

#751 The Cultural Roots of Schism (Part 2)

Colleagues,

This week we bring you Part 2 of Chris Repp's paper on the role of cultural differences and political expediencies in some of the major schisms in the history of the Church. In [Part 1](#) of this paper (first presented in its entirety in August of last year, at St. Augustine's House in Oxford, Michigan), Chris discussed the cultural roots of the Donatist controversy and the resulting schism. In this final part, he draws on his rich knowledge of Russian church history to explain the origins of the so-called Old Believer schism in the Russian Orthodox Church. In so doing, he casts revealing light on the very human motives at work in the life of the Church at every age, including the present day.

Peace and Joy,

Carol Braun, for the editorial team

"Dividing The Kingdom: Case Studies in the History of Church Conflict"

by Arthur C. Repp

THE OLD BELIEVER SCHISM IN RUSSIA

The second case study I turn to now is much less well known to western audiences, even among those with an otherwise thorough knowledge of church history. This was the Old Believer schism in the Russian Orthodox Church in the middle of the seventeenth century, a schism that persists until the present day.

Before considering the details of the schism, a very brief survey of Russian church history is in order, or to be more precise, the history of Christianity in the land we now call Russia. Christianity was introduced by fiat under Prince Vladimir (Volodimir) of Kiev in 988, under the influence of the Byzantines. Legend has it that the prince sent representatives to investigate four different religions, Islam, Judaism, Roman Catholicism, and Eastern Orthodoxy, and Orthodoxy won out because the envoys who had been to the Hagia Sophia Church in Constantinople reported that during the services there they didn't know whether they were in heaven or on earth, so beautiful was the Orthodox liturgy. In reality, the choice of Orthodoxy likely had much more to do with the forging of a political alliance with the then-powerful Byzantine Empire. The state of Kievan Rus', as it is known, was conquered by invading Mongol armies toward the end of the thirteenth century, and for the next two hundred years was a vassal of the Mongols. It was during this time that the seeds were sewn for a shift of power northwards. The principality of Novgorod on Lake Il'men made peace with the Mongols in order to turn its attention to fighting off the Roman Catholic Teutonic knights based in the Baltics. Better to have pagan overlords who would in some measure tolerate their Orthodox faith, than Roman Catholics who would surely insist upon conversion. It was also during the period of Mongol domination that the small settlement of Moscow rose to prominence, due in no small part to the fact that it controlled important waterways in the heart of what we now know as European Russia, and also thanks to the dense forests that surrounded it. It was during the reign of Ivan III, also known as Ivan the Great (1462-1505) that Moscow liberated itself and its surrounding territories from the Mongols, successfully refusing to pay the demanded tribute. Ivan's remarkably long and successful reign began only a decade after the fall of Constantinople (1453), whose last patriarch, fleeing the Turkish

conquest, died in the city of Vladimir in the general vicinity of Moscow. From this arose the so-called doctrine of Moscow as the Third Rome, the notion that the center of Christianity had passed from the First Rome to Constantinople, the Second Rome, and from there finally to Moscow. It was no accident, then, that Ivan took for himself the title of tsar', the Russian version of Caesar, or that he adopted for his seal the double-headed eagle of Byzantium. The idea of Moscow as the Third—and as the doctrine went, the final—repository and guard of Orthodoxy ("a fourth Rome there shall not be," so the saying went) was linked to the memory of the Council of Florence [1439] at which, in a bid for Western help against the invading Turks, the Eastern Orthodox patriarchs (with one exception) signed a union with Rome. This union established a principle of "unity in faith/diversity in rites" that is still operative within Roman Catholicism today. From the Eastern point of view, however, the patriarchs had without warrant compromised on the four chief points under dispute between East and West: the filioque clause inserted by the Western Church into the Nicene Creed, the use of unleavened bread in the Eucharist, the doctrine of Purgatory, and the principal of papal primacy. In the Russian mind, the Greeks were now heretics because of this union, leaving Russia alone as Orthodoxy's last bastion. Conflict on its western borders over the next two centuries with the likes of Poland, Lithuania, and Sweden kept the threat of Roman Christianity in the popular consciousness, even as it made available the benefits of Renaissance and Enlightenment learning through borderland cities like Kiev, which also emerged from Mongol domination at this time.

The seventeenth-century schism had its origins in the 1630s among a group of reform-minded clerics who called themselves the Zealots of Piety. This was late in the reign of Mikhail Romanov, the first tsar of the Romanov dynasty, which came to power as

Russia emerged from a period of national crisis known at the Time of Troubles. Mikhail's father, Filaret, was the patriarch of the church during his son's reign and *de facto* ruler of Russia until his death in 1633. As the country emerged from the Time of Troubles, he attempted to safeguard Orthodoxy from the heretical influences of Roman Catholicism and Protestantism through a policy of intellectual isolation from the West. The Zealots, also concerned with safeguarding Orthodoxy, viewed the crisis of the Time of Troubles—involving the collapse of the previous dynasty, a prolonged famine, and an invasion from Poland and Lithuania—to be evidence of God's displeasure at Russia's lack of faith. They therefore desired to remedy this situation by strengthening the church's authority, reforming its clergy and liturgical practice, and strengthening the faith and piety of the laity. They sought, for instance, to reform the popular observance of religious festivals, which in many places were interwoven with pagan elements, evidence of the fact that Christianity had never fully taken hold in Russia, but was overlaid on top of its pre-Christian religion in what Russian scholars have named *dvoeverie*, or "double faith." Church festivals were, moreover, in many places often little more than an excuse for drunken debauchery, in which even the clergy participated. An indication of the moral state of the church at the time may be inferred from a letter of the patriarch addressed to the clergy calling on them to refrain from drunkenness during Lent and concentrate on repentance. [1] One of the ways the Zealots sought to make the Orthodox faith a more significant part of people's lives was through the introduction of sermons into the Sunday services, a novelty at the time. Perhaps an even more important reform of the liturgy advocated by the Zealots was ending the practice known as *mnogoglasie* (lit. "many voices"). A development of the previous century, *mnogoglasie* was the practice of chanting different parts of the liturgy – in some cases as many as five

or six – at the same time, in order to shorten the very lengthy Eucharistic service. Obviously the meaning of the liturgy would be totally lost in this practice, but the letter of the law would be fulfilled: the service would be sung in its entirety. Nevertheless, this reform was resisted by many of the clergy. The best that could be achieved at this point was reducing the number of concurrent voices to two or three.

The reform efforts accelerated with the ascent of the next Tsar, Aleksei Mikhailovich Romanov, in 1645. In the first years of his reign a number of the Zealots were placed into important positions in the administrative hierarchy of the church. [2] In these years they also strengthened their ties with the Ukrainian and Greek churches. In 1649, Tsar Alexei ordered the Russian Patriarch to consult the Patriarch of Constantinople on the question of the Russian practice of *mnogoglasie*. The Greek Patriarch was categorical in his rejection of this liturgical innovation. At the same time, a new project was undertaken to correct translations of the church fathers and the service books, and for this Greek and Ukrainian scholars were recruited, as there was no one in Russia with a knowledge of Greek sufficient for the task.

This is where the trouble began. It was soon discovered that there were a number of differences between the Greek and Slavonic versions of the liturgy, including the prescribed way of making the sign of the cross. In this case, the Greek practice was to join the thumb to the index and middle fingers, while folding the remaining fingers into the palm. The Slavonic arrangement of the fingers was rather more complicated. It involved crossing the thumb over the ring finger, keeping the index finger straight, and slightly bending the other two. In this way, the fingers made the shapes of the letters in the Greek abbreviation of “Jesus Christ” (ICXC). One of the Zealots, a monk named Nikon who had risen to the prestigious position of

Metropolitan of Novgorod, was elevated to office of patriarch in 1652. His unusually quick ascent to the top of the church's hierarchy, together with his exalted view of the church's position in society and role in the affairs of state made him supremely confident in his ability to pursue his reform agenda. Moreover, he had discovered in the Patriarchal library the documents of the establishment of the Moscow Patriarchate in 1589 and a subsequent council in Constantinople, in which the Greek Patriarch charged the Russians to "keep the correct faith, free from innovations." [3] Thus emboldened, Nikon unilaterally ordered the publication of new service books in the year following his ascent. These new service books incorporated a number of changes that brought them into conformity with the Greek liturgy, on the assumption that the Greeks had preserved the more ancient practices.

Here was the rub: Nikon's deference to the Greeks, the Second Rome, which had long ago fallen into apostasy. As one Russian historian has observed, "Quite simply, Nikon decided to accept as authoritative the contemporary Greek liturgy. If the [Zealots of Piety] were willing to recognize the gradual accretion over time of minor errors in Russian liturgical practices, they were completely unprepared to recognize the primacy of a tradition 'sullied' by constant intercourse with Islam and undermined by its past compromises with Rome (especially the Florentine Union of 1439). ... In short, it was impossible for them to reconcile their vision of the Third Rome with Nikon's revolutionary initiatives." [4]

Even before the new service books were printed, Nikon issued an edict in 1653 just before Lent, which instructed the clergy to change the manner of bowing during certain services (from the waist, not all the way down to the knees), and to henceforth make the sign of the cross with three fingers in the Greek fashion. The priest of the Church of the Mother of God of Kazan

across Red Square from the Kremlin, known as the Kazan Cathedral (*Kazanskii Sobor*), was one of the first to refuse to comply with this order, and he was defended by a number of Nikon's fellow zealots. Among these were Ivan Neronov, a leading Zealot who, inspired by the example of St. John Chrysostom, had become famous as a preacher, first in the area of the Upper Volga (to the northeast of Moscow) and then in Moscow itself. He was also one of the chief advocates of reforming the practice of *mnogoglasie*.

As Patriarch, Nikon saw himself as co-equal with the tsar, following the Orthodox theory of *symphony*, the marriage of church and state. Opposition to his decrees was simply not to be tolerated. Priests who resisted the liturgical reforms were forbidden from leading services, and the most outspoken among them, including Neronov and the charismatic archpriest Avvakum, were arrested, defrocked, and sent into exile at monasteries in the Russian wilderness. [5] Neronov later recanted his opposition, but Avvakum remained an outspoken opponent of Nikon's reforms and became the chief spokesman, and eventually martyr, of the Old Believers (more accurately Old Ritualists, *staroobriadtsy*).

After acting unilaterally, Nikon sought the endorsement of his actions at a church council called in the following year, which confirmed his right, and even his duty as the guardian of Orthodoxy, to make reforms, although it did not explicitly mention the matter of how to make the sign of the cross. Only one bishop present at the council objected to the reforms, Pavel of Kolomna. Nikon consulted with the Patriarch of Constantinople, who was looking to Russia to liberate the Greeks from the Ottoman Turks. The Patriarch of Constantinople recommended excommunication. Bishop Pavel was removed from his see, exiled to a monastery in the north, and according to Old Believer sources later flogged and burned to death without a

trial. [6]

It did not take long for Tsar Alexei to view Nikon's overbearing administration of the church as a threat, and the patriarch soon found himself out of favor at court. In 1658, only six years after taking office, Nikon—in an apparent power play—withdrew from public life but refused to resign his position as patriarch, thus paralyzing the church administration at the highest level. After numerous attempts to bring him out of his self-imposed exile, a church council in 1666-7 deposed him and elevated a new patriarch. But while the council rejected Nikon himself, it nevertheless upheld his reforms. Half of the members of the council were foreigners, who were vehemently opposed to both the old ritual and the doctrine of the Third Rome. [7] And so, after several failed attempts a compromise with those who resisted the reforms, the council declared the old practices heretical, and prescribed secular punishments for those who practiced them. [8]

Here was an astonishing thing. In the eyes of the Old Believers, the leaders of the church, in league with suspect foreign prelates, were casting aspersions upon the last refuge of the true Orthodox faith, the Third Rome. Avvakum later wrote of his experience at the council, recounting how he appealed to Byzantine and Russian precedents, including the major Russian church council of the previous century, and praised the piety of the Russian saints. By his account, "the [foreign] patriarchs fell to thinking, but our people, they jumped up like wolves and howled and spit on their own fathers, saying, 'Our Russian saints were stupid and did not understand, they were not learned. How can we trust them, they could not even read?'" [9] If this account—written some twenty years after the events described—can be trusted, it provides an important insight into the attitudes of the respective parties in this dispute. As one scholar noted, "Russians committed to the Old Belief now

confronted a terrible choice: to acquiesce and risk eternal damnation or to continue their commitment outside the Church which had been their lifetime spiritual home.” [10]

As many chose the latter option, this now became more than an internal church dispute. Resistance to the council’s decision was regarded as rebellion against the state. A year after the council, conservative monks of the Solovetskii Monastery openly rebelled against the decrees of the council, and held out against the tsar’s army within their fortified walls for eight years. Other Old Believers went even further. If the tsar allowed such heresy and apostasy to occur, then only one conclusion was possible for many of the Old Believers: the tsar himself was in league with the Antichrist, or in some versions, was the Antichrist himself. Such a belief would later lead to the deaths of tens of thousands of Old Believers at their own hands. Self-immolation was seen as preferable to cooperation with the Antichrist. Many others, who were unwilling to die for the cause, fled to the periphery of the Russian state, where in subsequent generations they became unwitting agents of Russianization. Thus, what began as a power struggle among the higher clergy ended as a mass movement of resistance against the state. For the next century, “every popular uprising ... was fought under the banner of the Old Belief.” [11] Only in 1971, under the Soviet regime, did the Russian Orthodox Church finally rescind the anathemas of seventeenth century and recognize the validity of the Old Ritual. [12] Nevertheless, the schism remains unhealed.

What do we learn from these two episodes of church conflict? We learn that religious conflict can mask fundamental cultural and social differences. We learn that however necessary the kingdom of the left hand may be to preserve order and avoid chaos, its incursion into—or confusion with—the kingdom of the right hand can be disastrous for church unity. [13] We learn that it is

hazardous for those who are *simul iustus et peccator* in this life (at the same time saint and sinner, as Luther insisted) to claim a monopoly on the truth. Certainly in the two cases considered here there was middle ground that was left unoccupied. While the Catholic position in the Donatist controversy is surely ultimately the correct one when faced with the question of the efficacy of the baptisms performed by an unfaithful or immoral priest, surely everyone would acknowledge that unfaithful and immoral clergy are counterproductive to the church's mission. It was certainly a failure on the part of the Catholics not to take into account the experience of their Donatist opponents, those who had endured the brunt of the persecutions, the loss of family members and loved ones—however self-righteously that experience might have been expressed. Something similar might be said of the case of Patriarch Nikon and his former associates among the Zealots of Piety. His zeal for the reform that all of them wanted became compromised by his own ambition for power, which polarized the situation. Equally uncompromising were his opponents, who could not be satisfied with toleration, but insisted upon a complete restoration of the Old Ritual, and a corresponding anathema of the perceived innovations of the other Eastern Orthodox Churches. In both cases the church was irrevocably damaged. As anyone who is married knows, being right does not guarantee a successful marriage. [14] I say this as someone who loves to be right. Ask my wife. But as St. Augustine himself has taught us (in a development of his thought after his writings against the Donatists), on this side of the grave we have no sinless options. We have only the choice between sin and sin. There may indeed be times in the life the church, as in the life of a married couple, when separation may be the lesser sin than remaining together. But I suspect that those instances are far fewer than the number of schisms and divorces that actually take place—and in any case, schism and divorce are always tragedies.

Our only hope is in the forgiveness of God for Jesus' sake for the sinful choices we make, and in the inspiration of the Holy Spirit to work in us faith that is active in reconciling love for one another. May God grant us such grace.

Endnotes

- [1] Paul Bushkovitch, *Religion and Society in Russia: The Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 56.
- [2] V.V. Vinogradov, *Introduction to Archpriest Avvakum, the Life Written by Himself: With the Study of V.V. Vinogradov* (Ann Arbor: Michigan Slavic Publications, 1979), p. 10.
- [3] Bushkovitch, p. 60.
- [4] Vinogradov, p. 12.
- [5] Bushkovitch, 60.
- [6] Notes to Vinogradov, pp. 223-4.
- [7] Vinogradov, p. 22.
- [8] Cherniavsky, Michael, "The Old Believers and the New Religion," *Slavic Review* XXV (March 1966), p. 8.
- [9] Cited in Bushkovitch, p. 70.
- [10] Vinogradov, p. 22.
- [11] Cherniavsky, p. 20.
- [12] Vinogradov, p. 24.
- [13] See Martin Luther, *On Secular Authority*.
- [14] I am indebted to Frederick A. Niedner for this observation.

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.

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#750 On Being Special, or Not. A Double Crossing.

Colleagues,

You're about to read one of the best things we've sent you all year. It comes from Paul Jaster, who blessed us back in January with a three-part overview of Mark's Gospel. If you're not quite sure who Paul is, see the first paragraph of our introduction to [ThTheol 710](#), the first installment in that series. In the meantime take it from those of who us do know him that most anything Paul writes will yield a handsome return on the time you invest in reading it.

That's certainly the case with his offering today, a stunning example of what can emerge when the Crossings six-step method is employed to analyze what's going on not only in God's Scriptures but also in God's world. I'll leave it to Paul to tell you what he's writing about and why. He does that more succinctly than I would. For my part, I simply observe that anyone else who once sat as Paul did at the feet of Master Teacher Bob Bertram will notice how well the teacher rubbed off on the student. Bob is the one who captured the essence of the theologian's mission in two words: "[necessitate Christ](#)." That's the very thing that Paul is about to do.

Peace and Joy,
Jerry Burce, for the editorial team

P.S. Another reminder that we welcome submissions to Thursday Theology. E-mail them to cabraun98ATaolD0Tcom or jburceATattD0Tnet.

You're Nothing Special

Crossing McCullough and Mark 9:30-37

Recently, David McCullough Jr. made national news and rocked the graduation circuit by having the rash audacity to tell his own beloved high school students in a commencement address that "None of you is special." There was a second of stunned silence, and then "Bang!"—the Internet went viral.

David McCullough Jr. is the son of the Pulitzer Prize-winning author and is himself a longtime English teacher at Wellesley High School (Wellesley, Massachusetts). He has his father's wit and mastery of words.

McCullough's speech merits the attention of the Crossings Community, not only for its potent wordsmithing (a perennial Crossings favorite) and acute insight into cherished aspects of our culture (the world we are always crossing with Christ's cross), but also because he instinctively uses five out of the six steps of our own "crossing matrix" as he diagnoses our human malady and proposes his remedy and prescription.

This makes for striking convergences and divergences as one crosses McCullough's speech with Mark 9:30-37, where Jesus, the cross-bound Teacher, addresses disciples who are graduating from Discipleship 101 (ministry around the Sea of Galilee) and moving on to their "higher education" at the more advanced level (the necessity of the cross).

Diagnosis: Steps One, Two, Three

McCullough's "Step One" (the external problem) deflates swollen egos with the piercing line that made the headlines:

"You are not special. You are not exceptional. Contrary to what your U9 soccer trophy suggests, your glowing seventh-grade report card, despite every assurance of a certain corpulent purple dinosaur, that nice Mister Rogers and your batty Aunt Sylvia, no matter how often your maternal caped crusader has swooped in to save you...you're nothing special."

Notice who the culprits are in instilling a cultural epidemic of "I'm the greatest" attitudes, the same ailment that afflicted our Lord's first disciples in Mark 9:30-37: coaches, soccer moms, soccer dads, Mr. Rogers, Barney, a host of relatives...and parents like ME!

"Yes, you've been pampered, cosseted ["petted like a lamb" says Webster], doted upon, helmeted, bubble-wrapped. Yes, capable adults with other things to do have held you, kissed you, fed you, wiped your mouth, wiped your bottom, trained you, taught you, tutored you, coached you, listened to you, counseled you, encouraged you, consoled you and encouraged you again." "You've been feted and fawned over and called sweetie pie." [Yikes! How did he know I always call my daughter 'Sweetie pie'?] "But do not get the idea you're anything special. Because you're not."

McCullough's grounding for this claim? Vast "empirical evidence." Hard scientific facts and basic mathematical calculations that even he, an English teacher, cannot ignore.

"Across the country no fewer than 3.2 million seniors are graduating about now from more than 37,000 high schools. That's 37,000 valedictorians... 37,000 class presidents... 92,000 harmonizing altos... 340,000 swaggering jocks... 2,185,967 pairs of

Uggs. But why limit it to high school? After all, you're leaving it. So think about this: even if you're one in a million, on a planet of 6.8 billion that means there are nearly 7,000 people just like you." "And consider for a moment the bigger picture: your planet, I'll remind you, is not the center of its solar system, your solar system is not the center of its galaxy, your galaxy is not the center of the universe. In fact, astrophysicists assure us that the universe has no center; therefore, you cannot be it. Neither can Donald Trump... which someone should tell him."

