double goal of EVERY sermon. So Bertram's Steps 5 and 6 were Caemmerer's two possible different goals for any one sermon re-packaged as the two goals of every sermon: faith (#5) and love (#6). —EHS

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# Informal Remarks on the Historicity of Adam

Robert W. Bertram

Presentation, 1973

Question: If we are to be faithful to the Smalcald Articles, Part III, must we not confess along with Luther that sin originated in the historical person of Adam? In other words, does not Luther here express the doctrinal belief that sin entered the world through one man—Adam?

Answer: These two questions, at least in the form in which they are sometimes being asked nowadays, are assumed to be one and the same question. But really the two questions are not asking the same thing. The second question asks whether “sin entered the world through one man, ‘Adam’”. The answer to that is Yes. But the first question asks whether “sin originated in the historical person of Adam.” That the Smalcald Articles do not say. What is the difference between Adam, the “one man”, and what our questioners call a “historical person”?

If all we mean by a “historical person” is an individual human being like you or me, then that will hardly do to describe Adam. “One man”? Yes, that he is. But not merely “one man” as you or I am “one man”. No, Adam is “one man” the way Christ is one man”. And how is that? He is not just one man among “the many” the way you and I are. Rather, somewhat like Christ, Adam is one man for the many. He is the one through whom the many are made what they are, sinful and mortal. (Romans :19)

That does not mean merely that Adam was chronologically the first individual in a long series of individuals. True, that is part of his story, too. After all, some sinner had to be the first one. But that hardly explains why you and I and his other descendants should have to die, much less why we should have had to become sinners in the first place, just because of another individual's earlier disobedience—unless Adam is something different from just another individual, something of us all. Adam is that, too. He is, shall we say, our fallen human nature. He is universal man. Therefore Adam is at the same time all of us.

Yet that is no abstraction, no mere theological idea. That is as real as any “historical person,” but it is more by far than a historical person. Adam, as Paul says elsewhere, is the one “in [whom] all are dying”, (notice: the one in whom all men still are dying) as Christ is the one in whom “all shall be made alive”. (I Cor. 15:22) But it would be meaningless to talk that way about Adam if he were just a “historical person” in the distant past, over and done with. He is also, as the Lutheran Confessions say over and over, “der alte Adam,” “the old Adam”. What is that? “He is what is born in us from Adam.” (LC, Baptism, 65) Adam, in other words, is already very “old,” still surviving, still very much alive and active—“in us”. He is a being still very much present and mortally powerful.

Perhaps many of us moderns have come to think of “our old Adam” rather casually as nothing more serious than our own private means streaks or our bad personal habits. Really, he is human being itself in all its fallenness, as that weighs upon us and drags us down to death. That Adam, in which we all go on sinning and dying, can be defeated by nothing less than our dying and rising with Christ, beginning with our baptisms.

But that dimension of Adam, which the Gospel is all about, gets



badly shortchanged by much of the present preoccupation with Adam as a “historical person.” That preoccupation is an effective way to distract sinners from their real problem and leave them terribly vulnerable. By confining our attention to Adam as past and gone, we lose sight of him as he is still terribly and fatally we ourselves. Then our defenses are down, we forget the need of Christ, and it is Christ whom we lose—even though we might still go on believing in Adam as a “historical person.”

There are many other things which could be said in answer to the above question but which will have to wait for another time. For example, in speaking of Adam as a “historical person” wouldn’t we have to use the word “historical” in something different from a strictly literal sense? For the only “history” we know is by definition literally a history of sinfulness and death and pain and the Law. But the pre-fall Adam cannot be understood literally in any of those historical terms. If history is the history of sin and death (and it is), then Adam did not fall in history. He fell into history. Whatever “history” he lived in before the fall, a history without sin or death or even any need of God’s law and judgment, is something we fallen sinners cannot call by our own word “history,” at least not literally.