Towards the end of his "Step One," McCullough finally puts a label on the disease: "our unspoken but not so subtle Darwinian competition with one another," that old law of nature 'survival of the fittest,' which we try to soften and mitigate in these enlightened days by calling everyone 'special.' Or, as he will say at the start of his "Step Five"—"the narcotic paralysis of self-satisfaction."

However, as McCullough points out,

"If everyone is special, then no one is. If everyone gets a trophy, trophies become meaningless."

In fact, McCullough says, we Americans have made it worse! We have dumbed down and grade-inflated what it means to be "special," because we have come to love the praise more than the achievement. This sure sounds like a "theology of glory" to me.

"We have of late, we Americans, to our detriment, come to love accolades more than genuine achievement." "No longer is it how you play the game, no longer is it even whether you win or lose, or learn or grow, or enjoy yourself doing it... Now it's 'So what does this get me?' As a consequence, we cheapen worthy

endeavors, and building a Guatemalan medical clinic becomes more about the application to Bowdoin [College] than the well-being of Guatemalans. It's an epidemic—and in its way, not even dear old Wellesley High is immune... where good is no longer good enough, where B is the new C, and the midlevel curriculum is called Advanced College Placement."

McCullough's "Step Two" (the internal problem) is a one-liner:

"Our unspoken but not so subtle Darwinian competition with one another...springs, I think, from our fear of our own insignificance, a subset of our dread of mortality."

The "spring" (as in the Latin fons, fountain, source) of the external problem is an internal problem—"fear." Phobia. Fear of our own insignificance. A "subset" (that's a good school word) of our mortality. Is this the same kind of fear the disciples had when Jesus started talking about the necessity of his own suffering, death, and resurrection? Is this the kind of fear that caused them to be so silent when they failed to comprehend what he was saying? Was their fear much more than just a teenager's most mortifying nightmare—looking stupid in front of the class? Was theirs a mortifying fear of their own mortality? Which is a very legitimate fear (as opposed to an imaginary neurotic or psychotic one), since the chance of our mortality is exactly 100.00%. No more. No less. And did they cover up that fear by their competitive jabbering about who was the greatest—teacher's pet—the most "special" to Jesus and God?

But let us quickly add that any legitimate fear is not only a subset of our "mortality." It is also a subset of our life "under the law"—as the word "legitimate" suggests—life "under the lex, the legis." And by "law" we mean the law of God in all its many forms: "natural," "legislated," "revealed." And it

really does not matter whether it is a law discovered by scientists or catalogued by jurists, moralists or theologians. Any law (whether discovered by a Darwin, disclosed through a Moses, or passed by a congress) boils down to a “not so subtle Darwinian competition with one another,” the “survival of the fittest.” Those who live up to the law and/or successfully argue their case are rewarded. Those who do not live up to the law and/or lose the case are penalized. That’s the way laws work: reward and punishment. And deep inside we always know that we are not “the fittest.” There is always someone bigger, brighter, and stronger than ourselves—the very rude awakening many cosseted kids have in college, and a reality for which McCullough’s commencement speech seeks to prepare them.

It is the intersection of those two subsets—our “lack of fitness” under God’s law and our “mortality”—that makes our legitimate dread of death so fearful.

McCullough’s “Step Three” (the eternal problem) is his motivator for a big change in life and attitude. He ticks off several secular imperatives (see “Step Five”) and then he says,

“[Do these things], please, with a sense of urgency, for every tick of the clock subtracts from fewer and fewer; and as surely as there are commencements there are cessations, and you’ll be in no condition to enjoy the ceremony attendant to that eventuality no matter how delightful the afternoon.”

Death. He’s talking about death and funerals. And yet, compared to what Jesus says in Mark 9:30-37, we must note that for Jesus cessation/death/funerals, while indeed a problem, are not yet the biggest problem his disciples face. There is a greater fear. For even as Jesus predicts his own imminent passion and death, he simultaneously intimates that there is indeed a “ceremony” we can “enjoy” attendant to the “eventuality,” yes, even certainty

of death, no matter how gruesome the afternoon. It is a cheerful ceremony called "resurrection." The "marriage feast of the Lamb," as the book of Revelation puts it. (A Lamb, by the way, that was not "cosseted," even by his own parent, but crucified and raised.)

No, by far the greater and more crucial problem his disciples face is missing out on God and God's welcoming presence now and in the future in the person of the Jesus Christ, the Son of Man, and those with whom Jesus "hangs"—particularly, the least, the last, the little and the lost. This too, Jesus states as a law of nature. God's nature. Or is it a promise? "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me" (Mark 9:37).

McCullough's line of thinking suggests that taking little kids in arms like Jesus did and thrusting them before today's disciples no longer has shock value because our kids are "cosseted." Better would be to take in arms the very ones we are trying to keep our cosseted children away from—the druggies, the deadbeats, the dropouts, the sex-predators and the perverts. Those who never make it as far as high school graduation. The untouchables. The ones furthest from our radar. We can all think of places in town we don't want our kids to go.

But the point that Jesus is making—HIS big motivator—is that whoever does not welcome the ones that we dismiss as beneath us does not welcome him, the Christ. And whoever does not welcome him, the Christ, does not welcome God, the very one who sent him. That too is a promise—a threatening one. And that is our greater eternal problem. A threat greater than death, because it is "magnified" by the "sting" of God's judgment and rejection. It's one thing to die as a beloved and welcomed child of God. It is quite another to die as a God-forsaken one.

Prognosis: Steps Five & Six

McCullough has no “Step Four” (the eternal solution). But, Jesus does. And we will come back to Jesus at the end of McCullough’s speech, because McCullough’s own conclusion “necessitates” it. And isn’t that the whole point of any crossing—to necessitate the crucified Christ? The very element Jesus found so crucial in all of his own “passion predictions.”

McCullough’s “Step Five” (the internal solution) takes us to “faith” language and the effect that “faith” has on our behavior—precisely the same maneuver Crossers do in their “Step Fives.” And it is easy to take his secular ‘gospel imperatives’ and turn them into Christo-centric, gospel-centered ones.

“As you commence, then, and before you scatter to the winds, I urge you to do whatever you do for no reason other than you love it and believe in its importance.”

McCullough never says what “it” is. But in the Crossings Community we see “it” as “him,” the “Son of Man,” the ultimate “human one,” Christ, crucified and raised. And we see the “scattering to the winds” as Pentecost, driven, guided, and propelled by the Holy Gust—the third person of the Trinity.

McCullough continues,

“Resist the easy comforts of complacency, the specious glitter of materialism, the narcotic paralysis of self-satisfaction. Be worthy of your advantages. And read... read all the time... read as a matter of principle, as a matter of self-respect.”

Crossers say that too! “Read, read, read!” But we add both a “hermeneutic” and a “subject” to that imperative. Read how? Read through the “lens” of Jesus’/Paul’s/Luther’s Law/Gospel

hermeneutic. Read using Crossings' six-step diagnosis/prognosis approach, just as we are doing now.

Read what? Read both the Word & the world. Read both simultaneously, crossing the two together. The beauty of the Law/Gospel hermeneutic is that it is a way of reading everything. Not just Scripture. And not just words printed on a page or on a Nook, Kindle, iPad, iPhone, or whatever other intelligent device makes you look smart while being mobile. The Law/Gospel hermeneutic is also a way of reading the world—our actions, culture, behavior, rationales, and motives. Everything. The entire package.

More “Step Five”:

“Develop and protect a moral sensibility and demonstrate the character to apply it. Dream big. Work hard. Think for yourself. Love everything you love, everyone you love, with all your might.” “The fulfilling life, the distinctive life, the relevant life, is an achievement, not something that will fall into your lap because you’re a nice person or mommy ordered it from the caterer.” “You’ll note the founding fathers took pains to secure your inalienable right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness—quite an active verb[sic], “pursuit”—which leaves, I should think, little time for lying around watching parrots rollerskate on YouTube.” “Don’t wait for inspiration or passion to find you. Get up, get out, explore, find it yourself, and grab hold with both hands.”

Notice how McCullough Jr. has to work into his address the subject matter of his father—the Pulitzer Prize-winner—the author of *John Adams and 1776*, who, in turn, as a notable American historian has to work the “founding fathers” into his publishing career. Here “has to” means more of a personal compulsion than a divine necessity. It is an accolade to his dad

and to our “founding fathers” for their notable achievements. It is worship. Praise.

This is the very opposite of what McCullough was dissing and dismissing when he lamented the dumbing down of America—praise without achievement. Here with the founding fathers are the accolades that come with true genuine achievement: the pains that other people take to secure our “inalienable right to life, liberty and pursuit of happiness”—both the founding fathers who secured them and his prize-winning father, who, like an evangelist, reminds us of their sacrifice so that we likewise might pursue these “righteous” pursuits.

This is as close as McCullough ever gets to a “Step Four” (the eternal solution)—a sacrifice by someone in the past that is good for us today and forever, and yet, it is not anywhere near to what Crossers have come to know as God’s eternal solution proclaimed in the good news of Jesus Christ. First of all, the scope is so limited—Americans only. Only 4.6% of the current 6.8 billion. Secondly, it’s hard to claim that the founding fathers “secured” an inalienable right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness when the constitutional compromises these fathers constructed, quite intentionally and deliberately, left out huge portions of the population, including slaves. In fact, it could be argued that the greater “pains” in the birthing of our country were borne by those unmentioned slaves and that the pains they bore were precisely what enabled the founding fathers to pursue their fight for freedom—well, freedom for the propertied and merchant class.

Compare this to how Jesus “has to” work his father in, our Founding Father. Already in his first passion prediction, Jesus says, “The Son of man must undergo great suffering, be rejected, be killed, and after three days rise again.” He must become the servant/slave. He must! He must! This is the language of “divine

necessity.” Language that is clearly echoed in Mark 9:30-37. These are the “pains” our Founding Father must take to be faithful to his word of promise and to “secure” life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness because this God does dream big...and does work hard...and does love everything God loves with all God’s might. And that “everything” is “everyone!” Or, so we will claim in the missing Step Four that will be necessitated shortly by McCullough’s Step Six. But first, two more lines from his Step Five.

“Don’t wait for passion to find you. Get up, get out, explore, find it yourself, and grab hold with both hands.”

Interesting choice of words isn’t it? Passion! Crossers say exactly the same thing: “Don’t wait for passion to find you.” But, only because we want to declare that God’s Passion has already found you. All the things that Jesus predicted—“The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands...and will be killed...and in three days will rise again”—has already happened! It is mission accomplished. A firm achievement logged not only in the annals of history but also in God’s Book of Life. Work completed. Once and for all. A work that removes the “sting” of God’s judgment and rejection from death. And, thus, its great fearfulness.

And now the only thing for us to do is to get up, get out, and explore “the promise” it brings to our own daily lives. That’s what we grab on to with “both hands.” We grab on to “the promise” of Christ’s passion. Because...well, because any other passion will one day fade and let us down. And this “grabbing on” is precisely what faith is. Faith is grabbing on to the promise of Christ’s passion with both hands. Exploring it and living it. It is what Jesus was doing when he was holding class outdoors along the way with those first disciples: trying to get

them to let go of the 'law' of God/Moses/legislatures/school systems/nature, survival of the fittest, and grab on with both hands to the 'promise' of his passion.

Which brings us at last to McCullough's "Step Six" (the external solution).

"None of this...should be interpreted as license for self-indulgence." "Exercise free will and creative independent thought not for the satisfactions they will bring you, but for the good they will do others, the rest of the 6.8 billion—and those who will follow them. And then you too will discover the great and curious truth of the human experience is that selflessness is the best thing you can do for yourself. The sweetest joys of life, then, come only with the recognition that you're not special."Because everyone is."

I am stunned! I am shocked. McCullough's last line—his bottom line—is even more startling than his first line. Given the vast "empirical evidence" he has cited above, how in the world can he claim that "Everyone is special"? This bodacious claim just hangs there—like a thought frozen in midair—totally ungrounded and unsupported.

What's the Basis for this Claim?

Were I an English teacher and saw this in a student's paper, I would draw a big red circle around this last line and write in the margin, "What's the basis of this claim? What's the rationale? What is the support for your final conclusion?"

Certainly it is not logic. McCullough already said what logic says: "If everybody is special then no one is."

It is not the English. Nothing in Webster or the Oxford English

Dictionary suggests that “special” can ever be used as a universal term.

It is not biological science. There, as McCullough said, Darwinian competition is the norm. The law of nature takes over. Survival of the fittest. And many are unfit.

It is not our experience. There are far too many unnamed, invisible, unaccomplished people who simply are not on our radar. The very point that Jesus was making when he first took a little child in arm.

It is not TV–Survivor, American Idol, The Apprentice, all the other spin-offs. There only the fittest stay and anything less goes. It is Survivor not ‘survivors.’ American Idol not ‘idols.’ The Apprentice not ‘apprentices.’ Nor is it the Nielsen Ratings. This stupid stuff is on and all the intelligent shows I like get canned because they are not fit enough for the networks’ target audience—those much younger than myself.

It is not history. Well, at least, the history that we read in high school textbooks. For by and large that history is written by the winners, not the losers.

Maybe it is kindness and compassion. But, if so, then it is a bit ingenuous, condescending, and a denial of reality.

In the academic world, “everyone is special” is a common mantra that drives and funds a whole host of special-ed and gifted programs. And yet, every school is painfully aware that there are too many needy kids it cannot reach because of issues that sadly are too widespread and common. Schools cannot afford to design and offer a special-ed program for “everyone,” as special as they may be. And “dream big” programming often gets cut first when the chips are down. Even in the most affluent of times, choices must be made or the taxpayers will revolt. Again, a

natural selection of who is “special” and who is not by economic realities.

Astrophysicists tell us that it is getting extremely difficult to differentiate the human species (specialness) from any other life form. That we are dust just like all other matter in the cosmos: we are star dust and to dust we shall return. That there is an anti-matter world out there—an exact mirror image of our own (only to them we are the anti-matter). That the universe is so big and expansive, it has so many galaxies and universes, that even with all the infinite possibilities for random happenings it is still almost a mathematical certainty that there is another world quite similar to ours. That even “something coming from nothing” (creation ex nihil) is nothing special, because it happens on its own all the time. And so, a personal God intervening in this world of ours is not necessary or needed (see Lawrence M. Krauss, *A Universe from Nothing*).

The Missing, but Necessary, Step Four

Maybe a “personal God” is not necessary to create the world as science observes it, but it sure seems we could use one to redeem it. It is the same old problem: how do you make everyone special without giving anyone a big head over it, a big head full of the “narcotic paralysis of self-satisfaction”?

I don’t know McCullough’s religious affiliation or what role Christianity might play in his life. Due to the public school venue, he might have left some Christian claims unsaid although he may hold them personally. But whether he knows it or not, the very grounding for which his conclusion begs is provided by Jesus in Mark 9:30-37 in what Crossers have come to know and love as their matter of first importance: “Step Four”—God’s eternal solution.

Here heaven's Lord, exercising his own free will, humbles himself. He becomes what anyone of the human species who wants to be "first" (special) in the kingdom of God needs to be: "the last of all" and "servant of all." He hangs with the last, the least, the little and the lost. He even hangs with people who think they are more special than they really are, who think they are the greatest, and who get a big head about it. He does it for all 6.8 billion who are in the world today...and for all who came before or who will ever follow after. He welcomes them into his own outstretched arms to the point that he gets his arms stretched out and crucified for it. Jesus does the very thing that McCullough exhorts of his own Wellesley students, an act of selflessness, the ultimate act of selflessness, not because he is smart and knows that in the end it is in his own best self-interest, but because God's grace and mercy demand it. Jesus must undergo great suffering, be rejected, killed. He must...he must. For no other reason than Jesus, on his Founding Father's behalf, loves us and believes in our importance.

And yet, there is still more. Something which McCullough (or anyone else) never expected or called for, but which God's mercy did. For this selfless act, God raises Jesus from the dead and gives him the name that is above all others: the name of "Lord"—God's own name. Jesus is the ultimate "Special One" (Philippians 2). To him alone belongs both the "achievement" and the "accolade" of being "special" as in the "new song" of Revelation 5. He alone is worthy of our praise and accolades: "Worthy is Christ, the Lamb who was slain, whose blood set us free to be people of God. Power, riches, wisdom, and strength, and honor, blessing, and glory are his."

And yet, by his grace everything that makes him "special" does begin to rub off on those he "hangs with."

Jesus' words in Mark 9 set up two potent syllogisms.

Syllogism One:

Major premise – Crucified people who are raised from the dead are very special.

Minor premise – The crucified Jesus was raised from the dead.

Conclusion – Jesus is VERY SPECIAL!”

Syllogism Two:

Major premise – Those who are served are more special than the ones who serve.

Minor premise – Jesus, God’s ultimate VIP, became the least of all and servant of all.

Conclusion – All ARE special.

For Christians, the claim “Everyone is special” is grounded in the ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. To Christians, the law (and its exhortation to achieve...achieve...achieve...or else you will become extinct) is the “spouse” we’re not crazy about because it all too often leads to pride or despair. We would rather be “married” to Jesus and to his work and to his accomplishments, for it is what he has done for us that makes everyone “special,” in a way that gives comfort and encouragement to those who are so painfully and fearfully aware that they are not.

And note each phase of his life is necessary for this claim to be true, really true—his ministry, his death, and his resurrection. And no one can ever get a big head about it, because this is Christ’s achievement not our own. And yet, when we cling to his promises in faith, this very achievement does become “our own.” And the fulfilling life, the distinctive life, the relevant life does fall into our laps, not because we are a nice person or mommy ordered it from the caterer, but because it is God’s gift in Christ given to those who are open and receptive to the call, gathering, enlightenment and saint-ifying of his Holy Spirit. The Holy Gust that comes as part of this

great gift as mentioned in Step Five.

This is the very sequence the original Lutheran confessors set up in the Augsburg Confession, Articles I to VI:

There is a God (AC I)

and we're not it (AC II).

What we are not Jesus is (AC III).

What Jesus is we become by grace through faith for Christ's sake (AC IV),

by the means of the Spirit working in gospel word and sacraments (AC V),

so that we might bear God's "good fruit" in the world (AC VI).

Strikingly, Jesus never calls his disciples "special," a word of praise, an accolade. Instead, when Jesus starts out a sentence aimed at his disciples "You are...", he finishes it with words like "salt," "light," "witnesses," "friends," "branches." "You are the salt of the world." "You are the light of the world." "You are witnesses of these things." "I am the vine, you are the branches." "You are my friends." "Let your light so shine before others that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven."

Rather than give them accolades that can lead to big heads, swollen egos, and fierce Darwinian competition, Jesus gives his disciples a job to do and a mission to share that is the very opposite of paralysis and self-satisfaction.

It is a mission of welcome in Christ's name, especially towards those whom the world would ignore or abandon—only to discover that in those whom we welcome, we welcome Christ, the very Christ who welcomes us. And in welcoming him, we welcome the God who sent him.

Maybe the astrophysicists cannot find the center of the universe, but Christians have one. It is Christ, humbled and exalted, crucified and raised. In him we live and move and have our being. It is his extraordinary life that is our sweetest joy. It is from him that we discover the great and curious truth of the human experience that trusting in his promises is the best thing we can ever do for ourselves. And we do that not just for our sake, but also for the sake of the rest of the 6.8 billion who share this planet with us—and those who will follow them.

When it comes to being “special,” Jesus is. Jesus is special. And so are all those with whom Jesus hangs—which, by his extraordinary love and grace, just happens to be everyone.

Paul Jaster, Pastor
Emmanuel Lutheran Church
Elyria, OH 44035
10/8/2012

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.

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#749 Manichean America

Colleagues,

Today's offering might best be described as an op-ed piece. It comes to you from Dr. Michael Hoy, pastor of First Evangelical Lutheran Church (ELCA) in Decatur, Illinois, former editor of the Crossings newsletter, and steward of Bob Bertram's professional papers. We heard from Mike earlier this year in [ThTheol 729](#).

For this present contribution, readers outside the U.S. will need a bit of background. Mike is addressing an act of civil disobedience that took place this past Sunday in numerous churches around the country. U.S. tax law forbids churches and other entities that enjoy tax-exempt status from "engaging in electoral politics" ([Time Magazine](#)). Over the past five years a small though growing number of pastors, almost all of them from the conservative American evangelical tradition, have been flouting this law in a deliberate and public way, the aim being to provoke government sanctions and the lawsuits that would follow, the end result of which might be a court ruling that would overturn the law—or so it's hoped.

I'm pretty sure that Mike's cultural sympathies and political leanings are at significant odds with those of these pastors. Were he a standard left-of-center ELCA pastor and nothing more, one might dismiss his response to them as a mere venting of the spleen. As it happens, Mike is also a theologian of the kind that the thoughtful dare not dismiss but do well to listen to with care. That's why we're very glad to pass his piece along, knowing that you'll learn from it. Could be that those of you in the U.S. who are sick to death of the current campaign and the flood of cant our land is drowning in will also find it refreshing.

Note as you read, by the way, how Mike is tackling a beast that has gnawed and clawed at the Church since its earliest years. A relentless critter, it keeps trying to subvert Christ's reign by tearing Christ's servants apart over lesser old-age loyalties. Chris Repp pointed to this last week in his analysis of the Donatist controversy. This week Mike lifts high the cross and rams it in the beast's eye.

Peace and Joy,
Jerry Burce, for the editorial team.

P.S. A reminder to all that we welcome submissions to Thursday Theology. Email them to cabraun98ATaolD0Tcom or jburceATattD0Tnet.

On a Sunday when the common lectionary for many mainline congregations in America offered the story of God's desire for unity over the hard-heartedness of separation and divorce, hundreds of pastors in congregations of more fundamentalist leanings deliberately chose to offer a message of separation and divorce over a message of unity.

Such was the case on October 7, 2012. For it was on this Sunday that 1,477 pastors, under their own idolatrously-named Pulpit Freedom Sunday, abused their office as preachers as well as their pulpits in order to do everything *but* offer a message of freedom. The only freedom we have to preach from the pulpit is what St. Paul called the preaching of the cross: "We proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to the Jews and foolishness to the Gentiles, but to those who are called, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God." (1 Corinthians 1:23-24).

The message of these 1,477 was not about Christ crucified. It was about who their congregations should vote for on Election

Day, November 6, 2012; and they were specific and candid and self-righteous in saying that their congregations must vote for one candidate and not another. In other words, they lowered and abased their pulpits in the worst possible form of apostasy—not encouraging the gospel of Jesus the Christ who died for all people so that all might have life, but instead witnessing to a legalistic message that betrays only our own limited and shallow, Pharisaical hardness of heart.

These are politically divided times. One of the more influential secular and objective analyses I have read of late is the work of Jonathan Haidt, *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People are Divided by Politics and Religion* (2012). Haidt is a social psychologist at the University of Virginia. His work explores in great depth the genetic and scientific roots of moral values that have come to inform people and lead them down the path he laments: how it is that “morality binds and blinds” us into selfish and groupish (often hegemonic) behavior. Interestingly, toward the end of his analysis, in a section entitled “Toward More Civil Politics,” he raises the early-church heresy of Manichaeism—the belief that “the visible world is the battleground between the forces of light (absolute goodness) and the forces of darkness (absolute evil). Human beings are the frontline in the battle; we contain both good and evil, and we each must pick one side and fight for it” (309).

I have spoken on the subject of Manichaeism long before I ever encountered Haidt’s book. Initially, for me, the use of the term became particularly apropos for America as a whole when we seemed to learn all the wrong lessons after 9/11. Instead of seeing this tragic episode of our collective life together as an occasion for repentance and greater embrace for the cause of peace, we resorted to an older image of imperialistic strategy to assert our own good as a nation in contrast with the world’s supposed evil—as if evil were something “out there” and not deep

within ourselves.

But now, in this present decade, the turn of this Manichaeism has taken a different and more sinister twist. The groups of good and the evil are *among us* in America, where one's party identification spells which side we are on; and we become increasingly obsessed with supporting only one side in opposition to another. In my estimation, this obsession has found much too much expression, sometimes violently, in the rhetoric of our time.

Haidt's solution for Manichaeism—a call for more open social interaction with those who do not share our own hegemonic, groupish views—is a stretch, though I surely have no objection to that suggested strategy as well. But as a theological ethicist and pastor, and even occasionally a called-upon teacher of preaching (homiletics), I am inclined to offer another, more probing, analysis and solution. What if the real problem is so deep that we cannot solve it, no matter how hard we try? What if the problem is such that all we can do is confess it, as for example in the public confession of the church catholic and universal: “Merciful God, we confess that we are captive to sin and cannot free ourselves. We have sinned against you in thought, word, and deed, by what we have done and by what we have left undone. We have not loved you with our whole heart; we have not loved our neighbors as ourselves. For the sake of your Son, Jesus Christ, have mercy on us. Forgive us, renew us, and lead us, so that we may delight in your will and walk in your ways, to the glory of your holy name.”

In other words, what if the problem is that we all suffer from a hardness of heart that makes us pretend we are right while others are wrong, when in truth our bitter thirst for rightness over another's wrongness is already a sign that we are broken? For this the only solution is to hear the cry of the crucified

One who shares in our brokenness, in all cries of brokenness—cries that we never lose heart or ears for, cries among *all* people both here and abroad, most especially the “least of these,” cries of a creation so damaged by our own desire for profit, and indeed all cries before the God we have most offended—in order to hear also in his cry a plea for our own very broken souls to find the unity that God so desires for us all.

I do not dismiss the importance of our need and right to vote—something that should never be taken away and from which no one should be discouraged. And I underscore our privilege and duty to make choices that will truly demonstrate the greater good for all people and God’s creation. But there is more at stake in Manichean America than who gets elected to office. Our own spirits need healing from the brokenness of these times—healing which comes from the One who made it his business to elect us all in the unity of his love.

The Reverend Dr. Michael Hoy
Pastor, First Lutheran Church

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#748 The Cultural Roots of Schism (Part 1)

Colleagues,

Three Sundays from now the churches some of us lead or attend will celebrate the Reformation. I assume this habit is peculiar to Lutherans. The date we pick for it, after all, is pegged to the anniversary of Luther's posting of the 95 Theses on October 31, 1517. I grew up thinking and feeling about this event the way American children once did about Paul Revere's ride. It stirred my little store of Lutheran blood. I don't suppose it ever had the same effect on little Calvinists, or still less on Anabaptists. I imagine little Anglicans responding to it with, at best, a polite yawn. Little Catholics would have ground their teeth, if indeed they even knew the story. It strikes me these days that even little Lutherans have lost any sense of thrill over it.

I'll continue nonetheless this Reformation Sunday to invite some serious joy and thanksgiving from the people I preach to for the mighty deeds of God accomplished through the crusty, brilliant likes of Martin Luther and his fellow confessors of the Gospel. Did a gust of Holy Air, at once fresh and tumultuous, sweep through Europe in those days, reviving the Church and leaving treasures behind that we can revel in today? That strikes me still as undeniable. And if no one else in the Church at large has the wits to thank the Lord for this, then let Lutherans keep doing it for them. Thus do we serve the Body of Christ.

That said, it strikes me too that we will serve the Body better and praise God more faithfully if we bear in mind the profound ambiguities that shaped those sixteenth-century events. Simul iustus et peccator—at once saint and sinner—applied as much to

Luther, Melanchthon, and the folks who kept them employed and alive as it does to anybody. Did they operate with mixed motives? Of course. Was Christ their only master? Hardly, however much they may have wanted him to be. The hagiographies I read as a Lutheran boy left me thinking that the free course of the Gospel was the chief concern of Frederick the Wise. To think that still would be delusional in the extreme. Frederick was a politician, for crying out loud; and his subjects were as shaped and bound as he was by the social and cultural imperatives of their day. That includes his theologians, to say nothing of their opponents.

Some months ago Chris Repp, pastor of Epiphany Lutheran Church in Carbondale, Illinois, sent us a paper he had written about the underlying and often determinative role that cultural commitments tend to play in serious church conflict. We think it's worth reading as a springboard for honest reflection on our own strands of church history and the locations, both theological and ecclesial, that they've brought us to. Such reflection will invite humility, if nothing else. It may also serve to magnify our praise of the God who alone has the power to craft silk purses from sows' ears. With him "all things are possible," as we'll be reminded this coming Sunday.

Chris, who holds a PhD in Russian church history, will walk us through two case studies of grievous conflict, arguing that each was shaped as much or more by competing cultural loyalties as by theological disagreement. He'll talk first about the Donatist controversy of the late third and early fourth centuries. Then he'll introduce us to the Old Believers' schism in the Russian church of the 17th century. We'll send you this in two parts, interleaved with a couple of other contributions that serve in their own way to underscore Chris's thesis. In other words, look for Part Two in three weeks.

Chris's paper, by the way, was originally presented in August, 2011, at St. Augustine's House, a Lutheran monastery in Oxford, Michigan. Hence his introductory comments.

Peace and Joy,
Jerry Burce, for the editorial team.

“Dividing The Kingdom: Case Studies in the History of Church Conflict”

by Arthur C. Repp

I am thankful to Father John Cochran for giving me the opportunity to get my scholarly feet wet again by inviting me to give this lecture. It was during my four-year assignment with the ELCA's Division for Global Mission (as it was then) as an instructor of Church History and Systematic Theology at the seminary of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Russian and Other States, that Father Cochran and I first crossed paths. Since returning from that assignment, and after unsuccessfully searching for an academic position, I have devoted my attention to parish ministry and family life in Carbondale, Illinois. And so I was intrigued, but somewhat hesitant, when Father John approached me in May with the idea of presenting something on the history of conflict in the church as a way of putting recent troubles among Lutherans in perspective. I am in no way an expert on the material I present to you this morning, and my scholarly chops are a little rusty, if that's not a mixed metaphor. And besides that, when he first called me back in May I was preparing for a month of family travel in my wife's native England, during which I would have no time to read or write. But Father John is very persuasive. And I probably owe him for putting me up during a trip to Pittsburgh in November of 2002 for a conference of Russian historians, the last time I gave a

scholarly paper of any length. And so I stand before you with some trepidation, not as an authority, but as a fellow traveler (the Russian word for that is "sputnik,") a companion on a limited tour of two episodes in Church history that I think are instructive about the nature of church conflict in general. My conclusions will only be tentative, and I invite your own thoughts based upon what you hear, and upon what you perhaps know that I don't.

During the time I was teaching church history in Russia, and in subsequent survey courses presented to the Southern Illinois Learning In Retirement organization, I have increasingly come to believe that cultural differences and power politics lie at the root of most, if not all, church conflict. At the same time, I also suspect that culture and politics have an effect on the theology a given group finds compelling. It should be no surprise, for example, that the emphasis on freedom (from sin, death, the law) in early Christianity should have appealed to those who were least free in the ancient world-slaves and the lower classes of Roman society. It should not overly concern us that this is so. Christianity, after all, is an incarnational religion, which takes seriously the real lives of real people. At the same time, it is not bound by any particular culture or political arrangement, as the first significant conflict among Christians, concerning the proper way to incorporate Gentiles in the church, revealed.

The two case studies I will discuss this morning come from very different periods in the history of the church, one from late antiquity and the other from the cusp of the modern age. I had originally intended to speak about a third episode, a chapter in the history of the schism between the Eastern and Western churches, but I got so wrapped up in the other two that I ran out of time.

DONATISM

I begin with the more famous of these two episodes, and not chiefly because it figured prominently in the career of the patron saint of this institution. The broad outlines of the Donatist controversy are well known to anyone who has a passing familiarity with the history of the ancient church. It centered on the question of whether or not the personal character and behavior of the church's clergy affected the validity of the sacraments they performed. The fundamental error of the Donatists lies in the assertion that a baptism or ordination performed by an unfaithful priest or bishop made those sacraments invalid. The orthodox principle, articulated by St. Augustine almost a century after the controversy erupted, was that a sacrament's validity cannot depend upon the moral virtue of the one performing it. To believe otherwise would force one to live in constant doubt. It was the promise of God in the sacrament, so said the church, rather than in the personal character of priests and bishops, in which one was to trust.

Donatism had its origins in the last of the major episodes of persecution of Christians by the Roman State, the so-called Great Persecution under the emperor Diocletian at the beginning of the fourth century. Contrary to popular imagination, active official Roman persecution of Christians was only sporadic. In the quarter millennium between Nero's scapegoating of Christians for the burning of Rome and the Edict of Milan, which made toleration of Christianity official throughout the empire, sustained, official episodes of persecution were rare. Before the middle of the third century, such episodes were confined to specific provinces. A case in point is that of Bithynia-Pontus under the governorship of Pliny the Younger at the beginning of the second century, which established a sort of "don't ask, don't tell" policy towards Christians. This localized character of anti-Christian persecution changed in 249 with the first

empire-wide persecution (249-50) under Decius, and was followed less than a decade later by another general persecution (257-60) under Valerian. [1]

It was in the aftermath of these persecutions that the church faced a particular problem: what to do with those who had lapsed, those who—to one degree or another—had succumbed to the demand that they renounce Christianity and sacrifice to the traditional Roman gods under the threat of execution. During the first general persecution under Decius, all subjects of Rome were required to obtain a legal document certifying that they had performed the sacrifices in the presence of a Roman official. Many Christians defied the imperial edict and were martyred. Others performed the sacrifices and were spared, while many others were able to obtain the needed document without actually performing the sacrifices by bribing the officials in charge. After the Decian persecution in 249-50, many churches readmitted the lapsed immediately, while others allowed no possibility for reinstatement. A middle position emerged in the person of Cyprian, bishop of Carthage, where the persecution had been particularly severe. Cyprian advocated for the restoration of the lapsed, but only after a period of penance. In a dispute that foreshadowed the Donatist schism of the following century, Cyprian together with other African bishops also insisted upon the rebaptism of the lapsed, and anyone who had been baptized by a lapsed bishop, on the grounds that they had separated themselves from the church, and only the church could perform legitimate baptism. This position was opposed by Pope Stephen, who insisted that baptism administered by lapsed bishops was legitimate by virtue of their office, and was not invalidated by their moral failures. Although Cyprian and Stephen never resolved this dispute, Cyprian's martyrdom in the next persecution under Valerian meant that it did not rise to the level of a schism within the church. This unresolved issue

would, however, be a factor in the Donatist schism of the next and following centuries.

Before proceeding to the events that led to the Donatist schism, it is helpful first to remember the context in which the schism developed. I will take a moment, therefore, to briefly survey the Roman occupation and settlement of the Diocese of Africa, as the area was known by the time of Constantine—the area of North Africa encompassing modern Algeria, Tunisia, and the western half of Libya.

In the third and second centuries BCE, the expanding Roman Empire fought the three Punic Wars with the Empire of Carthage for control of the western Mediterranean Sea. In the end, the city of Carthage and its surrounding territory, encompassing the northern half of modern Tunisia, was added to the Roman Empire as the province of Africa, later called Africa Proconsularis, or Proconsular Africa, in the middle of the first century BCE. The city of Carthage, which had been utterly destroyed at the end of the Third Punic War, was rebuilt by Julius Caesar. The surrounding territory of Proconsular Africa was rich in agricultural land suited for the growing of grain, and for that reason it was the part of Africa that was most quickly and most intensively settled with Roman cities. The province soon became a key source of food for the empire, exporting as much as two-thirds of its annual wheat crop across the Mediterranean. [2] By the middle of the first century CE, Carthage had become the second-largest city in the western half of the empire. But in spite of this growth in population and wealth, the province was not as Romanized as might be expected. As the dean of Donatist studies, W.H.C. Frend notes, “even in cities, Roman culture was more a façade than reality.” Roman gods replaced native ones in name only, and Punic remained the official language for at least the first three centuries of Roman rule. [3]

Adjacent to Proconsular Africa was the kingdom of Numidia, which corresponds roughly to northeastern Algeria and southern Tunisia. Numidia was subdued by Rome at the same time that Proconsular Africa was established (second century BCE), but it was not settled with Roman cities to the extent Proconsular Africa was. The region had long been contested by nomadic peoples and agricultural settlements, with the balance tipping to favor the latter under Roman rule. The high plains of Numidia were not as fertile as the neighboring province to the east, and were more suited for growing olive trees than grain. Olive oil was therefore its chief agricultural export. [4] Until the empire-wide economic crisis of the mid third century, Proconsular Africa was much more economically productive than Numidia, but after that time the more self-sufficient Numidian province began to export more of its produce. But because of its geographic location and the lack of natural seaports, its goods had to pass through Proconsular Africa, and Roman middlemen, in order to make it to the Roman market. This cut into the profits of the Numidians and was the source of some resentment. [5]

There was therefore a cultural and economic divide between the two provinces, and between the urban elites and the lower classes within Proconsular Africa. As Frend has suggested, "the clue to Donatism may be found in a comparative study of economic and social conditions in [the provinces of Numidia and Proconsular Africa], and of the popular religion which flourished there." [6]

The persecution under Diocletian, which led to the Donatist schism, began unofficially with a purge of Christians from the Roman army in the last decade of the second century. The official persecution followed in 303 with an edict revoking the legal rights of Christians and ordering the confiscation of their property and scriptures. Later edicts required universal public sacrifice, similar to the persecutions in the middle of

the previous century. Diocletian had divided the empire into four territories, ruled by two co-emperors who went by the title "Augustus" and two subordinates with the title "Caesar." The western-most quarter of the empire, present-day Britain and France, was ruled by Constantine. Perhaps influenced by his own mother's embrace of Christianity, Constantine was unenthusiastic about the persecution, enforcing only its original edict, which he reversed within three years. In Italy, Spain and western North Africa, however, the persecution was strictly enforced. In Africa, the persecution ended in early 305, although confiscated property was not yet returned as it was in Constantine's territories.

As with the persecutions of the second century, the question of what to do with those who had lapsed had to be faced by the church in the wake of the Great Persecution. And as in the previous persecutions, those who had lapsed had done so in different degrees. Worst of all were those who publicly sacrificed to the Roman gods. These were known as *thurificates* (a word related to incense, as *Thurible* and *thurifer*.) Others turned over their Bibles, service books, and church vessels. They were known as *traditores* (from the same root as *tradition*, that which is "given over," but also "traitor," one who betrays.) Some, however, turned over heretical books claiming that they were the church's scriptures to Roman officials who were unable to make such fine distinctions. These latter *lapsi* were similar to those in the second century persecutions who had obtained certificates of sacrifice without actually having sacrificed. Also as in the second century, the attitude toward those who had lapsed varied from place to place. In the North African context, as a general rule the more Romanized areas were generally more lenient in restoring them to the church, while in the more indigenous areas the attitude tended to be more harsh. But this generalization is complicated, as we shall see. One

important factor in the differing attitudes was the nature of the persecution itself in the respective provinces, and between the social classes in the cities. As Frend observed, "persecution in the cities, among the upper classes, took on a more tactful character than in the countryside" where the persecution was generally more bloody. [7] This disparity naturally fostered or exacerbated resentment on the part of those who had endured harsher treatment. (Frend makes a comparison [p.10] to the collaborators and members of the resistance after World War II.)

The complicating incident that directly precipitated the Donatist schism was the consecration of a new bishop of Carthage in or around 311. The lower, indigenous classes of Christians in the city favored one candidate, Majorinus, while the Christians belonging to the Romanized ruling class favored another, Caecilian, and apparently rushed through the election and consecration before the Numidian bishops could arrive to bolster the ranks of their opponents. The opponents, however, refused to accept Caecilian as bishop on the grounds that one of the three bishops who participated in his consecration had been a traditore in the Great Persecution, thus rendering the consecration invalid. When the Numidian bishops arrived in Carthage, they consecrated Majorinus as a rival bishop, beginning the schism. Majorinus, however, soon died, and it was his successor, Donatus of Casae Nigrae, who gave his name to the movement.

As I have already suggested, the social and economic disparity between the rival groups seems to have played a decisive role in this emerging conflict. Christian theology seems to have been of secondary importance. As Frend noted, "except for the question of the validity of sacraments dispensed by non-orthodox clerics, no serious theological difference separated [the Donatists] and the Catholics." [8]

This is borne out by the discrepancy between the rhetoric of the Donatists and the back-stories of their own leaders. A particularly instructive case is that of the sub-deacon Silvanus in the Numidian city of Cirta. When the previous bishop died during the persecution in 304, the more fanatical elements within the church, who were not inclined to wait until the persecution was over, put forth Silvanus to be the next bishop. What is interesting about their choice is that Silvanus had only a year and a half earlier played a part in handing over the church's silver chalices to the Roman authorities, and this was well known. He was also known subsequently to have robbed Roman temples, which may have redeemed him in the eyes of his supporters. The choice of Silvanus was opposed by the Roman citizen class of the church, who preferred that a citizen become bishop, but at least someone who had not been a traditor. Their opposition was overcome, however, when they were locked up in the tomb of the martyrs, and Silvanus was acclaimed by the crowd as the new bishop. Frend says the following about the significance of this incident:

"Here was a paradoxical situation. A self-confessed traditor had been chosen by fanatically Christian crowds as their bishop. Later, these same crowds would support Silvanus in making charges of traditio against Caecilian, the elected bishop of Carthage, thus forming the Donatist schism. There is no rational explanation for this...." [9]

This was not yet the end of the story. To become bishop, Silvanus still needed to be consecrated, and for that purpose twelve Numidian bishops travelled to Cirta. For the consecration to be valid it was also necessary that the bishops be in good standing, and upon examination, four of the twelve confessed to being traditores. They insisted, however, that as bishops their transgressions were between them and God alone, and at least one of them threatened schism if the matter was pressed. The

consecration went ahead with all twelve bishops participating. At this early date, the Numidians were not prepared to divide the church over this issue.