Moreover, if what is all-important is to trace original sin back to just the right “historical person,” then why doesn’t Paul trace it instead to Eve who, as he is careful to point out elsewhere, really was the one originally deceived? (I Tim. 2:14; Gen. 3:6)

Or finally, if we are going to cite Part III, I, of the Smalcald Articles, ought we not do so for the purpose for which that was written: namely, to so understand original sin as to necessitate, not Adam, but Christ Jesus? (11) It is the latter thing which the Roman Catholic opponents were violating, namely,

the need of Christ, despite the fact that they had no trouble accepting Adam. Mightn't we too run the risk of using Adam for a non-confessional purpose, for example, the way the Reformed do, to shore up the authority of Scripture? If our concern is truly the confessional concern with original sin, then we might check our current practices against something like Article XII of the Formula of Concord. (SD, 9-27) In that Article XII the confessors inveigh ever so sharply, more sharply than ever we Lutherans in America do today, against those sects which, by denying infant baptism, deny original sin. But if our Lutheran critics nowadays are so concerned for the "historicity of Adam" out of a deeper concern about original sin, why then are some of them—for example, in their evangelism crusades—so casual about their alliances with those sects who really do publicly and officially deny original sin? How serious are we really about the real confessional concern about Adam?

Once again, my intention is not to deny that there was a first sinner, "Adam", who was every bit as much a "historical individual" as anyone of us. What I am concerned about is our current preoccupation with that one feature of Adam which Paul is emphasizing in Romans 5 and which the Smalcald Articles in turn rediscover from Romans 5, namely, that Adam is a very special kind of "one man." The way he is "one man" is not the way a "historical individual" is. Adam is "one man" the way Christ is "one man." He is one-for-many. That cannot be said about just any "historical individual." But that does have to be said about Christ and about Adam, else the whole evangelical and confessional point about Adam is lost.

Ultimately what is at stake is the Gospel, but more immediately the Gospel's whole emphasis upon original sin. Granted, those who concentrate on the historicity of Adam claim to do so out of a concern with original sin. But that is exactly the doctrinal point we cannot do justice to by fixing upon what is called

Adam's historicity. For all that says is that Adam is the first in a series of sinners. However, to say only that is to ignore what it is about that "one man" which causes all his descendants to fall with him. It ignores the real thrust of original sin, namely, that Adam is also an ongoing, present reality in whom, as Paul writes to the Corinthians, we "are dying" (present tense) still today. That is why the Lutheran Confessions too speak of "the old Adam," which is that universal fallen human nature which we all inherit, into which we are born through no choice of our own, and from which we are helpless to extricate ourselves. It isn't even enough to say that Adam is like the first in a series of dominoes which starts all the subsequent dominoes falling. He is those dominoes as well. That is why they likewise, you and I, share the same responsibility and guilt as he does.

"The old Adam" is Adam as he is now present. Otherwise there is no explaining why, just because that first individual fell, the rest of us should be made to fall with him, let alone why we should have to die for his falling—unless he is at the same time our own moribund humanity. Those who claim to safeguard the biblical teaching concerning original sin by safeguarding the idea of Adam as a "historical individual" are in fact jeopardizing the teaching by that one-sided accent. Is their preoccupation with Adam's historicity really concern about original sin? Or is it rather a concern to safeguard the authority of Scripture? And if it is the latter, is that really the right way, the scriptural way, to go about it? Really not. The scriptural way to "safeguard" Scripture is so to use Adam as the origin of our sin, not just the past origin but the present origin, that there is finally no match for him—except that other "one Man", who also is one-for-the-many, Christ Jesus.

This prompts an observation about the old practitioners of the historical-critical method and about some of their biblicist

critics today, how alike they can all be. In its earlier, more destructive days that method was often distorted by an unbiblical view of history, namely, that history is a piecemeal, one-event-at-a-time succession of separate happenings. But that same view of history still seems to afflict biblicists today, when their chief historical interest in Adam is that he lived and fell and died once upon a time. Those old historical-biblical critics, on the one hand, and their biblicist opponents today, on the other hand, are often thought to be diametric opposites when in fact they are all too often operating from the same mistaken, unbiblical premises about biblical history.

On the opposite side, the biblical side, a reference to the Confessions comes to mind. In the Large Catechism Luther narrates the story of our own "fall", nowadays, as if that still happens the way the first sinner's fall did, after an initial period of innocence in our lives. Actually, as Luther well knew, we don't "fall" at all. We are born fallen. Yet notice how intent Luther is to "contemporize" us with Adam.

What a parallel tragedy it would be if we were to reduce Christ to merely a "historical individual." True, what we are faced with in this whole christological idea of one-for-many is a mystery. So far as I know, even this dimension of Adam was relatively late in being recognized by Judaism, but at any rate it was common enough knowledge by the inter-testamental period that Paul could appeal to it when he wrote his letter to the Christians at Rome. But Paul's purpose in doing so was christological. Paul could take for granted that his Roman readers, at least the Jews among them, did already accept the notion that one man could be for the many, that is, so far as Adam was concerned. So now Paul takes advantage of the fact and then proceeds to build upon that his further argument concerning the vicariousness of Christ: "how much more," says he, must what is true of Adam be true about Christ.

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# Legal Morality And The Two Kingdoms

By Robert W. Bertram

Valparaiso University

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Every American Christian who is morally serious about the law of his land deserves two reminders: First, that being a Christian believer and being a good citizen, though he must be both, are two different things – and sometimes are two conflicting things; second, that being law-abiding and being moral are not two different things but are usually parts of the same thing. In other words, he must remember, first, that his life within God's creation and hence within human society operates according to principles which not only differ from but frequently conflict with the principles which govern his life in the holy Christian Church --even though in both realms the principles come to him from the same God. This is a reminder to keep unlike things distinct. The second reminder is about like things, which are often separated from each other though they should not be: namely, morality and law. To pretend, as we Americans are sometimes wont to do, that what is moral is separable from what is legal is to frustrate morality and emasculate the law. It is to cut asunder what God has joined together.

# 1. THE TWO KINGDOMS

First of all, then, the reminder to keep unlike things distinct. The rules of the game which govern one's membership in the communion of saints are not the rules of the game which govern one's membership in the human race. It would be as incongruous to settle international disputes through the sacrificial crucifixion of a prime minister as it would have been incongruous to conciliate God and man with diplomacy or with deadly weapons. You could not conduct a successful business by selling all that you have and giving to the poor or by advising your disgruntled employees to consider the lilies of the field, anymore than you could secure the gifts of the Spirit through shrewd financial investment or collective bargaining.

It would be preposterous, would it not, to base the spiritual fellowship of Christians upon their sexual attraction to each other or their common ancestry or the fact that they inhabit the same country and speak the same mother-tongue and share the same national pride? It would be equally preposterous to base marriages and families and nationalities upon a Gospel which, like that of the Christians, makes no distinction between male and female, Jew and Greek. A university which prepared its students for graduation by washing them baptismally and feeding them sacramentally would be as unthinkable as a kingdom of heaven which had to depend on a grading system, scientific method, artistic taste, and an honor code. What sort of government would it be which proclaimed that its kingdom is not of this world and always kept its sword in its sheath and based its judicial system on the forgiveness of sins and the love of one's enemies? It would be as misguided as a communion of saints which had to rely for its saintliness on law enforcement or a two-party system. Our theological forefathers knew what they were doing when they distinguished between an order of grace and

an order of creation, a kingdom of the right hand and a kingdom of the left.

## SAINT PAUL

The oppositions between these two orders, as Werner Elert has shown, is abundantly illustrated in the New Testament. It is Saint Paul's one and the same Epistle to the Romans which insists on the one hand that Christians are not to seek revenge but rather are to love their enemies and, on the other hand and almost in the same breath, insist just as emphatically that the state does have the right of revenge and the duty to wield the sword (Romans 12:14, 19 f; 13:4). This antithesis is especially delicate if the judge who has to give the orders to wield the sword happens also to be a Christian: nevertheless, he has to give the orders. There is the case of the Nebraska judge who in the morning granted a divorce to a husband and wife and in the evening, at a congregational meeting, had to condemn their divorce and, exercising the office of the keys, had to vote to bar them from the Lord's Supper. The same Paul who wrote the Epistle to the Romans writes in another letter (Galatians 3:28) that there is no longer any distinction between the sexes and yet, in still other letters, movingly advances the cause of conjugal love (Ephesians 5:25ff.) and in good conscience justifies its physical expression (I Corinthians 7:4 ff.). Paul announces too that differences between nationalities have been abolished (Colossians 3:11), still he proudly refers to himself as an Israelite (II Corinthians 11:22). This is also the apostle who exalts the Christian's concern for the inner man (Ephesians 3:16), who praises the heavenly prize as the only one worth striving for (Philippians 3:14) – the same apostle, nevertheless, who will not let the Corinthians forget that he himself works with his hands (I Corinthians 4:12), admonishes others to do likewise (II Thessalonians 3:8 ff), and finds a

common bond with those who like himself are by trade tentmakers (Acts 18:3). Christian freedom is for Paul a denial of slavery (Galatians 3:28; I Corinthians 7:22), yet he advises Christians who are slaves that it is their duty to continue in their slavery (Ephesians 6:5).