And yet by 311, when it came to a bishop not of their liking in the neighboring province, a bishop belonging to the ruling class and citizenship of their hated oppressors, schism seemed warranted. In their minds, however, it was not they who were schismatic. They justified themselves by insisting that the ones who had betrayed the church by handing over its sacred scriptures and vessels, not to mention those who had sacrificed to the Roman gods, had also by their betrayal cut themselves off from the church. Using the logic of Cyprian from the previous century, the sacraments and the scriptures belonged to the church. Only the church had the right to interpret scripture, and only the church could administer the sacraments. If a bishop had cut himself off from the church during the persecutions, it stood to reason that the sacraments he administered, most significantly ordination and baptism, were invalid. That made the priests he ordained, and the baptisms they in turn performed, equally invalid. It did not take long for the Donatist to regard as outside of the true church not only the priests and laity directly affected by these illegitimate sacraments but also anyone who associated with them and received them as fellow Christians. A key scriptural passage used by the Donatists to support their position was Jesus' saying about the vine and its branches in John 15. Those who had betrayed the faith were the fruitless branches that had to be cut off of the vine. And although Jesus says that it is his Father who is the vinedresser, the Donatists considered themselves his instruments.

The response by the supporters of Caecilian was first to deny that any of the bishops involved in his consecration had been traditores, but then to insist that even if they had been, that

would not invalidate the consecration, for the validity of a rite or sacrament does not depend upon the personal virtue of the one administering it, but upon their divinely bestowed office. The key scriptural passage used by the Catholics was the parable of the wheat and the tares. In contrast to the Donatist presumption to act for God was Jesus' command to let God and his angels sort out the good from the evil. In the early days of the conflict, though, neither side was very interested in convincing its opponents. Both were certain of the rightness of their cause, and both were confident that their position would win over the church at large.

Initially the Donatists appealed to Rome to invalidate Caecilian's consecration and affirm their own bishop. But this occurred in 313 as Constantine was conquering Italy, declaring the official toleration of Christianity, and presenting the Lateran Palace to Pope Miltiades. In spite of the fact that this pope was of Berber (Numidian) origin, the Lateran Council over which he presided supported Caecilian and condemned Donatus for rebaptizing lapsed clergy and causing a schism. [10] (The Donatists, it seems, were the original Anabaptists!) The Donatists appealed to a council held at Arles in the following year, and in 316 directly to the Emperor, both to no avail. The schism persisted, and by the middle of the century the conflict had turned violent, with both Donatists and Catholics raiding and looting each other's churches. [11] By this time it was clear that there would be no reconciliation.

What was it that kept these two groups apart? Why couldn't they remain together in spite of their differences on the matter of the lapsed, as the church of Africa had done in Cyprian's time? The key difference was that in the fourth century Christianity became not only tolerated, but also fashionable. Those who had been members of the church when it had been a persecuted sect had come to regard the secular world as their enemy. Choosing

the church for them had meant abandoning the world. With Constantine that reality changed. Now it was possible to be a member of the church and also a member of the broader society. Donatism, then, may be seen as one of several ways that Christians reacted to this new reality. Another, less drastic reaction was monasticism, separating oneself from the world, if not from the church. But there was also a positive reaction that embraced the new reality as God's will. In this scenario the emperor now became God's agent for spreading the faith. The Donatists' worldview and the emerging Catholic consensus, at least among the leaders of the church, could not have been more divergent.

By the time of Augustine, who found Donatism to be alive and well in the Numidia of his day (Hippo Regis was historically the residence of Numidian kings), the battle lines were drawn and the two sides were deeply entrenched. Although Augustine skillfully articulated the difficulty in the Donatist doctrine of the sacraments from the Catholic perspective, he came upon the scene much too late and with too much bad blood between him and his opponents to engage in any meaningful conversation that would serve to heal the schism. His eventual resort to coercion and his theological justification for it only served to exacerbate the situation.

It has been suggested, rather persuasively in my opinion, by the likes of W.H.C. Frend and the Augustine scholar, Peter Brown, that at the heart of the difference between the two sides lay divergent worldviews inherited from the respective cultures of North Africa and Imperial Rome. In his famous biography of Augustine, Peter Brown sums up the matter nicely:

"[Both the Donatists and the Catholics] were faced by the fundamental problem of the relationship of any group to the society in which it lives. Briefly, the Donatists thought of

themselves as a group which existed to preserve and protect an alternative to the society around them. They felt their identity to be constantly threatened: first by persecution, later, by compromise... The Catholicism of Augustine, by contrast, reflects the attitude of a group confident of its powers to absorb the world without losing its identity. This identity existed independently of the quality of the human agents of the Church: it rested on 'objective' promises of God, working out magnificently in history, and on the 'objective' efficacy of its sacraments. It is a group no longer committed to defend itself against society; but rather, poised, ready to fulfill what it considered its historic mission, to dominate, to absorb, to lead a whole empire." [12]

Endnotes

[1] F. L. Cross and E. A. Livingstone, eds, *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 3rd edition, (Oxford: OUP, 1997), q.v. Persecutions, inter alia.

[2] W.H.C. Frend, *The Donatist Church: A Movement of Protest in Roman North Africa*. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1952), 33.

[3] Frend, 36.

[4] Frend, 46.

[5] Justo L. Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity*, 2nd ed., vol. 1 (New York: HarperCollins, 2010), 177.

[6] Frend, 24.

[7] Frend, 4-5.

[8] Frend, 2-3.

[9] Frend, 12.

[10] Frend, 15.

[11] Maureen A. Tilley, *The Bible in Christian North Africa: The Donatist World*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 74. Tilley's work is a useful account of how Donatist use and interpretation of scripture changed over time as the circumstances and fortunes of the Donatist church changed. In my

opinion, however, it in no way significantly impacts the overall presentations and conclusions of Frend's landmark work, despite what strike me as overblown claims to the contrary made by the author and accepted by at least one reviewer.

[12] Peter R. L. Brown, *Augustine of Hippo, A Biography*. London, 1967, 214.

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#747 A reading of St. Mark, Crossings-style (Part 5)

This week brings the fifth and final installment of my fellow Thursday Theology editor Jerry Burce's reading of the Gospel of Mark, first presented during the pre-conference to the Fourth International Crossings Conference this past January.

As you may recall from the first part of Jerry's presentation ([ThTheol #742](#)), he set out to articulate how it is that this particular Gospel—with its abrupt and disheartening ending, its terse style, its focus on fear, its lack of joy—can possibly be read as good news for us today. In this last part, we get Jerry's compelling answer to that question. He builds his answer

on his central thesis (para. 17 of [ThTheol #742](#)): “When reading Mark, the secret of the kingdom (i.e. of what God is up to for us in Jesus) lies in the hidden recesses of gaps.” Thus we, like disciples listening to Jesus’ parables, are meant to hear Mark from a more informed perspective, drawing on our insiders’ knowledge of the scriptures so that we can truly see and hear—rather than looking without perceiving, or listening without understanding. The first “gap” to which Jerry drew our attention was the allusion to Malachi’s prophecy of Jesus’ temple-based agenda, in the opening verses of Mark 1. In his conclusion, Jerry now focuses on the “gap” at the end of Mark’s Gospel, and on what that gap has to tell us when we read it with disciples’ opened eyes.

Peace and Joy,
Carol Braun, for the editorial team

1. OK, so J. dies. We’ve noticed already how he’s done in by the blind and the deaf. The betrayers: Judas, the Council, Pilate. The spitters, the mockers, both Jew and Gentile. Disciples, of course, still don’t see what’s going on, and their ears are stopped. What J. said on the road did not sink in. What he says in the anointing episode at Bethany, 14:1ff, and repeats in starker detail en route to Gethsemane, doesn’t sink in either. When J. is arrested they melt into the night, except for Peter, who bawls his way into the darkness a couple of hours later.
2. As to what this dying signifies or accomplishes, Mark has little to say. His style is to report. He doesn’t interpret, leaving that for the likes of St. John. Those of us old enough to remember Dragnet might describe Mark as the Sgt. Joe Friday of Gospel writers. “Just the facts, ma’am.” For the meaning of the facts he points us to the

prophetic witness he invited us to wallow in when he kicked things off in chap. 1, the stuff lurking in the gaps of things alluded to but not spelled out in full. Remember, we're disciples. We're meant to know our Scriptures, we're meant to let them chime in with their clarifying information as we go along. A reading of Mark that's true to Mark's intent will do exactly that. And as at the beginning, here too dear Handel is of great help. So when soldiers beat Jesus, or when the nails are pounded through his hands, we should absolutely hear the music in our heads. "He was wounded for our transgression, bruised for our iniquities." And when he agonizes in the garden, the song is "surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows." "I'm so sad I could die," Jesus says to Peter, James, and John. That's 14:34 in a recent translation.

3. As I've mentioned already, Mk. himself is specific about the grief J. bears in the garden. It's the same astonishment, the same amazement, the same baffled not-getting-it that has so troubled others as they've watched him in mysterious action around the sea or on the road. Now it's his turn to be baffled and amazed, *ekthambeisthai*, 14:33. We can suppose he succumbs to this for at least two reasons. On the one hand there's the blindness, the deafness, the doltish unbelief, the outright hostility that has so irked him all along. Now it's rising up in tsunami proportions to sweep him away. How do you wrap your mind around something like that, the astonishing durability of oppositional unbelief, the blindness that won't be healed, no matter what? Coupled with that, 14:36, is the will of the Father for whom all things are possible, who now exercises that will not by withdrawing the cup but instead by insisting that J. drink it down, thus becoming the camel of camels who makes the

first excruciating passage through the eye of the needle. That too is one of those things that's possible for God, as Jesus himself had said, 10:27. Away he'll go to open the needle's eyes so that other camels, rich and poor alike, can follow him when following him is the only option they've got left, either that or perish. By the way, I don't think it at all fanciful to presume that Mark invites us to draw connections like these. To the contrary. It's his *modus operandi* as a good news teller. Drop the hints. Leave it to them to put the two and two together, the seed growing secretly (4:26-27).

4. As in earlier sections, there are places in the Golgotha movement where Mark has J. quoting directly from the Old Testament, in each case drawing our attention to interpretive material. There are three of these quotations. Let's look at them quickly.
5. The first will be unfamiliar to almost all of us. Zechariah 13:7-9, the opening of which J. quotes on the way to Gethsemane, 14:27-7 'Awake, O sword, against my shepherd, against the man who is my associate,' says the Lord of hosts. Strike the shepherd, that the sheep may be scattered; I will turn my hand against the little ones. 8 In the whole land, says the Lord, two-thirds shall be cut off and perish, and one-third shall be left alive. 9 And I will put this third into the fire, refine them as one refines silver, and test them as gold is tested. They will call on my name, and I will answer them. I will say, 'They are my people' and they will say, 'The Lord is our God.' You'll be struck here by the echoes of the material in the Malachi gap of 1:2, silver being refined and gold tested in fire. The aim is to purge impurities and forge a new and faithful relationship between the people and their God. That's why the shepherd is struck and the sheep scattered. That's what the pending crucifixion will

accomplish. And that's as far as Mark will go, even by allusion. He won't pull an Anselm and trot out a theory on the inner workings of the mind and heart of God. Instead, "to you has been the secret of the kingdom of God," 4:11, where secret is *mysterion*, a thing to be preached as reality and accomplished fact, but still, a mystery. I have no clue why God should love me, or Christ be patient with me even unto death. He just is, and does.

6. Daniel 7:13 is the second quotation. It comprises part two of J.' response to the high priest's demand, "Are you the Christ, God's Son?" (14:61). Response Part One is a simple (and astonishing) *Ego eimi*. I AM. That's burning bush talk (Ex. 3). Jesus has used it before, with his disciples (6:50). Response Part Two, i.e. Daniel: "You will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of power," etc. This cinches the case for the prosecution. The fellow has to die. What else can be done with a flesh-and-blood human being who claims an identity that belongs exclusively to the God of Israel, the great I AM? Blasphemy, pending as a growing suspicion ever since 2:6, is now the explicit charge; and given what the high priest et al. are now able to see and hear, conviction is the only possible option, as in the only righteous option. "Hear, O Israel, this God is the one, the only" (Deut. 6:4). How can any responsible person allow a Nazarene bumpkin to worm his way into that one-and-only-ness, however flashy and impressive said bumpkin may be? *Ego eimi* indeed! Proper sin management begins and ends with shutting the blaspheming mouth once and for all. Ergo God's own move in the beginning when he pushes the first blasphemers away from the tree of life (Gen. 3:22-24). So God's high priest has got to dispatch this one to the tree of death, with Moses' stamp of approval on the entire operation. Of course there's no way that anybody at all can begin to guess that for once and

only once a one-and-only non-blasphemer is about to breathe his last. That will become apparent post-Easter, but only to those with eyes that see and ears that hear and hearts that really beat. Meanwhile, chances are that hearing ears will pick up on the possibility that J. is injecting a paradoxical twist into Daniel's word. "You will see the Son of God sitting at the right hand of power when he comes in glory. " Yes, and the first will be last and the last first, the greatest are the least and the least greatest, and is Mark inviting us to understand that when the chief priests et al. see J. hanging on the cross, it's precisely in that moment that they'll be seeing the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of power? John certainly wants us to think that. Is this Mark's way of conveying the same idea, that ultimate power for us is exercised by J. in his death? Jesus, who in his dying secures and underwrites his authority as the Son of God to keep on forgiving sins, or more to the point, perhaps, to keep on being patient with doltish, feckless disciples like you and me? Again, whether Mark intends this is at best a guess. By contrast, his *modus operandi* requires us to use the rest of the material in this "Daniel gap" to shape our understanding of who Jesus is post-Easter. See Dan. 7:14 in particular: To him was given dominion and glory and kingship, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that shall not pass away, and his kingship is one that shall never be destroyed. Or to put that succinctly, Jesus rules.

7. The third great Scriptural quote is from Psalm 22: "My God, why have you forsaken me?" This, in Mark's telling, is J.' sole word from the cross (15:34). Am I the only who hears the widow groaning this same word as she throws her last penny in the temple coffer? Or how about those folks

back in chapter 5, Jairus and the bleeding woman? Aren't they groaning it too? And isn't this word the constant undercurrent in the noise of those frantic, teeming crowds that hem J. in again and again at the seaside, or dog his heels every step of the way to Jerusalem.? I hear Mk. saying, see how J. makes our groan his groan; and I hear Mk. inviting me to add, see how in J. case it's a one-and-only righteous groan, i.e. of someone—the only one—whose eyes and ears have always been open to God and who has never broken faith with him.

8. That noted, when we follow Mark's prompt and turn to the psalm we again find an abundance of material that serves as commentary on the event he reports, in this case the crucifixion:

From you comes my praise in the great congregation; my vows I will pay before those who fear him. 26 The poor shall eat and be satisfied; those who seek him shall praise the Lord. May your hearts live for ever! 27 All the ends of the earth shall remember and turn to the Lord; and all the families of the nations shall worship before him. 8 For dominion belongs to the Lord, and he rules over the nations. 9 To him, indeed, shall all who sleep in the earth bow down; before him shall bow all who go down to the dust, and I shall live for him. 30 Posterity will serve him; future generations will be told about the Lord, 31 and proclaim his deliverance to a people yet unborn, saying that he has done it.

9. By pointing to this, Mark invites at least two conclusions. a) Because of J.' crucifixion, "the poor shall eat and be satisfied; and those who seek the Lord (e.g. poor widow) will praise the Lord." Praise him as opposed to cursing him, as one guesses the widow may have done after tossing in her whole living and then heading

off to die. b) Because of the crucifixion “all the ends of earth will turn to the Lord and all families of the nations worship before him.” In other words, the crucifixion will accomplish the very thing the temple was meant to accomplish—nations streaming to Zion, etc.—but hasn’t, and won’t. Mark doesn’t speculate on how this will happen; but, via the psalm, asserts merely that it will happen, and that the death of J. is of essence in making it happen. Again, this is a Sgt. Joe Friday assertion, just the facts: it will happen; there’s no need, at least for now, to go into the whys and hows.

10. What this Psalm 22 gap information does tell us is that J.’ death will do what God’s temple arrangements aren’t doing—extending mercy, that is, and drawing the nations into God’s praise. And now we also understand why, in the moment of J.’ last breath, the temple curtain is torn in two, from top to bottom, the latter being a hugely important detail. (If from bottom to top, human beings could have done it. God alone can rip the other way, from top to bottom. Thus Harry Wendt of Crossways.) Now J. hangs as the sole source of divine life and mercy flowing into the world and drawing the world to God. Not that J. will do that if he stays dead, or if nobody bothers to talk about him. Which brings us to the last great problem of St. Mark’s Gospel, namely its abrupt ending on an apparent note of abject failure.
11. Mark 16-When the sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices, so that they might go and anoint him. 2And very early on the first day of the week, when the sun had risen, they went to the tomb. 3They had been saying to one another, ‘Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?’ 4When they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had already been rolled back. 5As

they entered the tomb, they saw a young man, dressed in a white robe, sitting on the right side; and they were alarmed. 6But he said to them, 'Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here. Look, there is the place they laid him. 7But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you.' 8So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.

12. So women say nothing to anybody because they're afraid. They're not the only ones. This is standard operating procedure in our own congregations today. Folks will swarm on Easter Sunday. And when they go home they'll say nothing to anybody, because they're afraid. Every pastor has run across parents who say nothing about J. to their own children, refusing even for their sake to underscore that with J. alive, well, and in charge (cf. the Ps. 22 gap material above) they don't need to be afraid. Why the mute parents? Because they're afraid—of “imposing their beliefs” on their children in violation of emerging mores in the wider pluralistic culture, a culture that finds the likes of Tim Tebow to be deeply annoying.
13. I wonder if that isn't the Sitz-im-Leben into which Mark sends this Gospel. First century churches were also comprised of feckless believers who were scared to death of telling it like it is in the post-Easter era when Jesus, the Son of God (1:1), rules, governs, and manages sin via the new forgiveness regime (cf. [ThTheol 742](#), par. 19). Instead of touting and celebrating this they play the games that Peter played at Antioch (thus Paul, Gal. 2:11-12), still pretending that Gentiles should become Jews if they want to be real Christians. And maybe they're feeling ashamed of that too—ashamed, that is, of saying

nothing as they cave to the Zeitgeist. I know I feel ashamed of it. And I'll bet the folks in the congregation I serve are ashamed of it too, or at least the thoughtful ones are.

14. Parenthetically, I'll also bet that Mark was thinking about this back in chapter 8, when J. expands on the first passion prediction with a comment about the Son of Man being ashamed of people who are ashamed of him (8:38).
15. Mark's first point to the churches, whether 1st or 21st century, is that there's nothing new about the fear and shame we feel today as disciples who, saying nothing to anyone, fail to pass along the good news and to exercise our authority to invite repentance, heal the sick (especially the sick at heart) and give the boot to unclean spirits (cf. 6:12-13).
16. His second point is to underscore the ongoing mystery of faith in Jesus and of the unfolding reign of God's new forgiveness regime that this specific faith gives rise to. He achieves that underscoring through the stunned, dumbfounded silence that necessarily follows on 16:8, from which silence arises an embryonic "Aha" and with it a pressing and inescapable question: if those women, minds thoroughly blown, said nothing to anybody because they were afraid, then how is it that you and I are talking about J. today and are able sometimes and in some setting to blab madly away, at least to each other, about God mightily at work for us in his death and resurrection? Or more succinctly, how is it that we celebrate Easter at all?
17. Mark's answer, as in the only possible conclusion we can come to: "It's a miracle!" A miracle, moreover, that only a Jesus-risen-from-the-dead could pull off.
18. Looking back we suddenly see how Mark has been setting us up for this conclusion all along, via the accumulation of

material he's been trotting us through. Those spit miracles, for example—big sigh and double pass, the deaf guy hearing and blabbing, the blind guy seeing at last. Couple that with Mark's witness to J.' dogged, unrelenting determination to stick with dense and timid disciples no matter what, and somehow in some way to bring some confidence and genuine understanding to life in them. This has been the toughest miracle of all for Jesus to effect, and by 16:8 it still hasn't happened. From the ensuing silence comes the message that not even then did Jesus give up. Instead he has used his resurrection to pull off at last what eluded him around the sea and on the road, the miracle of seeing-and-hearing disciples accomplished not in a second pass but in a 222nd pass, for all we know. Else how could anyone have heard what we ourselves have come to believe imperfectly, in our own versions of the incessant flip-flop back and forth between the faith that follows Jesus and the demonic doubt that doesn't (cf. Peter in 8:29-33)?

19. It seems to me that Mark supports this conclusion by hinting strongly at a miracle of faith effected by the risen Jesus—who else could it be?—already on Easter morning. The hint appears in the person of the mysterious young man—neaniskos in Gk.—whom the women find in Jesus' open tomb. He is anything but afraid, and imparts the news of J.' resurrection quite happily. Two significant details: first, he is dressed in a white robe, stole in Gk, a nice reminder for those of us who wear modern stoles about the essential nature of our vocation. Second, he is seated on the right side of tomb, a detail that calls to mind J. response to James and John, 10:40: "but to sit at my right hand or at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared."
20. Two chapters earlier Mark told us of another mysterious

neaniskos, this one dressed in a shroud. When grabbed he slips the shroud and runs naked into the night. This detail is famously unique to Mark.

21. A proposal: what if these two young men aren't two but one and the same? I find this idea compelling. Why else would Mark bother inserting the one neaniskos into the Gethsemane story? The classic explanation, that Mk. is pulling an Albert Hitchcock move and giving himself a cameo appearance in his story seems terribly weak to me. And on the other side, why is the figure in the tomb identified as a neaniskos and not as an angelos, an angel, as Matthew does? The choice of word, I think, is deliberate. Because, in fact, the two young men aren't two, but one and the same. This makes the point that the resurrected J. is operating with a new kind of power that grabs a stranger and turns him overnight, or in a moment's flash, into a genuine apostle, no longer naked with unbelief but clothed with the righteousness that comes of faith, as Paul will later say.
22. Speaking of Paul there too is neaniskos in whom Christ worked the miracle. And how about Francis, the pampered rich boy of Assisi who does what the pampered rich boy of chapter 10 is unable to do? Or how about Luther the law student? Or the British boys who piled into flimsy coracles and rowed across cold seas so they could talk about Jesus to the worshipers of Wotan in the dreadful forests of Germany? And of course let's not forget the women. Starting with these women, the ones too afraid to speak. Matthew adds to his version of Mark's report by sticking in a note about J. appearing suddenly to them on their way back from the tomb. Mark prefers to leave us reaching the conclusion on our own. It had to have happened. How else would you and I be talking today about the resurrection of the Son of God?

23. This brings me to another proposal I'd like to toss out, namely that by ending where he does Mark invites us to draw the life and witness of the Church into the work of interpreting and understanding the story he tells. It's the same move he keeps making with the prophets, only this time he's drawing from the opposite chronological direction. Here too, I think, we ought to take him seriously, more seriously than the rules and procedures of standard exegesis would permit us to do. So you want to make sense of Mark's Gospel? Then read the prophets. They'll clue you in. But go in the other direction too. Dig out, dare we say, the Augsburg Confession. This too is a testimony to Christ and his work produced in dark, tough times when institutions established to mediate God's mercy were corrupt and the beneficiaries of those institutions were strong and fiercely determined to hang onto the bennies they derived from them. And the last thing they are interested in is a Christ who behaves as J. does in Mark. Does anyone want to know what Mark's story about this J. means for us? Then take a look at what they confessed about him in those reformation days, how, Art. 2, the fundamental problem we face is sin, which, Art. 3, Jesus the Son of Man and the Son of God addresses; which, Art. 4, is of use to us only when we grab hold of it by faith, which, Art. 5, is a miraculous gift and creation of the Holy Spirit who opens eyes and ears and hearts and operates mysteriously, working such faith if and as the Spirit sees fit. Try using that, sometime, as a template for reading Mark, and you too will be pleasingly amazed by the extent to which the witness of the confessing children illuminates the witness of the testifying evangelist parent from whom they drew their information in the first place, he among others.
24. Back to the point, and thus to Mark's ending point. Out

there in the darkness and silence of the post-16:8 gap the risen Lord is at work. Disciples may be as thick and dense and scared as ever. Christ Jesus has not given up on them. His compassion (and God's) for the milling crowds remains what it's always been. They are his people and the sheep of his pasture. He resents the spirits that afflict and madden them and leave them unclean. He abhors the authority, whether God-given or not, that sucks them dry and leaves them without hope. He revels in the trust he finds in people who jump at him for the saving that he alone is able to provide as the Son of Man and Son of God with authority on earth to forgive sins. To keep his work going he needs disciples who are strong, confident, unafraid, and who talk about him incessantly as the good news for all that he alone is. Disciples of this ilk will count on him to do what he alone is able to do to create that faith. In the end this determination of J., his refusal to give up on us, is the Good News that Mark writes to tell us about.

25. With this in mind, keep praying that Christ will form that faith in you so that your eyes see, your ears hear, and your feet trudge gladly behind him as Bartimaeus once did.

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#746 A reading of St. Mark, Crossings-style (Part 4)

Colleagues,

This week we return to the next part of my fellow Thursday Theology editor Jerry Burce's extended exploration of the Gospel of Mark, which he first presented during the pre-conference to the Fourth International Crossings Conference in January 2012 in Belleville, Illinois. (The previous parts were [ThTheol #742](#), [#743](#), and [#744](#).)

When we last left off, Jerry was walking us through Mark's Gospel a second time, this time digging deeply into several specific episodes. In [#744](#), those episodes included "spit miracles" from what Jerry identifies as Mark's first symphonic "movement"—the one set around the Sea of Galilee. This time he takes us through the Gospel's next two movements ("On the Road" and "At the Temple"), focusing on the healing of the blind beggar Bartimaeus and on the troublesome story of the poor widow's offering at the temple.

I trust you'll find much food for thought in Jerry's incisive and frank ruminations, particularly because the material he discusses this week will be showing up in the gospel readings throughout this October and into November.

Peace and Joy,
Carol Braun, for the editorial team

Orthographic note:

e = epsilone = etao = omicronw = omega

29. On we go to our next pericope. It's the final episode in the Road Movement. 10:46-52—46They came to Jericho. As he and his disciples and a large crowd were leaving Jericho, Bartimaeus son of Timaeus, a blind beggar, was sitting by the roadside. 47When he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to shout out and say, 'Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!' 48Many sternly ordered him to be quiet, but he cried out even more loudly, 'Son of David, have mercy on me!' 49Jesus stood still and said, 'Call him here.' And they called the blind man, saying to him, 'Take heart; get up, he is calling you.' 50So throwing off his cloak, he sprang up and came to Jesus. 51Then Jesus said to him, 'What do you want me to do for you?' The blind man said to him, 'My teacher, let me see again.' 52Jesus said to him, 'Go; your faith has made you well.' Immediately he regained his sight and followed him on the way.
30. In a change from prior procedure let's start this time with the story itself, dig into it for a while, then track back for the context that gives it final shape for us.
31. So, 10:46. J. is leaving Jericho with the swarming retinue, disciples in close, a mob milling around. The crowds won't leave him alone, you know. Part of it, I'm sure, is the entertainment factor. You have to spend time in a poor, third-world country to know what this is about, and how it looks and smells. Swarming is exactly the word. That's what you do when life is boring. Folks will run for miles to be diverted.
32. At the roadside sits a blind beggar. The closest U.S. equivalent is the guy standing at the end of the freeway exit with a sign around his neck saying Help Me. He makes passersby feel helpless. He stirs their contempt.
33. Getting wind that this is J. of Nazareth—you pick up on lots of stuff at the roadside when no one's paying you heed—he starts to cry out. The verb is *kradzo*. That's what

the demons do when J. comes near them; it's what a desperate father does, earlier in this movement, 9:24: "Lord I believe; help thou my unbelief!" Kradzo is what Jesus does with his dying breath, as I've mentioned earlier.

34. If, by the way, you're on the receiving end, kradzo is obnoxious, annoying in the extreme. There's nothing polite or pious about it, nothing at all. It makes you want to kick somebody in the teeth, well, maybe not you, not that, but still, you want the noise to stop.
35. As does the crowd, v48. Again, you've got to be there to see it, how in parts of the world people are blunt, cold, and unabashed in giving someone a public scolding, and they aren't restrained by Western notions of decency or kindness. A blind jerk is still a jerk and you treat him that way.
36. Still v. 48, he bellers all the more--"Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me." Jaster says that eleison, "have mercy on me," is what people commonly yelled out to kings and emperors as their retinues swished by. You'll be tempted to think, maybe, that identifying Jesus as he does signals some kind of special wisdom or insight on Bartimaeus's part. It doesn't. Again, he's listened for months to the roadside chatter. And flattery is the essential tool for a beggar's living, such as it is. Rolling the dice he bellers again.
37. V. 49, Jesus stops. "Buck up," says the crowd, "He's calling you," and so he is, though not in the way the crowd thinks.
38. V. 50, Bartimaeus jumps up. This is his one and only big chance, he's going for it. "What do you want?" says Jesus, though it's more than that. What do you want me to do for you. Answer: Rabbouni, (i.e. the disciple's term for his particular teacher): "My teacher, let me see again."

Making the connections, are we?

39. V. 52, "Take off," Jesus says. "Your faith has saved you, seswken se. " And immediately—no double pass needed, no big sighs of any kind, no touching, no spitting—immediately he sees again. What's the proof that he's seeing, as in truly seeing with the kind of sight that Mark is finally all about? Answer: he follows J. on the way, en tee hodw. The road to Jerusalem, that is. The road to the great aggravating of the powers that be. The road to being punished, the road to being crushed. The way of the cross, as many will call it.
40. What a contrast of course to those other disciples, my kind and your kind. That bunch has been on the way since 8:27. Flip back to that verse, take a look. En tee hodw, away from the sea, Jesus springs the big question—it's the first time he's brought it up: "Who am I, do you think?" The Christ, says Peter, 8:29. So what does it mean that he is the Christ? What follows is a period of specific instruction in that very topic, a narrower, more focused topic than they got in the prior term of disciple-school. To use that other metaphor, this is double-pass time for this initial set of disciples. Up go Jesus' sleeves and he gets down to work on opening ears and eyes.
41. 8:31, the first Passion prediction. (By the way, the passion predictions are easy to track in Mark. Note where they occur: 8:31, 9:31, 10:32). Immediately comes the first bad reaction, Peter attempting to call J. on the carpet. 8:34, Jesus' first clear declaration that sticking with him means getting it in the neck, though the payoff will be grand. Life-losers will be life-savers.
42. 9:2 special lesson time for Peter, James, and John, on the Mount of Transfiguration. Notice, please, how eyes and ears come into play. v. 7, "Listen to him," the voice says; v. 8, they looked and saw Jesus only, J. who is

turning Moses and Elijah into yesterday's news, as in, if you want to know what's finally on God's mind listen to Jesus, see J. only. What does that mean for us today? That's what all of us are here at this conference to talk about. The point for now: to make sure we're clear on what the subject is, and what it isn't.

43. 9:14-29, the episode of the stubborn demon, featuring that father already mentioned, the one who screams the prayer that all disciples ought to scream. "Lord I believe; help my unbelief!" For their part, the disciples are still too dense to imagine that prayer, let alone to scream it.
44. 9:31, again a passion prediction and again, v. 32, a bad reaction. The disciples don't get it, eegnousin, and they're afraid to ask. Did I mention that J. got very testy in that stubborn demon incident, v. 19? No wonder the boys are skittish about asking him things.
45. 9:33, it's a typical guy thing that, being clueless and afraid, you change the subject. So shuffling behind J. the disciples chatter on the road—yes, that en-route-to-Jerusalem road, of all places—about who's the greatest. When J. calls them on it, they're scared to fess up. 9:36, a lesson about the greatest/least thing, complete with a living prop, a little child taken in up in Jesus' arms so the disciples won't just hear, they'll also see the point he means to make.
46. 9:42 and following, proof that even modern translators are struggling with this hearing/seeing thing. John has wanted to know if they "done good" when they told a stranger to quit using Jesus' name to cast out demons. "Sorry," says Jesus, bad move. And then, v. 42, whoever skandalidzee, i.e. scandalizes one of these wee ones who believes in me... What does that mean? The old RSV renders, whoever causes one of them to "sin." Yet that's precisely what it cannot mean, not if "sin" is understood the way the wee

ones always understand it, i.e. as a violation of God's Moses word. But then no wonder a wee one will wind up a lifetime of churchgoing worrying on her deathbed about whether God will let her in. Now that would be a little one who has been scandalized en tee hodo, on the road, the consequence being that she's broken faith in Jesus. She doesn't trust him. She doesn't see his arms embracing her in the blessed sacrament, she doesn't hear him saying, 'Don't be afraid, the storm of death won't make you perish, nor will your sin, and just by the way, to hell with the devil, don't worry about him. To scandalize a little one is to break her faith in Jesus and to shift her eyes and ears back to Moses and Elijah. Woe to the wretch who does that to her, not least the one who phrased the English in the Bible she read her whole life long. Double woe to the wretches—and they fill the church these days, always have, always will—who define discipleship in legal or prophetic terms. "You're a Christian if you..." —fill in the blank with whatever version of orthodoxy or orthopraxis the speaker is touting, and they all do it, from the left as well as from the right, from Higgins Rd. as well as Lindbergh Blvd. Shame on them all. What matters is whether at day's end you're counting on J. and only J. to save you. Woe to the one who destroys that trust.

47. Chapter 10, some Pharisees, model non-trusters, look to Moses to pull their fat from the fire of a lousy marriage and they expect J. to nod his head to that. He doesn't. 10:13, little children, trusters par excellence, get scooped up in the arms of J. who grooves on trusters, but that happens only after J. has to bark again at gate-keeping disciples who still don't get it. 10:23-31, the rich guy who can't bear to follow J. because it would cost too much. I wish we had time to dig into this further we simply don't. 10:26, the disciples, exceedingly

astonished, are unable to imagine how a camel can be squeezed through the eye of a needle. All this time they've been tagging after J. and haven't they been watching? Why still so deaf that they dare to brag, as Peter does, v. 28, about them doing what the rich guy didn't? 10:32, again they're on the road, but they're not happy trudgers. They're freaking out again. They're being afraid. Again, palin, Jesus takes the twelve aside and again explains what's going to happen when they get to Jerusalem, 3rd prediction, as we say. Of course it falls on deaf ears. Again. 10:35-44, James and John are making asses of themselves over who gets to sit where when Jesus is running the show; in v. 41 the others join the folly. For them this is the second such argument in just this movement; the last was in chapter 9, hard on the heels of the second prediction. 10:42, again J. explains, again, again and yet again. And still today the wrangling goes on over which disciple, which faction of disciples, will control the agenda in the church of Jesus Christ. Can you hear J. grinding his teeth?

48. 10:46, we're back to Bart, dear Bartimaeus, dirty, smelly, pushy, annoying, loud, rude, and obnoxious. And for Christ our Lord, a breath of fresh air. Finally, a true disciple. The last is first, the least is greatest, and that's how it works in the kingdom of God. Bartimaeus is the hero of Mark's Gospel as Thomas is of John's Gospel. He is the model disciple. He sees and grasps; he hears and understands. Other little ones have done the same along the way with as much panache, though truth be told, perhaps it's simply desperation, the thing that drives the Greek woman to argue over bread crumbs, or the bleeding woman to sneak a touch, or those loutish young men to tear a hole through a roof so they can get their pal to Jesus. All these get praised, and what they seek gets done for

them through a faith that isn't a feeling, still less a propositional system. It's merely the thing that fixes eyes and ears on J. passing by and says "give me what I need to live as you alone can give it," and when it gets the gift it follows blithely down the road on Jesus' heels, and it is not afraid nor is it amazed.

49. As for us, as for our churches: if we're sick to death of being blind and deaf, or of sweating fruitlessly with others who are, then Bartimaeus sits here—thanks to Mark, thanks to the Holy Spirit moving Mark— as the model of what to do. Ask, beg, demand of Jesus the faith in him that he so badly wants to give us, said faith known otherwise as open eyes, open ears, and a heart to stick with him no matter what. And if there's any doubt at all that we need to stick with him, well, it's on to the next episode.

50. The Sea and the Road are long behind us. Now we're at the climax of the Temple Movement. 12:38–13:2–38 As he taught, he said, 'Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and to be greeted with respect in the market-places, 39 and to have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honor at banquets! 40 They devour widows' houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation.' 41 He sat down opposite the treasury, and watched the crowd putting money into the treasury. Many rich people put in large sums. 42 A poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which are worth a penny. 43 Then he called his disciples and said to them, 'Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury. 44 For all of them have contributed out of their abundance; but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on.'

13:1As he came out of the temple, one of his disciples said to him, 'Look, Teacher, what large stones and what large buildings!' 2Then Jesus asked him, 'Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down.'

51. A few opening questions—

- a. Who has heard a stewardship sermon preached on this text? [All hands go up. Of course they do.]
- b. What point, pray tell, did the preacher try to milk from it?
- c. Why in all honesty was the preacher making that point?
- d. One final question: look at the pericope itself. What's your opinion of Jesus and the role he plays in this pericope?

52. True confessions, Burce getting personal: I've used this story for the stewardship shtick once, maybe twice. I can't remember when. I gave up on doing that a long time ago.

53. Number one, it's bogus. If the point is "make like the widow, toss it all in" we're telling lies when we peddle it. Truth is, we expect no one to do that. No honest, thoughtful Christian ever has. Instead we expect each other to put food in our children's bellies and a roof over their heads. We rejoice when someone spends money on an overdue vacation, and if we don't, we're jerks.

54. Number two, this story makes me angry. What's with a system that drives this woman to toss her last penny in the pot—and now what? Does she crawl into the corner of a Jerusalem alley and lie down there to die? I should add that this story makes me angry also with Jesus. What's with him, that he simply stands there watching, without the slightest hint whatsoever of coming to the widow's

aid?

55. A third reason for hating this story, especially as a stewardship text. It leaves me writhing with a bad conscience. I know about religious institutions. There's one in Cleveland, Ohio, I'm supposed to be running. We need money to do that. We need the faithful filling the plate. The light and heating bills are ever due. And so is my paycheck. I tell them to give to the glory of God. Never once have I confessed that other thought at the back of my mind, that if they still want a pastor six months from now they had better pony up.
56. Give till it hurts. We're supposed to say that. Give it all up and follow me. Jesus said that to the rich guy, chapter 10, prior movement. But I won't say that. I wouldn't do it myself. My wife wouldn't let me. Hey, I'm Old Adam too, so I blame it on her. Then like a drowning man I grasp for the 10% rule that Moses put in place, and even then I struggle keeping up with it. And to ram it down the throats of others seems always so damnably self-serving.
57. Welcome to the horror of the institution, above all the institutions that God himself has set up both to mediate and secure his gracious presence on earth, and it doesn't much matter how the mediating gets done, whether through sacrifice or through word and sacrament. In either case the institution itself will bring our sin to the fore and aggravate it. And at day's end we're left bitterly at odds with God, and God with us.
58. And God in his painful mercy has seen fit to do something about that. That's been the driving theme of the current Temple Movement. Those who serve institutions that serve God need to be purged of the sin that piles up as they run them and even more as they corrupt them (again, cf. Malachi 3). The temple must be cleansed. So must the

institutions of the church. As some like to say it, *ecclesia semper reformanda est* [i.e. the Church needs constant reforming]. And the time will come when the institution itself has got to be torn down for having failed to do what God himself established it to do.

59. Mark doesn't use the word "sin" in this or any of the other main movements. I've already observed that. Instead he shows the effects and consequence of sin through Jesus' eyes. In the Temple Movement these are the eyes of the judge, Malachi's messenger who is more than a messenger. He is God himself in the person of Jesus, God's Son, though no one in this movement will see it, least of all the top dogs who ought to be canny enough to know a messenger of God when one rolls into town. They don't, of course. They're blind, they're deaf; as blind and deaf as anyone can ever be. Again like the rich man, chapter 10, they have lots and lots to lose. Paul Jaster does a splendid job of summarizing the political, social, and economic factors that enter into this particular piece of the narrative ([ThTheol #712](#)). You'll be enlightened.
60. In 11:15 Jesus launches his Malachian mission within the temple precincts. He knows in advance what he'll find, and how he'll deal with it. The signal of that is his cursing of the fig tree on the way to work that Monday morning (11:12-14).
61. What he finds is a temple that fails to function as God meant it to do. A market operates in the space designated for any Gentiles who have their wits sufficiently together to come there to pray. These Gentiles, the nations, are now excluded. In goes Jesus to do to the traders as he's been doing to the demons, and yes, the verb is *exballw*, he drives them out. There follows a scathing indictment. The clean is unclean. Robbers are running what ought to be a house of prayer (v. 17). With that the big shots plot to

kill their judge (v. 18).