## JESUS

Not only in the epistles of Paul but also in the gospels, in the life and teaching of our Lord, do we find dramatic evidence of this opposition between the two realms. Think, for example, of the numerous secular occupations Christ mentions in His parables without His ever suggesting there is anything intrinsically wrong with these occupations – the architect (Luke 14:28), the banker (Matthew 25:14 ff.), the merchant (Matthew 13:45), the steward (Luke 16:1 ff), the householder (Matthew 20:1 ff), the farmer (Matthew 13:3 ff), the fisherman (Matthew 13:47 ff), the shepherd (Luke 11:21), the judge (Luke 18:2), the soldier (Luke 11:21), the prince (Matthew 18:23), the housewife ((Matthew 13:33) – and how He announces salvation to a revenue agent (Luke 19:9) and marvels at the faith of a centurion (Matthew 8:10) without so much as hinting that they should forsake their offices. Still, this is the same Master who requires of His followers that for Him they must give up their occupations (Luke 5:27 f.) and their civic relations (Luke 18:22). The principles by which men govern one another in state and society, He says, are to have no place in the group life of His disciples (Mark 10:42 ff), yet He commands them to support the government's tax program and to discharge their obligations to the emperor (Mark 12:17). The Master and the disciples who, as He says, are hated "because they are not of the world" (John 17:14) are nevertheless quite at home at a party which, even by our standards, must have been very worldly indeed (John 2:11 ff.). Christ warns against accumulating wealth and yet in the



operations of those who do accumulate He finds a model for those who seek the Kingdom of God (Matthew 13:44 f.). He sharply scolds His hearers for being anxious about food and raiment (Matthew 6:25 ff.) yet eats the food which is produced and prepared by just their kind of anxiety (e.g., Luke 14:1). He criticizes Jews for saluting only fellow Jews and yet, paradoxically, His own method of shaming them is to tell them that therefore they are no better than non-Jews (Matthew 5:47), elsewhere He compares non-Jews to dogs (Matthew 15:26) and unbelievers to swine (Matthew 7:6).

## THE PRICE OF CONFUSION

Any veteran Christian knows that, if distinguishing these two orders is difficult, not distinguishing them is disastrous. Just try to live in the order of grace as though it were the order of creation (and this has been tried as recently as today) – what do you get? A woefully secularized Church. And the worst thing about secularizing the Church is not that you replace her old *gemuetlich* fellowship with a now impersonal bureaucracy, nor that you recreate her churchmanship in the image of Madison Avenue and Wall Street, nor that you vulgarize her good name in the community, nor even that you render her children ethically indistinguishable from the children of the world. Worse still than these is that you burden her with a task which by itself is indeed noble and imperative but which in no case is the essential task of the Church of Jesus Christ: the task, namely, of making people decent and of making the world safe for decent people to live in. This is a task all right for school boards, for juries, for stockholders' meetings, for married couples, for union locals, for private consciences, for non-Christian and sub-Christian religions. But a Christian Church which conceives this as her principal task is flirting with adultery and is no longer the faithful Bride of Christ. To be sure, the Church

which had no concern for decency and safety would also be no Church. More than that, she could not make herself understood, she probably could not even survive, if she could not count on some measure of that concern within the non-Christian world about her. But – and this is the whole point – this concern for human decency and safety is not what makes the Church what she essentially is.

Men lay violent hands also on the other order, the order of creation, when as religious men they look to it for redemption, which is not its responsibility, and piously mistake it for the kingdom of heaven. But it is not the kingdom of heaven, anymore than it is the kingdom of hell. That is, its business is not to save men or to damn them. It is a kingdom of productive work. As such, it is not interested in men as saints or as sinners. As good men and bad men, yes. But goodness in this case is not righteousness, it is not the measure of a man's standing in the divine favor or the divine disfavor. Human goodness in the creative order is rather a utilitarian thing. It is the measure of how faithfully a man performs in the service of the Creator. Do not misunderstand, this does not reduce goodness to a relative thing. If in his service to the Creator a man proves to be, say, dishonest, then dishonest he is and he stands condemned as for a transgression which is wrong not relatively but absolutely. Perhaps on top of this he loses his job, the esteem of his fellows, and his own self-respect. But such condemnation, though it may proceed from an absolute norm, has here a purpose which is largely pragmatic: to restore the dishonest servant to honest service, to fit him once more for the useful opportunities and joys of creation. In point of fact, he may thrive better on sympathy than condemnation. Charity is capable of both, of sternness as well as mildness, but charity is always the dear pragmatist. She has no interest in passing judgment, whether negative or affirmative simply for its own sake. She is

interested in getting on with the business of creation.