62. 11:20. In a conversation about the withered fig tree J. tells his disciples that they can tackle institutional mountains too. But in doing that, forgive those who wrong you, he says, v. 25. Operate as he will-that's the implication.
63. 11:27 to 12:37, debates with the big shots in their several factions, none of whom can see that it's high time for them to repent into the forgiveness of sins, else their jig is up.
64. Back now to our core text. It has one function only, to explain again why the jig is up both for the institution itself and for those who run it. "Beware the scribes," v. 38. They prance around. They hanker for status, as if serving God isn't status enough. They grub for money. This incredible line, "they devour widow's houses," v. 40. Comes now a widow, v. 41, whose house has been devoured. That's the implication. So watch, please, as this institution and the folks who run it in the name of God gobble up her last red cent. No one sees this, or if they do, no one cares. After all, she's just a widow, another pesky Bartimaeus type. But there sits the judge. He spots it. He makes a special point, v. 43, of telling the disciples what's going on. And still, 13:1, the eyes aren't seeing, the ears aren't hearing. "Look, says one, "such whacking great stones, such fabulous buildings, ain't it all so grand." More confession: that's the sort of thing I tend to say every time I visit the son who lives in Manhattan. The judge's answer. "It's all coming down. For the widow's sake, for God's sake, it has to." End of episode, end of movement. 13:2, not 12:44 where, in our own blindness, we usually quit reading.
65. I've got some questions. Why do we quit reading there, at 12:44, and all the church as well, not least the

translators who always insist on cutting 13:1 & 2 away from the unit it clearly belongs to? Why do we work so hard to look on the widow with admiration and not with pity? Why have Christian preachers forever twisted this into a phony object lesson about forking over the cash? And if we look at the story squarely, with honesty, why are we scared to fess up to the feelings it has got to stir about J. passivity as he stands there looking on? Have you never once been astounded by that? Or if so, are you afraid to fess up to it? Do you still think Jesus can't handle it? If so, have your eyes, your ears been open as you trotted after him on the road just now?

66. It's our turn to start screaming, "Lord we believe. Help thou our unbelief" (9:24). But what keeps us from that? Like those first disciples, are we still entertaining the possibility that J. won't come through for us? Really, do we think that? Shame on us if so (8:38).

67. No wonder J. has got to die. More on that in the next session.

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.

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#745 Ed Schroeder Reports from Toronto

Colleagues,

In the early '80s, as Crossings co-founder Ed Schroeder was stepping away from the disintegrating remnants of Christ Seminary–Seminex, he somehow got bitten by the mission bug. There followed for him and his wife Marie a second career, grossly underpaid, as a globe-trotting teacher of Lutheran theology and a steady contributor to ecumenical conversation about the mission of the Gospel. The latter interest has taken Ed , with Marie, to any number of conferences and assemblies of mission specialists and scholars, almost all of which he told us about at length during his twelve years as editor and chief writer of Thursday Theology. I'd guess that for many of us these reports have been our only connection to the arena of scholarly missiology.

If this be so, then we bring you a treat this week. Ed and Marie were recently in Toronto for the 13th Quadrennial Assembly of the [International Association for Mission Studies](#) (IAMS). You'll see them (for the time being at least) in the photo that pops up when you click on the hyperlink—lower right corner, Marie in red, one person away from the edge, and Ed directly behind her. Last week Ed sent us a report of what he heard and saw there. That he did so is a pretty good indicator of how enmeshed he continues to be in that ongoing conversation. After all, he had told us earlier not to expect him to reengage with Thursday Theology until Martin Luther's November birthday. Some things, obviously, are too important to wait—and for that we're glad. You'll be too.

So here without further ado is Ed's newest and latest, as ever

respectful though also critical of what he heard, the aim being that Christ should get the glory and sinners the comfort that God seeks to give. Enjoy.

Jerry Burce, for the editorial team.

Colleagues,

IAMS 13. Afterwards Some After-Words.

[Not all of them triggered by Daniel Carroll Rodas' whimsical comment as he began his second Bible Study with us—and both were super! —on Saturday: “I’m a bit nervous with this presentation since I understand there are some Lutherans here.”]

1. The Good News itself was margined, I think, in our time together in Toronto focusing on “Migration, Human Dislocation, and the Good News. Margins as the Center in Christian Mission.” Had we dug more explicitly into THE Good News itself—especially as it is articulated in I Peter and in the Letter to the Hebrews (the “great cloud of witnesses” section)—we would have benefited. We’d have heard that the margins are the center, not just for Christian Mission, but the center of Christian existence itself. When these texts speak of alien/exile/stranger, they are theological terms, not sociological ones. The key NT term for that is “parepidemos.” For that term the standard NT Greek-English lexicon BDAG says “Christians who are not at home in this world.”
2. Possibly this margination, as I call it, comes because we more or less all suppose, “Well, all of us know what The Good News is, so that term doesn’t need any explicit attention in the program.” But, of course, it always does. I remember my first-year seminary teacher (homiletics)

telling us, "If you think that you can presuppose the Gospel to be already present in the hearts and minds of your congregation when you are preaching a sermon, then that sermon will be a Gospel-less sermon."

3. Dan's Bible studies were marvelous and eye-opening. But Bible and Gospel are not synonyms. And when the explicit texts we studied were from the laws of the OT, then all the more "the Gospel needs to be added." [That's a mantra from Luther's colleague Melanchthon when he was teaching his students about preaching Christian sermons on law-texts from the Bible.]
4. NT references did surface, of course, throughout Dan's presentations—and also in the presentations from the keynoters. Most often as corroboration of what Dan was presenting from "Moses" in the Hebrew scriptures, sometimes from explicit "Gospel" references in the NT But...
5. But we never took time to get a "Gospel-grounding" for a mission theology to folks at the margins. And there is a difference.
6. As St. John reminds his readers already in his prologue: The law was given by Moses, Grace and Truth came through Jesus Christ. Mission theology grounded on the former will not be the same as mission theology grounded on the latter. Or, best of all, grounded on both—God's Law and God's Gospel—properly distinguished and then properly linked to each other.
7. A "different" mission theology, different from Moses (and from Moses-repeated in the NT), a mission theology with Gospel-grounding surfaces regularly in the NT Most explicitly, it seems to me, in I Peter and the "great cloud of witnesses" section in the Letter to the Hebrews, the only two places in the NT where the term "parepidemos" occurs.
8. But also in the four NT Gospels. Take the Luke 10 parable

that Daniel brought to our attention, the Good Samaritan. Dan startled some of us by showing us the “switch” that Jesus does with the word “neighbor” at the parable’s end. Namely, that the “neighbor” to be loved was not the victim half-dead in the ditch, but the Samaritan, the outsider whom Judeans were not inclined to love at all. That much—a surprise to some of us—is still Moses. Love thy neighbor. Seems to me that Luke’s real punch line at the end of the parable is a switch on the “lawyer’s” initial question. If you will, a switch from Law to Gospel, to the Good News.

9. Like this. The lawyer has been grounding his life on the law, as he reveals by his very opening question to Jesus. Therefore he asks the Law-question of Jesus: “What must I do...” In Luke’s overall theology what he needs to do “to inherit eternal life” is this: “Repent (from living a law-grounded life) and believe the Good News (Jesus standing right in front of him).” So the parable is about him. The law (priest and Levite in the parable) are unable to help him, even worse, they leave him half-dead in the ditch. He needs Jesus, THE Good Samaritan (par excellence) to rescue him from his ditch, bring him to some “inn” where with continuing care (from the outsider “Samaritan” Jesus!) he will find life again. This Jesus is not only the “neighbor” whom he ought to love (and trust), but in clinging to Jesus he would thereby also be fulfilling the “first and great commandment” about which he apparently (blindly) thinks he has no problems. [Yes, that is Luther’s exegesis of this text, Dan.]
10. Now to I Peter and Hebrews. THE fundamental notion of alien/exile in these two texts is that when you trust Christ you BECOME an alien/exile in the very homeland you’ve grown up in—even if you never leave your birthplace, never are pushed to the margins—sociological, political or economic—of your native habitat. Trusting the

gospel makes you an alien in your own homeland.

11. So the message of I Peter/Hebrews is how to BE a Christ-trusting alien/exile wherever on the planet you happen to be living. In our discussions in Toronto the “alien/exile” was almost always some “other,” not we ourselves. We were working on “being Biblical” in our response to such “others.” The alien/exile was the grammatical object of our sentences. The texts of Hebrews/Peter present aliens/exiles as the subjects of the sentences. We Christians, ALL Christians, are the aliens/exiles. How might our work on the Conference theme have unfolded, had we started from there?
12. Being a Christ-trusting alien/exile is not the exception to “normal” Christian faith-life, but the standard, the constant. Being an alien/exile in whatever culture surrounds you is the norm (=what’s normal) for Christian existence. To slip out of that Christian “normal” into some non-alien/non-exile way of life is to slip away from Christ. It’s that serious. [The concept of an “established church” in any culture is an oxymoron according to I Peter/Hebrews.]
13. Fundamental to Christian exilic/alien existence is the new God-relationship bestowed by Christ to those who trust him. That new God-relationship makes them citizens of a new world (gives them a new passport, a second passport with new identity and new homeland-connections!) and at the same time turns them into aliens/exiles in their former homeland where their “old” passport identified them. They are no longer “at home” in their homeland.
14. The message in I Peter and Hebrews is addressed to Christ-trusters who are growing weary of being aliens/exiles in their own homelands. Burnout, you might say. And for whom among us today is that unknown?
15. And at the root of it, say these NT texts, as is always

the case when faith flags, is the faltering Christ-connection of the Christian exile/alien. So they—and we too—need the Christ-connection rejuvenated.

16. So both of these NT books devote their initial chapters to remedying just that: the Christ-faith-burnout. As my ancient homiletics prof said: They preach the Gospel to already (well mostly) believing Christians. And then spell out for them a Gospel-grounding for how to live their Christ-trusting alien/exile existence in what is otherwise (but then again is not) their homeland.
17. That counsel—"parakleesis" in Greek—focuses on their daily life in the context of two audiences. One is their fellowship with other Christ-trusting aliens/exiles. The other is with folks who are not (not yet) Christ-trusters, whether or not they are aliens/exiles in the social, political, economic surroundings where they live.
18. One way of portraying Christian mission with these metaphors is to say, "Gospel-proclamation intends unashamedly to turn its hearers into Christ-trusting aliens/exiles." And having done that at the outset, to "disciple" them in the manner portrayed in I Peter and Hebrews.
19. Remember that the old meaning of the Greek word for disciple (matheetes) is apprentice. "Following Jesus" amounts to a master-apprentice relationship. Granted, the Master does teach his disciples, but the teaching—like that of a master carpenter, master violinist—is not classroom-instruction, but "showing how" to practice the skill of the specific "trade."
20. In Christian discipleship the apprentice is in the "trade" of becoming a "master/meister/maestro" Christ-truster, that is, a master exile/alien. In word and deed the Master Christ models it in front of us. To "make disciples of all peoples" is to proclaim the Gospel with the result that

all peoples become apprentices of Jesus, which turns them into his kind of aliens/exiles.

21. But Christ-trusters are not exiles/aliens from a homeland to which we hope someday to return. No, it's exile in the other direction. I think it was Emma Wild-Wood who told us that we are aliens/exiles from a homeland up ahead, a homeland toward which we are moving, but have not yet arrived. Which, of course, is a direct citation from Hebrews 11:15 & 16.

Summa. What difference would such explicit Gospel input have made for our time together in Toronto? I don't know. There's an old "Pogo-quote" that circulated in the USA when I was a seminarian 60 years ago. "We have met the enemy, and he is us." I Peter/Hebrews say something similar: "We have discovered the alien/exile, and she is us." For which, "Thanks be to God."

Edward H. Schroeder
St. Louis, Missouri USA
31 August 2012

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#744 A reading of St. Mark, Crossings-style (Part 3)

Colleagues,

As you'll remember from [ThTheol #742](#) and [#743](#), we're in the midst of the Rev. Dr. Jerome Burce's multipart presentation on the Gospel of Mark, which he first delivered in three one-hour sessions on the day before the official start the Fourth International Crossings Conference in Belleville, Illinois, in January of this year.

Today's installment brings you the first half of the second hour of Jerry's presentation. Having walked us through the "overture" and the various symphonic "movements" and "interludes" of Mark's Gospel (Movement One: **Around the Sea**. Movement Two: **On the Road**. Movement Three: **At the Temple**. First Interlude: **Mt. of Olives**. Movement Four: **To Golgotha and Beyond**. Second Interlude: **Belleville, IL**, or Wherever), he now takes us through the Gospel a second time, this time with special attention to several key episodes including what he calls the "spit miracles."

By the way, we've made a slight change to our plan (from my introduction to [#743](#)) for publishing the rest of Jerry's presentation. We're splitting his second hour into two pieces, rather than one. And to give you a bit of a break from Mark, we'll put a temporary pause on Jerry's presentation next week and instead bring you a piece that we recently received from Ed Schroeder.

Till then, happy reading of Jerry's intriguing ruminations on the structure and thematic content of Mark.

Peace and Joy,
Carol Braun, for the editorial team

1. In this second hour we're going to do a second pass over the body of Mark's Gospel. You're about to find out why. The approach this time will be to dig into specific episodes in each of the first three major movements, and then to poke around a little more in movement four. In the third hour we'll use an episode of the final movement as a springboard into our central question. Once again, how is Mark "gospel"? How is God using this grim tale to deliver good news to us today?
2. To get us started, we'll focus on two key episodes in the Galilean Movement. First, 7:31-37—

Then he returned from the region of Tyre, and went by way of Sidon towards the Sea of Galilee, in the region of the Decapolis. 32They brought to him a deaf man who had an impediment in his speech; and they begged him to lay his hand on him. 33He took him aside in private, away from the crowd, and put his fingers into his ears, and he spat and touched his tongue. 34Then looking up to heaven, he sighed and said to him, 'Ephphatha', that is, 'Be opened.' 35And immediately his ears were opened, his tongue was released, and he spoke plainly. 36Then Jesus ordered them to tell no one; but the more he ordered them, the more zealously they proclaimed it. 37They were astounded beyond measure, saying, 'He has done everything well; he even makes the deaf to hear and the mute to speak.'

Next, 8:22-26—

22They came to Bethsaida. Some people brought a blind man

to him and begged him to touch him. 23He took the blind man by the hand and led him out of the village; and when he had put saliva on his eyes and laid his hands on him, he asked him, 'Can you see anything?' 24And the man looked up and said, 'I can see people, but they look like trees, walking.' 25Then Jesus laid his hands on his eyes again; and he looked intently and his sight was restored, and he saw everything clearly. 26Then he sent him away to his home, saying, 'Do not even go into the village.'

3. Thus our texts. First observation. In any kind of reading context is an essential key to understanding. That's especially so in Mark, who seems at first blush to string episodes together more or less at random. In fact he doesn't. Instead he arranges carefully as a person might who puts beads on a string in such a way that patterns emerge, and from the patterns come meaning.
4. So, back we go to the start of this movement, 3:7. It will help it will help if you open up Mark and follow along. Again, 3:7: J. withdraws to the sea, disciples following, crowds crushing in, fireworks shooting off as he exorcises and heals. Don't forget the key detail: the crowds are from all around the sea, a mix of Jew and Gentile. They all get Jesus' goodies, and on the same basis. This is of the essence to the unfolding story.
5. 3:13. Jesus goes up a mountain and calls to him "those whom he wanted." (Cf. John, "you did not choose me, I chose you.") He appoints the Twelve, a) to be with him, b) to be sent out to preach, c) to have what it takes to cast out demons. This again is of the story's essence. What will follow is Disciple Seminary, Apostolic Training School, the tag-along version. Watch. Listen. Learn. The key instructional topics: i) Who is Jesus? ii) What can he do, and whom will he do it for? iii) How to run with it.

How to push the project along with the confidence that you can do it too, just like he says, or-just as important-with the guts to do it as he did. A hint at the outset: the disciples are slow, slow learners. As if that should surprise any of us who are disciples today. Like they say, look up slow learning in dictionary, and there you'll see Burce's picture.

6. 3:20-35, first lesson for the new pupils: J. isn't possessed. He isn't in league with the devil. He isn't out of his mind, v. 21, where the verb is *exestee*, another of the words in the amazed/astonished group. Conclusion of the lesson: we who do what God wants are Jesus' family. And what does God want? What is to *theleema tou theou*? Answer: sticking with God's Jesus and following him. Disciples today are still struggling to learn that, aren't we.
7. 4:1-34. The second big school day, featuring parables of the kingdom, crowds pressing in to listen, disciples being taken aside for private instruction. With it comes an explanation that has to be underscored, 4:10-13—

10When he was alone, those who were around him along with the twelve asked him about the parables. 11And he said to them, 'To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God, but for those outside, everything comes in parables; 12in order that "they may indeed look, but not perceive, and may indeed listen, but not understand; so that they may not turn again and be forgiven." ' 13And he said to them, 'Do you not understand this parable? Then how will you understand all the parables?

This too is of the essence: there's a seeing that doesn't perceive, a hearing that fails to understand. There is a "not getting it," in other words. Not getting who Jesus is, and what he's here to do, and who he's doing it for.

At the end of 4, v. 34, J. is determined that disciples should get it. "He explained everything in private to them." 4:35: Sorry, right away, on that very day, that very evening, they flunk the first test. There's that storm at sea, 37, where the sea, like the desert, is a testing zone, "Teacher, do you not care if we perish?"—that's "perish" in the present middle tense, signifying that other forces are involved in the action of the verb, We're perishing because greater powers are doing us in, and "doesn't that matter to you, J.?" My, what a thing to ask! "Shut up," says J. bellowing at the wind and the waves, and instantly, of course, the great calm, v. 39, but—get this—though Jesus' speaking works beyond the boat it doesn't work inside the boat. To the disciples he says, v. 40, "Why so afraid," and "C'mon guys, no faith?" But still the disciples don't calm down. There is bad English translating at this point, v. 41, "they were filled with great awe," NRSV. That's wrong! The Gk: Ephobeetheesan phobon megan, they feared a mega-fear, the same as Luke's shepherds did when the lights went on in the field. "Who is this?" they say. Daryl Schmidt in a technical scholarly translation picks up on the imperfect tense of the verb at this point. He thinks it's deliberate, and not an example of Mark's infelicitous Greek. "Who is this?" they would say"— so Schmidt renders it, the implication being that this particular response by disciples isn't a one-time thing but a regular, ongoing response, the key point being that dealing with a hurricane is a snap compared to dealing with a faithless human heart, even for the Lord of heaven and earth who Jesus has just shown himself to be.W

8. 5:1. They're in the country of the Gerasenes, Gentile turf, Decapolis territory. Get out a map and refresh your

memory. From here on J. darts back and forth, up and down, now with Jews, now with Gentiles, always the disciples tagging along, supposedly to learn something. Here they see J. expel a legion of demons. For me the great question in this story is why the locals don't lynch him over their loss of the 2,000 pigs. Do the disciples notice that the cleansing, saving, freeing work that Jesus does will inevitably result in a large loss to somebody? Do we notice that? When we see others getting annoyed or (these days) dismissive of Christians, do we understand what's going on? Cf. Paul in Philippi, Acts 16:16-24.

9. 5:21. They're back on Jewish turf, again with the crowd flocking at seaside. There are two healings now, Jairus' daughter, and en route to that, the bleeding woman. To the latter J. says, "Daughter"—remember the end of ch. 3, who is J. family—"daughter, your faith has saved you, seswken se." Translators insist on rendering this as "your faith has made you well." I wish they'd quit that. It obscures things that English-speaking disciples today are meant to notice.
10. 6:1. The futile trip to "his own country," where it's Jesus' turn to be amazed, ethaumadzen, at the Nazarenes' unbelief. His turn, in other words, to say, "I can't believe it!" He'll have to believe it, of course. All the other actors in the story will leave him no choice.
11. 6:7-30. This is the disciples' missionary expedition sandwiched around the story of the Baptist's death. Notice how this works, because it's a rhetorical device Mark uses more than once. (This is at least the third time it has already occurred, with prior instances in chapters 3 and 5. In 6:7-13 the disciples are instructed and dispatched, and if you jump directly from 13 to 30 you'll notice how the narrative continues seamlessly. 13 and 20 have been pried apart, in other words, and the Baptist narrative

shoved in—yes—the resulting gap. It makes a point. Apostleship is hazardous to your health. Servants of the kingdom are bound to get snuffed when they run around making like the Baptist, proclaiming, v. 12, that people should repent into forgiveness as God's new way of managing sinners and saving them. Many won't want to. Like Herodias they'll get really annoyed when you shake dust from your feet, i.e. when you signal or say that in failing to repent they're stuck with a system and a God behind the system who's bound to make them dead. Our own contemporaries don't want to hear that. They stop their ears. They shriek. They get bitter and mean. Recall the late Christopher Hitchens, or Bill Maher, perhaps. As we'll hear in the Road Movement, if you're going to follow J. you've got no choice but to take up your cross. Somehow, in some way, you'll get nailed too by the hotshots who hate what J. is doing.

12. Deep breath time. At this point refer to the sheet with the double caption "Spit Miracle" [[available online](#)]. Now a pattern is unfolding. 6:30-44. 5,000 are fed in a wilderness area, eremos topos, on Jewish turf. There are loads of lessons for disciples to absorb if their ears and eyes are open. As the action unfolds all sorts of interpretive info is flowing up unspoken through the gaps, all of it basic stuff that even fishermen and tax collectors should know about, let alone seminary graduates. Haven't we heard of manna in the wilderness? And when J. has them sit down in groups on green grass, v. 39, who doesn't hear echoes of Psalm 23, esp. when we've already heard the mob described as "sheep without a shepherd," 34, and who is the Messiah if not the Ultimate Son of the original shepherd king? Etc.
13. Do the disciples get it? Fat chance. Again, 45, they're at sea, the winds hostile and against them, and J. who had

sent them ahead so he could be alone (who can blame him) comes walking. There's this strange bit, 48, of him wanting to pass them by, again, no wonder, they're an exhausting bunch; though notice here how that detail will always get folks in Sunday Bible classes to be amazed-thaumazein. Startled. Disbelieving. Not my Jesus, they say, as if they own him. In the boat the disciples freak out, 50. Jesus joins them, "take heart," tharseite, it is I, ego eimi, as in "your God is with you" "don't be afraid," the wind dies. Reaction? Again, not calm, not fearlessness, but lian ek perissou en heautois existanto, they really, really, really jump out of their skins. How come? Because 52, they didn't learn the lesson of the loaves, they plain don't get it, their hearts are hardened, petrified, though here the verb can also mean callused, as in eyes covered with cataracts. Keep that in mind.

14. 53-55. More thronging crowds, more healing, people touching J.'s garment as the bleeding woman did (chap. 5) emphasis here on touch. And as many as touched it were saved, esozonto. This is usually translated "were healed," but there's more to it than that. "Saved" is the better rendering.
15. 7:1-23, J. argues with Pharisees about cleanliness and what that involves. Paul Jaster has good stuff about that ([ThTheol #710](#)).
16. 24-30 J. heads for Tyre and Sidon, old Jezebel's turf. Along comes a dirty Greek woman to get help for her daughter. There's patter about bread. The dirty Gk. gets what she asks for, her child lying in bed, the demon gone. Pharisees, stuck as they are on old conceptions of cleanliness, don't cash in like this. Neither do Americans for whom hygiene and exercise is the new religion through which lives will be saved for a few years longer. Back to

the disciples. Did they listen to the patter between J. and the woman? Were they paying attention? We know they weren't.

17. 31-37. At last. We've gotten there. Back to where we started, key text #1. It unfolds in the Decapolis. Again, this is dirty Greek turf. People bring J. a fellow who is deaf and dumb. They ask him to touch him. J. takes him aside, privately. Notice, that's the very thing he's been doing all along with his disciples. And now, yes, he touches. That and more. First his fingers in the man's ears, then he spits, and touches his tongue. And after that a big, big sigh. Ephphatha. The guy hears, he speaks, the crowd goes nuts. They blab. More on this in a moment.
18. First, in chap. 8 the pattern repeats, with crucial variations. 1-9, J. is still on Greek turf. Another crowd is fed. The scenario is the same as at the first feeding, key details repeated, including a note, not to be missed, about compassion as the motive that's driving J. His heart, at least, is not hard. As for the disciples, they're still obtuse. You'd think they'd know the drill, but they don't. They raise the same dumb questions and objections. "How can anyone feed people with bread in the wilderness?" v. 4. What's with these guys? As for the rest of the parallels, do your own comparison. It's very important.
19. 8:10, again a boat ride. 11, again an argument with Pharisees who want a sign from heaven—where have these guys been? Clipping along, yet another boat ride, v. 13, and now more back and forth about bread, not with a suppliant (the Syrophoenician woman) but with the disciples who (unlike the woman) don't and will not get it. "Watch out for Pharisee's yeast, for Herod's leaven," J. says, v. 15, and all they can think of is the one loaf of bread that's with them in the boat, and how will they

all eat supper? Whereupon Jesus loses it, v. 17: “Why are you talking about having no bread? Do you still not perceive or understand? Are your hearts hardened (covered with calluses)? 18Do you have eyes, and fail to see? Do you have ears, and fail to hear? And do you not remember? Do you not yet understand?” Loose translation: You bozos!

20. 8:22-26. Here is our second key text. Now they’re on Jewish turf. People bring J. a blind man this time. Again they ask him to touch him. Again he takes the fellow aside as he has all along with disciples. Again spitting, again touching. Again an odd peculiar twist, very unexpected, not a sigh this time, but a misfire so to speak. J. takes a first pass with his hands and asks, “Can you see anything?—as if he himself wonders if that’s in question. Turns out it is—and again, we who operate with our defined set of assumptions about who J is and how he ought to function will be amazed. The guy sees indistinctly, as with cataracts still on. So J. does a second pass with the hands. Now the guy strains to see—he puts some effort into it—and only now is his sight restored, and he sees clearly. “Go to your house,” says J. My house is your house—he doesn’t say that, but if we hear this being whispered somewhere in the background, it’s a pretty good sign that Jesus has been hard at work on our ears and eyes as well.

21. I want to argue that these two miracle episodes, unique to Mark, are at the core his message and of the essence to the good news he means to pass along. So some quick observations just about these episodes—

22. First, that they belong together, to be read as a matched set, ought to be obvious. I won’t belabor that.

23. Nor will I belabor how hearing yet not hearing, seeing yet not seeing, is Mark’s core concern throughout this Galilean movement, above all where the disciples are

concerned. That concern will continue to preoccupy him in the coming movements too. Well, of course it will, and must. How will his word and work bear fruit, how will folks get saved, how will the forgiveness system get touted as God's preferred option for managing the sin problem if these doltish disciples don't get it?

24. Speaking of dolts, aren't I one of them? I need to remember that as I deal with dolts, hearing but not hearing, seeing but not seeing. Take for instance the folks sitting in Sunday pews. I couldn't make it plainer than I do, but still some will insist on despising the weekly invitation to take and eat, to take and drink—it simply can't be the thing it's said to be, can it? Or I think of the woman lying on her deathbed last month. She's been listening to Lutheran preachers her whole life long—she's been listening to me for the last seventeen years—and still she frets about whether she's been good enough to merit a passage through the pearly gates. So there she lies, riddled not only with cancer but with the leaven of the Pharisees. You talk to her about the way of forgiveness, you rehearse the stories, you recite the promises: still, you can tell as you talk that the words are wasted on ears that are deaf to them. Later, when done, you get in the car and you want to scream. One imagines Jesus' comment: "Welcome, dear disciple, to the misery of your Lord."
25. If anything astounds me in this current tour of Mark, it's the sheer difficulty Jesus has in getting disciples to get it. That's the first thing these two miracles underscore. Signs, John would call them. You and I might refer to them as enacted parables, teaching devices, where you and I are the dim-witted students. It isn't easy to get the deaf to hear and the blind to see. Demons scatter with a simple word. A simple touch heals the withered hand or stops the

flowing blood or raises the dead. Yet faced with deafness and blindness as in a lack of faith, a failure to get it, even Jesus has to roll up his sleeves. For this he doesn't touch, he massages. He uses spit. He groans to high heaven with the sheer effort of doing what he's trying to pull off. He blows the first try and has to make a second pass before the eyes are seeing clearly. Shame on us, then, for thinking that pennies ought to drop and people sing with joy simply because they sat through that brilliant class I taught last quarter, or the sermon series I just finished preaching. Getting people to get it—that's hard, hard work, even for God. This is Point #1 of the Spit Miracles and the wider context they're wrapped in.

26. Point #2, and this is even more amazing, though of course it shouldn't be: notice the dogged determination with which Jesus sticks at it. He won't give up. He'll repeat himself again and again. He'll rerun the miracles. He'll cross the sea for as many times as it takes for the dolts to understand that Jew and Gentile are alike to him in this forgiveness regime that he's here to install and underwrite as God's final word to all humanity. I assume, of course, that the Jew/Gentile thing is the immediate Sitz im Leben, so to speak, the issue of issues that Mark has his eye on as he lays the story out. Yes, surely other issues are swirling in the air. Again, Paul Jaster does a splendid job of sketching some strong and likely possibilities: the collapse of the temple, the problem of Rome, the sundering of relations between church and synagogue which is very much in the offing. But if Mark writes for the church, as a tool in Christ's own project to unstop ears and open eyes, then the Jew/Gentile issue which so predominates elsewhere in the NT is surely at the forefront of his thinking here. Hence the dance of this particular movement. Just now we've gotten Paul's letter

to the Galatians in story form. It gets repeated also here because so few in that first-century church seem quite to get it. It gets repeated because the Lord of the Church is driving the repetition, again and again, over and over, until ears are open, yes, and tongues loosed, and eyes begin to see. Meanwhile the Holy Spirit is busy groaning with sighs too deep for words, the prayer being that the proclaimers he needs to push the project forward will finally get their wits together and tell it like it is. The Spirit too will not give up.

27. Two last quick notes, and then we push on, as we must. Maybe this is fanciful, but I can't help but connect the double-pass in the second of these miracles with the two-times crowing of the cock in the Golgotha movement. The rooster declares that for all the work Jesus has put into him, this sad-sack disciple is still blind as a bat. He can't see a thing, not even moving trees, which is to say, he hasn't the faintest clue as to who Jesus or what he's up too. It will take a resurrection for the ophthalmologist to try again.
28. Second note, about the spit. He who heals with spit will be mocked with spit. Those who do the spitting will be both Jews, deaf to what they're hearing, 14:65, and Gentiles, blind to what they're seeing, 15:19. And in the hugest of ironies—Mk. drips with irony, by the way—the spitting of the deaf and blind will be the proximate cause of the healing of the nations. You might want to mull on that for your next Good Friday sermon.

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.

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#743 A reading of St. Mark, Crossings-style (Part 2)

Colleagues,

Last week ([ThTheol #742](#)) we brought you the first part of a paper on the Gospel of St. Mark by my fellow Thursday Theology editor, Jerry Burce. As you'll recall from last week, Jerry presented this paper as an extended pre-conference study session before the opening of the Fourth International Crossings Conference in Belleville, Illinois, this past January.

In the first part of his talk, Jerry walked us through what he called the "overture" of the Gospel, up to Mark 3:6. In this second part, and continuing with his symphonic metaphor, he walks us through the various "movements" and "interludes" in rest of the book. Along the way, he continues to point out recurring themes and to illuminate Mark's distinctive vocabulary, which (Jerry points out) is often obscured by standard translations. (Please refer back to the vocabulary list at the end of [ThTheol #742](#) for an overview.)

As you read, please keep in mind that today's installment is leading up to the final two parts of Jerry's paper, in which he first delves more deeply into several important episodes in Mark's Gospel and then runs the entire Gospel through the Crossings six-step matrix, finally tackling the question of how so gloomy and joyless a text can understood as good news for us

today. We look forward to bringing you those final two parts in the next two weeks.

Peace and Joy,
Carol Braun, for the editorial team

Orthographic note: when rendering Greek words with English letters, one wants somehow to distinguish between long “e” eta and short “e” epsilon, and between long “o” omega and short “o” omicron. To that end I’ve rendered as follows—

e = epsilonee = etao = omicronw = omega

[Part 2: picking up after paragraph 45]

46. At this point let’s pause to map out the rest of the Gospel with an eye for major section breaks and the rationale for identifying them as such.
47. First, since I’ve spoken of the opening section as an overture, I may as well carry on with the symphonic idea. Imagine four major movements with two interludes, the second an interlude as John Cage might imagine, the orchestra going silent and leaving everybody to sit there chewing on things until the conductor waves his baton to signal that it’s time to go home.
48. Geography and location are of the essence in making sense of Mark, so we’ll speak of the movements in those terms. Movement One: **Around the Sea**. Movement Two: **On the Road**. Movement Three: **At the Temple**. First Interlude: **Mt. of Olives**. Movement Four: **To Golgotha and Beyond**. Second Interlude: **Belleville, IL**, or Wherever.
49. **Movement One** starts at 3:7. It ends at 8:26. J. withdraws to the sea, his disciples in tow, a crowd gathers (3:8). Of huge significance is the composition of this particular

crowd, comprising people from Gentile parts as well as Jewish. Here the ministry of J. is going completely public, which, in the larger context of the Biblical narrative as a whole, takes the Promise completely public for the first time. See the comments on Luke's parallel in my 2010 Conference paper, "[The Mission of Christ the Insurgent](#)," p. 10. Luke, by the way, attaches this Bible-as-a-whole hinge moment to the ministry of John the Baptist. Here it serves to launch Mark's contribution to the major ecclesiastical issue for the New Testament church, i.e., for whom is Jesus, and on what terms, one of the top two or three issues in Mark's Gospel as a whole.

50. Concerning the sea, look at the vocab sheet and note how references to it are clustered in this section, a tale of frantic movement back and forth and all around northern Galilee with the sea always at the center of things. 3:7-12 has an introductory, mini-overture quality to it, as in, "Here's a typical day in life of Jesus," J. with his disciples at the seashore, the crowds pressing in, the boat ready just in case, the sick touching to get healed, demons babbling his identity and being told to shut up. And so it will continue.
51. Major themes in this movement: First, the identity of Jesus with an emphasis on a) J. as the Messiah, the one promised and the one who keeps the promises; b) J. as a sort of new and peripatetic Zion to whom the nations come streaming to find healing and rest; c) J. as the Lord of Creation and the Ultimate Mr. Clean. Second theme: the calling of the Church as exemplified in the persons of the disciples, disciples defined as those who don't merely listen, they hear, who don't just see, they perceive (cf. 4:11-12); and in hearing and perceiving are equipped to carry J. mission forward. Third theme: the infernal difficulty of getting disciples to get it. Most of the

time they flat out don't, a problem that all of us today are painfully familiar with. The movement ends with the second of two miracles unique to Mark, both intensely didactic as all the miracles are—signs, as John the Evangelist will come to call them, pointers to things about J. that we get to hang our hearts and hopes on. Here the thing pointed to is a promise of immense importance to the Church today. We'll explore it in detail later.

52. **Movement Two.** This begins at 8:27. The key marker of the movement is "on the road/way." *Hodos* in Gk. Again see the vocabulary sheet with an eye to how the word is distributed, seven occurrences in the section as a whole, four of them in chapter 10, which is best viewed as a major subsection. The road in this movement is the route J. takes to Jerusalem. It starts with a final Galilean tour, though without mention of the sea, and in 10:1 turns south toward Judea. The movement kicks off with the great "Who do people say that I am" question, followed by the first of the passion predictions, 8:31. The others are at 9:31 and 10:32-33. What unfolds is a two-edged sharpening of the identity question that loomed large in the first movement, gets sharpened, first by focusing on who J. is vis-à-vis Elijah and Moses, and second by introducing the disciples to the bizarre idea of the Christ who must die, with the implications of that for their present behavior on the one hand and their apostolic destiny on the other. Where is J. going, and what's entailed in tagging along? Those are the driving questions. There's an increased emphasis in this movement on teaching and instruction. As before, the disciples flat out don't get it. Nor do others. The mood is grim. The disciples are obtuse, the crowds needy, the Pharisees hostile, and Jesus cranky. Relief comes finally at end, in the person of Bartimaeus, the only one in entire Gospel who both sees and follows en

tee hodw, on the way (10:52). Bartimaeus is for Mark as Thomas is for John, the one who finally gets it. Mark's choice, I think is the more scandalous, the beggar as exemplar for all of us today.

53. **Movement Three**, At the Temple. It begins at 11:1 with the entry into Jerusalem. This brings us to the heart of Mark's soteriology, the clash between sin-management systems, both of them God's, but each producing a very different outcome. We'll look at that in some detail when we get to the widow's mite in the next [section]. All the action takes place in Holy Week, of course, first the Palm Sunday entry, then Monday's cleansing of temple—God coming suddenly with whip in hand per that hidden testimony of Malachi mentioned earlier—then a subsequent series of disputations (six of them) with opponents in their several varieties, including one—this is unique to Mk.—who winds up being praised (12:34). Along the way the fig tree gets cursed, the scribes are excoriated, and the widow's offering is observed. The mood is electric. Paul Jaster likens it to the King's return to Gondor in The Lord of the Rings ([ThTheol 711](#), second paragraph from the bottom). Jesus is commanding and the crowds enthusiastic, while the extant authorities alternate between hostility, fear, and amazement, the reactions that J. invariably stirs up. The central issue is authority, tied, of course, into the ongoing question about who J. is. For his part, J. stops being cagey. Almost. The section ends—as far as I know I'm utterly alone in asserting this—not at the end of chapter 12, but at 13:2.
54. **Interlude**. The Markan apocalypse. It starts at 13:3. One reason for saying that—the other I'll get to later—is the parallel in this verse to 3:7's kickoff to Movement 1, i.e. a mention of J. withdrawing with his disciples, and a note about specific place he's withdrawing to, in this

case the Mt. of Olives. And now an oddity, unique to Mark: J. takes four disciples with him, not 12, not 3, but 4, Andrew having crashed the usual Peter, James, and John party (13:3). This is the longest unbroken stretch of discourse in all of Mark. I won't pretend to make sense of it beyond the following superficial observations:

- a. Today's exegetes associate it with Trajan's destruction of Jerusalem, A.D. 70. It makes tons of sense that Mark's first hearers did that too.
- b. That said, it could be just as easily associated with the downfall of any ingrained sin-management system, whether political, economic, cultic—the medieval papacy, the French aristocracy, American slavery, the Berlin wall; or on the micro-level, with whatever institutions you and I have invested in our whole lives long—church buildings, universities, neighborhoods, arrangements of any and every kind that are designed in large part to keep sinners in line. All these things will be laid low. That's the core message.
- c. Meanwhile whatever's being taken down and whenever it happens, expect wrath and woe, false Messiahs, turmoil within the church, attacks on the faithful. Re. false Messiahs, the Gk. reads "many will come in my name saying ego eimi (I am)," i.e. assuming not only Messianic but divine pretensions.
- d. Beyond that, expect the Lord's appearance to save. Hang in there. Be tough. Be smart, head for the hills if you have to, but whatever you do, don't give up.
- e. The last word here is "watch" (13:37; NRSV: "keep awake"). That's Markan code for "trust." Watching is the very thing the disciples fail to do during the proto-apocalypse about to unfold (14:37).

55. **Movement Four:** To Golgotha and Beyond, a.k.a. the Passion. To which I append the Easter narrative because in Mk.'s construction the two belong together as a continuation of a central theme that will occupy our attention in the next [section]. The movement begins, then, in 14:1. It ends at 16:8, not sooner, for reasons to be explored. I underscore my earlier comment about the darkness of narrative. The gloom is unrelenting, all the way to the end. Again the central question, Where is the good news? The story, of course, is very familiar, but even so, here are a few assorted details to notice in Mk's telling, the significance of which will come apparent in the next [section] –

- a. In the garden Jesus becomes “distressed (14:33).” That’s a lousy NRSV translation (other translations are lousy too). The Gk. is ekthambeisthai, amazed, astonished—at least that’s how it’s translated wherever else the word pops up. In other words, everybody else’s standard reaction to God’s big doings in and through Jesus now becomes J. own reaction to what the Father is up to. He doesn’t like it, not one little bit. If you will “remove this cup” (14:36) and the “if you will” is the same “if you will” that the leper posits, chapter 1. Back then J. answered “I will.” Now the Father answers “I won’t.”
- b. Again some poor translation: we’ve been taught to say that Judas betrays Jesus, as in 14:11, 17, 42, whereas the chief priests hand him over to Pilate, 15:1, who in turn hands him over to soldiers, 15:15. The Gk. uses the same verb in all three places, paradidomi. I.e. if Judas is traitor, so are the others. In their actions they all commit the same offense, i.e. they betray God. And very much to a

specific Markan point, the essential crime against J. gets committed by a) disciples, b) Jews, and c) Gentiles, all of them suffering from the same malady of terminal deafness and blindness.