But this magnificent business is spoiled when men with their misplaced religiosity distort the work at hand into a way of salvation. People are anxious to justify their existence (as if they were even authorized, much less able, to do so.) So they ponder the creative and creditable things they do – keeping house, writing term-papers, indulging appropriate worries, praying for virtue, befriending their relatives, reading the editorial page – and wonder whether all these things might not help to establish their personal worth. Meanwhile their pondering and their wondering plays hob not only with their composure and their digestion but with the Creator's time-table and with His whole bounteous plan for them.

This can happen to everyone. It can happen to professors. It does happen to the professor for whom teaching is no longer the privilege of working with the Creator but is instead a grim life of self-sacrifice by which the Creator-turned-Judge is now to be appeased. For him teaching is the pious ordeal by which his life shall be made to count for something. "And gladly teach" means for him "and meritoriously teach." If as the Psalmist says the great God is moved to laughter by the kings and rulers of the earth who take counsel against Him, then what must His laughter be when He finds Himself competed with by this new self-savior, the lordly professor. See him, armed with his terrible red marking-pencil, separating the sheep from the goats with the kind of humorless and austere inflexibility that should properly be reserved only for the Last Judgment. See him bestride his platform as majestically as only he can who does daily battle with dragons like Darwin and Dante and Diesel and, oh yes, poor defenseless Decartes, or as he turns from his onslaught upon a quadratic equation or the third declension, still unbowed but bespattered with chalk dust, or as he leans back in the relaxed rumple of his tweeds while his students wait, pencils poised,

for his next word and while he ponders – why the sophomore in the rear is whispering.

Or perhaps he is not the lordly professor at all, but the professor of terrible meekness, anxious to save himself by professorial flagellation. In this academic vale of tears, with its lethargic students and its distracting extra-curriculars and its insufficient pay and its elusive truths and its daily unfinished business and his own limited abilities – oh, his own so limited abilities – he spends himself in holy martyrdom, never complaining about a thing except about the fact that his colleagues are forever complaining. About nothing is he so certain as about uncertainty, and it is his supreme act of self-abnegation to dwell, with his upset students, in *The Problem Insoluble*. What makes the good class or the good dean or the good lecture “good” is that it confers upon him the wan hope that, perhaps after all, he may yet amount to something- that is, if the lectures will just hold out a little longer and if the students will please not lose interest and if the dean remembers his name. How hard it is for him to utter that superbly creative utterance, “So what” – without uttering it cynically or irresponsibly or without wondering nervously just why he did utter it. Even life’s sheer delights, like humor and music and good drink and the joy of winning and the pleasure of twitting his friends and enjoying his wife – even these seem to be for him soterological acts, projects he is under obligation to “be good at.”

If this is the case with the professor – the professor, that is, who feels constrained to convert his profession into religious credit (and I chose the professor not because he is the favorite target but only because I happen to be familiar at first hand with his variety of sin) – then it is certainly also the case with all God’s other human servants, from the mother to the paper-hanger to the comedian. No wonder they find the work of

creation so taxing. No wonder the Creator, in His displeasure, threatens to put an end to the whole thing sooner or later – and promises to replace it with a new creation and new men.

## **THEREFORE**

No wonder, then, that it is important to distinguish the order of grace from the order of creation. This is not the place, or at least the time, to speak about the opposite and equally treacherous danger – the danger, namely, of widening the distinction between the two orders into a separation, thus destroying their mutual dependence – or about the bearing of all this upon the American “separation of church and state,” or about the ambiguous position of the historical Church which, like the individual Christian, has to operate within both orders simultaneously. Our purpose, you recall, was simply to remind ourselves to keep distinct two unlike things, the kingdom of the right hand and the kingdom of the left.

## **THE MORALITY OF LAW**

Then there is the second reminder, to keep like things together. This is the forgotten truth that, within the natural order of human society, there is no hard and fast distinction between what is legal and what is moral. The law is but a means of applying and enforcing what is right. It is an extension of the ethical.

## **MINIMAL VERSUS IDEAL**

Professor Edmond Cahn, in his recent excellent book, *The Moral Decision*, notes that one of the ways Americans commonly distinguish law and morals is to say “that the law enforces only those minimum standards of moral behavior that are indispensable for community existence, whereas morals deal with standards

suitable to an ideal human being.” (39) But, as Professor Cahn rightly protests, is the law really as “minimal” as all that and so unconcerned with the “ideal”? His own answer (and we heartily concur) is No. One wonders, for example, just how many members of Alabama’s White Citizens;’ Council would concede that the Supreme Court’s ruling on segregation represents “those minimum standards of moral behavior that are indispensable for community existence,” and just how often, in their murmurings against it, they have referred to it as “idealistic.” Surely they would agree, though none too agreeably, that the law is capable of embracing the ideal.

There is another reason for this conclusion. If a community’s moral ideals should happen to hover above the reach of its laws in a given generation, there is still every chance that, with enough time and a broad enough consensus, those ideals will wind up in the next generation on the community’s law books. Duties which at an earlier time were merely moral duties have a way of changing, through subsequent history, into duties which are legal as well as moral. Many of the things which you and I and our parents formerly construed as just unethical have by now become not only unethical but also illegal. There was day not so long ago when an employer could get by without giving assistance to the unemployed, and perhaps have only his conscience to answer to. Nowadays he would also have to reckon with a statute which requires him to pay mandatory contributions to unemployment insurance. His moral duty has become also his legal duty. Formerly a broker, in advising an investor, may have deceived the investor regarding the present condition of the market, and perhaps the only thing wrong with that at the time was that it was not decent. Today it might also not be very legal, and the broker may find himself in trouble with the Securities and Exchange Commission. Listen to the searching way in which that commission’s chairman recently condemned this sort

of deception. Quoted in last November twenty-ninth's Chicago Daily News, he said: "It has been the position of the Commission that if an uninformed investor could be reasonably deceived, the manner of the fraud is immaterial, whether it takes the form of a direct lie, or a half truth, or a question, or an innuendo; this has been sustained by the courts." As a moral judgment, not to say a legal judgment, this can hardly be said to be merely minimal.

To hermetically seal off ethics from law as though the one dealt with the most and the other with the least, is to forget that what was exclusively ethical yesterday may well become both ethical and legal tomorrow. Pessimists may try to explain this away by saying that the former moral duties have merely lost their old appeal and now in their weakness have to turn for help to the strong arm of the law. Is it not just as likely that what has taken place here is a rise in the moral level of the law itself?

## **EXTERNAL VERSES INTERNAL**

Another popular distinction between law and morality is the one which says – and you have heard it before – that the law deals only with men's external behavior whereas morality is concerned with their internal motives and intentions. This distinction, too, is much too neat. In a court of law, as I understand it, it is frequently necessary, in order to establish guilt, to ascertain a person's subjective mental status. In a case of homicide, for example, does it not make considerable difference, not only morally but legally, whether the killing had been malicious and whether it had been premeditatedly malicious? Similarly, in questions of contracts, of dispositions in a last will, of tax evasion, it is often essential to the court's ruling to know just what the testator had in mind, or whether there was actual intent to defraud, or whether the evasion was

“willful.” These are largely questions of moral intention. The point is, they are also legal considerations.

Furthermore, quite apart from the law’s passing judgment on a man’s intentions, there is the matter of the law’s influencing his intentions. It is remarkable how a speed limit sign not only will cause a driver, externally, to reduce the speed of his car but also may instill in him, internally, a heightened respect for local pedestrians. What is legal is not external to what is moral. The law is not apart from but a part of morality.

## **SO THEN**

The order of creation may be markedly different from the order of grace, but it is still the order of creation, ordained by a wise and just and bountiful Creator. Within this order, this kingdom of the left hand, His ordaining hand – though it be His left one – works unceasingly not only in the meek and the gentle private moralities but also, and perhaps most amazingly, in the public moralities of our legal institutions. If we sometimes have difficulty finding Him there, it may be that we do not sufficiently expect to find Him there. The man who ignores the law’s divine origin and authorization, conjures with it flippantly or seeks to outsmart it or exploits it for evil ends, is ultimately not only lawless but godless. The man who remembers its origin – especially the Christian who remembers that its Creator is also his Reconciler – discovers in the law not only deep obligation but also new opportunity for his gratitude.