- c. Speaking of which, pay attention to the places where the verbs “hear” and “see” pop up in this section. E.g. “You have heard his blasphemy, what say you” (14:64), and “Let him down from cross that we may see and believe” (15:32), and when the centurion “saw” that he breathed his last in this way, he said... (15:39). Here we’re at the same core Markan theme.
- d. Small details. Notice that in Mk., exclusively Mk., the cock crows twice. Notice too the spitting, by Jewish council, 14:65, by Gentile soldiers, 15:19. Matt. picks this up, but not Lk. I think it carries more weight in Mk. than it will in Mt., calling to mind here the double-pass spit miracle of 8:22-26, about which I’ll say more shortly. Note for now that there J. touches twice to get the man seeing. Here the cock crows twice to open Peter’s eyes to his disgrace.
- e. By the way, notice the other strange detail, unique to Mk., of the young man in the garden running naked into the night (14:51-52). I plan to make some hay with that. Whether it’s worthy hay or not, you’ll have to say.
- f. Finally, notice that in Mk. the charges against J. focus on him as an insurrectionist, a revolutionary. “You think I’m a robber, a bandit?” asks J. when he’s arrested (14:48), but again, this is a wretched translation. The word is leestee, i.e. freedom fighter or terrorist depending on one’s point of view, the very thing Barabbas is. The accusation at

his Jewish trial is that he threatened the temple (14:58) and that's repeated in the mockery at the cross, 15:29; the issue at Roman trial is that whether he pretends to be king (15:2, 9; see too the mockery of the soldiers, 15:18, 26). That these are the charges will be obvious to all of us here. It isn't and won't be to folks who hear this story in churches on Palm Sunday (and pity the lack of time that day for preachers to dig into it). Ask people in the pews, why did J. die? Their answer: to take away our sins. They'd be shocked to learn, I'll bet, that in Mk. sin per se is hardly ever mentioned. The Baptist brings it up, ch. 1, as does J. at the healing of the paralytic, ch. 2, but that's it. The word "sin," hamartia, appears nowhere else in the entire Gospel. Instead J. attends to sinners plagued by the consequences of sin—madness, as in infestation by unclean spirits; also sickness, hunger, and death, to say nothing of the deadly oppressiveness of the very systems that God himself has put in place to manage sinners, be it the temple or Rome. Sinners run these, of course. Sinners are also excessively attached to them. What we're about to explore is how J. focuses above all on the blindness, deafness, and hardness of heart that underwrites such attachments. Blindness (and deafness) is what sin is fundamentally about. When woman saw that tree was good for food, etc., she ate, and when the man ate too they saw that they were naked (Gen. 3), and up went the barriers of fear and hostility that J. will tackle in this very dark tale, this Gospel, so to speak, as St. Mark tells it. "So to speak," because it ends in a bust. "They said nothing to anyone, because they were

afraid" (16:8).

56. Comes **the close, the silent interlude**, Mk. 16:9 to 16:11, and on the far side of that gap is a bunch of people spending a Monday morning in Belleville, IL, with their noses buried in 1:1 to 16:8, as if there's something useful to be found there after all. As if the J. of Mark's telling is worth reading and thinking about in A.D. 2012. Herein lies a mystery that (also) begs for much attention. Which it will get, before we're done.

57. So much for [section] 1, Mark in overview

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A reading of St. Mark, Crossings-style (Part 1)

Colleagues,

This week we bring you the first part of a paper by my fellow Thursday Theology editor, Jerry Burce. At the Fourth International Crossings Conference this past January—in fact before the conference officially started—Jerry presented a Crossings-style reading of the Gospel of Mark to an audience of

pre-conference attendees. Below you'll find the first installment of that presentation, with the rest to follow in upcoming weeks. In this part, Jerry walks us through what he calls the "overture" of Mark's Gospel, drawing out the recurring themes and important words introduced in the book's first few chapters. At the bottom of this e-mail you'll find Jerry's index of those words, which may want to print out that index for ease of reference while reading.

You'll see, by the way, that Jerry's writing remains in the form of speaking notes, with an outline format and scattered abbreviations (esp. for especially, J. for Jesus or Jesus', etc.). But these small informalities take nothing away from the clarity of his writing, and I trust that you'll find much to appreciate as we revisit his pre-conference talk over the next few weeks.

Peace and Joy,
Carol Braun, for the editorial team

Orthographic note: when rendering Greek words with English letters, one wants somehow to distinguish between long "e" eta and short "e" epsilon, and between long "o" omega and short "o" omicron. To that end I've rendered as follows—

e = epsilonee = etao = omicronw = omega

1. Let's start with "joy." Chara in Gk. It's a big, big word in Matthew's Gospel. Think e.g. of the wise men seeing the star, again, at long last, as they close in on Bethlehem. The best translation of the Gk. at this point is the old KJV, "they rejoiced with exceeding great joy." Or think of Matt.'s central, defining parable, where the fellow, finding treasure in field, "in his joy" rushes off to sell

everything and buy the field. Or yet again, think of the women on Easter morning leaving the tomb with fear and great joy, *megala chara*, the very thing that the eleven bubble with at the end of Luke's Gospel on their post-Ascension return to Jerusalem, or that they feel, according to John, on Easter night when Jesus shows them his hands and feet. "Echareesan," it says; they "joyed" when they saw the Lord, the one who had said many things to them in the upper room so that "my joy may be in you and your joy may be complete" (Jn. 15:11). Later comes that other apostle, the Gospeler par excellence, the one who calls the saints at Philippi his "joy and crown" and urges them to "rejoice in the Lord always," and again he will say "rejoice."

2. No wonder then that we who drink deeply from wells of Mt., Lk., Jn. & Paul take it for granted that joy is to the Gospel of Jesus Christ as rich, lip-smacking foam is to the kind of beer God meant for all true human beings to drink, and it ain't Bud Light, that's for sure.
3. This brings us to the conundrum that will occupy our attention today. In the Gospel according to St. Mark there is no joy. There flat out isn't. The word *chara* appears once and only once, and then fleetingly, evanescently. In ch. 4 the folks represented by the seed that falls on rocky ground hear the word and receive it immediately—euthus—with *chara*, i.e. with joy, and then poof, it's gone. They have no root you see. Along come troubles and persecutions and again euthus—immediately—these folks fall away. And these, mind you, are nothing more than folks J. talks about. None of the flesh-and-blood types he actually bumps into respond with joy at all, not even a tiny puff of it. And once, only once, do any of them think to glorify God. The contrast with Luke could not be more startling.

4. Mark is the dark Gospel, we might say. So dark that it forces us to ask how the writer can start with an opening sentence that promises good news. So dark that I'm guessing lots and lots of preachers will be grabbing this Easter Sunday for the John option this year. Really, who on the Lamb's High Feast will want to wrestle with Mark's dreadful last sentence: "They said nothing to anyone for they were afraid."
5. Fear permeates Mark. It's one of two standard reactions to the things Jesus does. The other, more frequent still, is amazement in an assortment of shades and strengths, conveyed in the Gk. through five different verbs, none of which the translators manage to render all that well. People are stupefied, they're beside themselves, their minds are blown, they become unhinged. Colloquial English does a better job with the verbs than formal English does.
6. The one thing people hardly ever do in Mark is trust Jesus. There are five occurrences of the noun *pistis*, ten of the verb *pisteuw*, fifteen "faith" words altogether, and the context in all but four of these is Jesus asking for something he doesn't get. He doesn't get it because the people he's with are blind and deaf. Seeing, they don't perceive, listening, they fail to hear, and especially where the disciples are concerned their minds are thick like molasses. They flat out don't get it. Twice it says that their hearts are hardened—an assertion you don't see in either Luke or Matthew (see Mark 6:52, 8:17, each occurrence preceded by one of the great feeding miracles).
7. No wonder that in Mark's Gospel Jesus gets impatient and testy, exasperated—"you still don't get it," he asks, ch. 8—and now and then he's downright angry, not just with enemies but with crowds and disciples too, ch. 9. Only in Mark can you imagine the disciples muttering as they tag along about the mood the boss is in today.

8. No wonder too that of the four passion accounts Mark's is the bleakest by far. In Mk. Jesus goes to his death without the slightest trace of human sympathy, support, or remorse, no governor's wife troubled by dreams, no weeping women, no mother looking on with breaking heart, and for sure no Judas despairing or thief repenting. Mark's sole distinct detail is of the young man in the garden running naked into the night. More on that fellow later, but for now note simply how alone Jesus is. In Mark the loss is unrelenting, the darkness unmitigated by the faintest trace of light. And again the last word, even on Easter, is "they were afraid."
9. **Comes the question—the compelling question—how is Mark gospel? How through a tale so stark and grim does God deliver news that's good for us today?**
10. I propose in our time together this morning to start thinking that through with you, all over again, as the case may be. It's not, after all, as if Mark is altogether new to anybody here. Some of you will know it as well as I do, or even better. Feel free to chip in as we go along, please.
11. Here's the approach I plan to take.
 - a. First, we're going to do a quick step through the Gospel from beginning to end, paying particular attention as we go along to the introduction, then to section divisions, and then to key issues within sections. We'll spend some time also on Mark's vocabulary as a key to spotting the things that matter to him and making connections that the translations obscure.
 - b. Second, we'll dig more deeply into a handful of specific episodes, chiefly the spit miracles (that's my term; I'll explain when we get there), then the healing of Bartimaeus, and then the account of the

widow's mite. We'll think too about Mark's peculiar veaviskos, the young man in the garden, the young man in the tomb, and in the course of that we'll tackle the problem of the ending that isn't an ending.

- c. Finally I want to run the Gospel as a whole through the Crossings six-step matrix as a way of getting above all i) to what our deepest issue is in Mark's proclamation, and ii) to Christ, and to what he's doing for those who listen to him as disciples today.

- 12. Lots to do, so let's get started. Bibles open, please to Mark 1:1.

+ + +

- 13. Section 1. The Overture, you might say, wherein are sounded all the chief themes that we'll encounter in the rest of the tale as it unfolds. **We'll take the intro slowly**, then scoot through the rest (see at par. 23). Start by reading, 1:1 through 1:8....
- 14. v. 1, The good news of Jesus Christ the Son of God. Says who? How so, good news? That's the very claim we've got to test. If we don't get there, i.e. if it's not good news for us and for our children, our neighbors, our 2012 world, then get out the scissors and snip away. There's no point in reading this stuff any longer, and our time will be better spent in making the best of our lives in a bad news world the way everybody else keeps trying to do.
- 15. v. 2. "As it is written in the prophet Isaiah." In fact, he starts by quoting Malachi, 3rd chapter, and gives the opening line of an otherwise hidden passage of such significance that we've got to take the time to look at it. Flip there and follow along, and if in reading you need to hum Handel's recitative and chorus, do so softly.
- 16. Malachi, then, 3: 1, "Behold I send my messenger to

prepare the way, and the Lord whom you seek will come suddenly to his temple." So guess what, that's precisely where and how Mark will show the Son of God going, to the temple, and suddenly. Forget Johannine chronology. In Mk. there's only one trip to Jerusalem. It launches late in ch. 8, with the sudden first-and-only swoop into the city and temple coming in ch. 11. Once there Jesus will be the refining fire and fuller's soap, Mal. 3: 2, that purifies the sons of Levi and forces them for once in their lives to present a righteous offering to the Lord, not that they'll know that's what they're doing when the nail J. to his cross. (The irony in Mark is everywhere, it's everywhere.) And J. will also bear witness, Mal. 3:5, against oppressors of widows and those who "thrust aside the alien." Much more on that later when we attend to the episode of the widow's mite. For now, there are two things to notice. Notice first how this Malachian passage is the Jerusalem agenda for J. as Mark will tell it, an agenda launched and anticipated in his earlier scampering around the Sea of Galilee, chs. 1-8. When you work through those first chapters, pay attention to how issues of ritual cleanliness keep cropping up, over and over, not just in spats between J. and his opponents, but in the fact, e.g., that the bleeding woman is unclean, and so is the dead girl, and so is the leper, and so are all those other denizens of the crowds who touch or get to be touched by the fuller's soap (Mk. is big on touch, again we'll see that more closely); and as for demons, they're not just demons, they're unclean spirits—that's Mk.'s standard term for them—and like blood stains they're intractable, impossible to purge until now, suddenly now, when Mr. Clean is on the scene. That's what's coming, first in Galilee, then in Jerusalem where Mr. Clean will go crazy.

17. The second big thing to notice—and this I think is

absolutely critical to grasping Mark as good news: notice how all this Malachian advance notice of Jesus' agenda is in fact tucked into the gap between 1:2 and 1:3, and there it lurks, hidden away where the untutored crowds are bound to miss it. Disciples, on the other hand, are meant to catch it, which is not to say that they do. Still, to them has been given "the secret of the kingdom of God" (4:11). Let me suggest—this is my personal thesis; have others suggested it? I don't know—that when reading Mark the secret of the kingdom, i.e. of what God is up to for us in J., lies in the hidden recesses of gaps like the Malchian gap we've just noticed; and for us today it will lie especially in a yawning gap that we'll get to at the very end. It's there, in a post-Markan gap, so to speak, where we'll find God's answer to our central question, which again is the only real question, namely how does Mark's "good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God" emerge as good news for all of us today?

18. Pushing forward, then, still in Mk's introduction, v. 3. Here he does quote Isaiah, ch. 40, "Prepare the way of the Lord," where "way" = Gk. hodos. Hodos will be a key marker for identifying a major section break in ch. 8. Further, "make his paths straight," where "straight" = Gk. eutheias, a near relative of euthus, "immediately." Euthus is one of Mark's huge words, as you'll see on the vocabulary sheet. Straight eutheias paths enable one to be immediate, euthus. What makes for a straight path we'll get to shortly, but first, another gap thing, the stuff from Isaiah 40 that Mark doesn't reproduce but assumes disciples will pick up on, as disciples trained by good old Handel are certain to do, yes? What's hidden in this gap? Mountains laid low, valleys lifted up, the glory of the Lord revealed so that—get this—all flesh shall see it together. All flesh, not just Jewish flesh, all people

seeing together, and there you have two huge Markan motifs, esp. in the Galilean section, though in Jerusalem too. Again the vocab sheet: seeing–eidw, also bleppw, anableppw, thewrew, horaw—is an incredibly important word, where seeing means spotting the glory of God in Jesus (the Son of God), and not elsewhere. The grim surprise of Mark is how few people wind up doing that. They don't hear so well either. For Mark, seeing and hearing are paired concerns, and huge concerns at that, both of them. Again, check the vocab sheet, akouw (“hear”).

19. v. 4. Comes now John the Baptist preaching (keerussw) a baptism—a washing, a new way of getting clean—which involves “repentance for the forgiveness of sin?” No, “repentance” into the forgiveness of sins where forgiveness is God's alternative way of dealing with the human sin-problem, alternative, that is, to the temple way, or to the mind-the-p's-&-q's-of-Moses way, or to all the other ways that human beings cook up to cope with each other's sin. Here's the thing: turning away from those other sin-solving schemes and into forgiveness as God's preferred scheme—being open to that forgiveness, being willing at least to look at the thing—is what will make Jesus' paths straight and progress immediate. By contrast, folks who are invested in the other schemes—esp. the few folks whose power, income, reputation, etc. derive from them—will want nothing to do with forgiveness, and their resistance will slow the Lord down. Look at the vocab sheet. Notice how the occurrences of euthus are bunched in the opening Galilean chapters and diminish after the turn to Jerusalem in ch. 8. Why? Because Galilee is swarming with old-system losers who are hungry for something new that will serve to save them. Jerusalem by contrast is run by old-system winners. They're out to defend their turf and the perks that go with it. It's the same deal today.

On Wall St., in academia, among cultured cosmopolitans, among all the winners in our secular sin-management systems, Jesus gets mocked and his church withers. In Africa, we hear, the losers flock to him. There his paths are straight, the results immediate, and the church thrives. (Well, sort of. Disciples are running the show, and as Mk. shows, disciples have issues.)

20. v. 8. Note quickly how John promises the coming one who will baptize you with the Holy Spirit. That never happens in Mark as it does, say, in Jn. 20. This is significant. Again we'll get to that later.
21. v. 9, J. is baptized. He comes from Nazareth. He won't return there, except very briefly. The announcement signals God's blessing and authorization for everything he's about to do. What's esp. important here is that J. sees and J. hears-and takes it seriously as obtuse disciples will not. Here's the first hint in Mark of what Luther will call the alien righteousness that will be his preeminent and saving gift to those of us who don't see and don't hear. What Jesus sees, by the way, are the heavens "torn apart" as the temple curtain will be. It's the same Gk. verb in both places, schizw as in schism, as in the rending divisions that religious systems everywhere are rife with. Let me suggest that here God is creating a schism of his own, the one that will occupy Paul, but will also drive the underlying theological drama in the rest of Mark, i.e. a schism between God's very own Moses-system and his new Jesus-system. The former keeps the heavens closed and God distant and hidden. The new one tears the heavens open and leaves us looking at the very face of God-for-us in the person of Christ. From here on the two systems will be in unrelenting conflict.
22. By the way, if you're at all struck here by the force of the verb, not to say its violence, see how that's

continued in v. 12, where the Spirit “drives” J. into the desert. In Matt. and Lk. the Spirit “leads.” Here the verb is *exballw*, to toss out, to give the boot to, so to speak. *Exballw* is what J. will do to the unclean spirits he encounters in Galilee and later to the traders infesting the temple in Jerusalem. A bit of pure speculation: is the Spirit teaching him here how hard and tough he’ll need to be when he rolls up his sleeves and gets to work? Alternatively is the background to this the scapegoat driven into the desert, having bathed in the sinners’ bath and gotten covered with their dirt?

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23. 1:14. John goes to jail, Jesus to Galilee. Now the fun starts—fun also for us because I’ve got to speed things up. From here on I do my best to fly, observation only, comment at a minimum. **We will focus on the many things that get a first mention in this Markan overture**, so to speak, wherein themes are sounded, almost all to be repeated and developed later.
24. 1:14 again. Jesus comes into Galilee. He invades it, as it were, preaching (*keerussw*) the Gospel of God. And into v. 15: this is the first and only announcement of the kingdom’s onset. Jesus does the announcing. In Mk. (versus Matt. and Lk.) the Baptist makes no mention of it. “Believe the good news,” J. says. But people don’t believe it. They won’t believe it.
25. 1:16. The calling of the first four disciples. They leave former things behind and follow J. Euthus. Immediately.
26. v. 21. First stop at Capernaum, hereafter J. home base. He wastes no time. He teaches euthus, in the synagogue. On the Sabbath, the day of rest. Forgiveness means rest. I’ll bet that’s what he teaches.
27. v. 22. First of the standard reactions to what J. says and does. Astonishment. Amazement. See the vocab sheet for the

range of words. The verb here is ekpleessomai. Fear often accompanies this, phobeomai.

28. Also v. 22: first appearance of "authority" as J. distinguishing characteristic. Exousia, as in ex-, out of, ousia, nature, being. That which emerges from who you are. He talks and acts as one greater than Moses, as the author of Torah and not its interpreter. No wonder they're surprised.
29. v. 23: first appearance of an unclean spirit with a big mouth, first exorcism. First instance of J. barking at somebody or something. Note: the spirit cries with a loud voice, megala phonee as it comes out. Same thing J. will do when his pneuma, his breath/spirit goes out of him in the moment he dies.
30. v. 27. More amazement, more talk of authority. And immediately, euthus, his fame spreads, 28.
31. v. 29. First healing, Simon's mother-in-law. 30, The first touching of the ill, the unclean. J. takes her by the hand and raises her up. First little resurrection in other words.
32. v. 32, first flocking of people at Jesus' door. The first mass healing.
33. v. 35, J. first escape to a lonely place, an eremos topos, where eremos is wilderness. First effort to dodge the crowds for a moment. Fat chance.
34. v. 36, first hint from Simon that people want him, are on the hunt for him. v. 39, first refusal to be pinned down, first tour of Galilee. First mention of exorcism as a first and foremost activity with preaching, keerussw.
35. v. 40. First and only healing encounter with a leper who also has a cleanliness issue. He'll have supper with Simon the leper when the woman anoints his feet, ch. 14. Still in v. 40, the first instance of somebody raising questions about J. motives, "if you want to". 41, First mention of

pity, compassion, churning bowels, splangnistheis, as J. compelling motive, and God's too; though an alternative reading has J. getting angry, orgistheis. Also 41, first use of haptomai, touching, as frequent aspect of Jesus' healing method. And here J. stretches out his hand to do that; God drove Adam from the garden lest he stretch out his hand for the tree of life. The phrase in LXX (Septuagint, the standard Gk. translation of the OT) is exactly the same as the one here. Old Adam stretches his hand to steal life on his terms. The new Adam—the Son of Man/Adam—stretches the hand to give life on God's terms. Later the same hand will be stretched again and nailed in place.

36. v. 43. First (or second) mention of J. getting testy and driving somebody away, exballw again. Don't tell, 44, but the guy does tell, 45, in fact he starts to keerussw, to preach; the crowds swarm, J. starts hanging out in the eremois topois, the deserted places, not "the country" as in NRSV.
37. End of chapter 1, we're all exhausted, and it's only just begun. This, folks, is Galilee. It's God among the losers.
38. 2:1-12, J. back at Capernaum, second mention of people swarming the door of his house; the paralytic's pals lower him through roof, Jesus sees their faith, the pals', not the sick guy's; he responds by forgiving the sick guy's sins. First time J. mentions forgiveness. First time the scribes perk ears up and start to bristle. First mention of blasphemy as J. essential crime in his opponent's eyes. First claim by J. himself that he has what it takes, the exousia, the authority to do what he does. First and only instance of amazed people glorifying God.
39. 2:13, first occurrence of the adverb "again," palin in Greek. We'll encounter this "again" again and again. See your vocab sheet. I'll argue later that palin is of the

essence to the Gospel as Mark tells it. Here J. is again beside the sea, the first time being when he called the first disciples. This second time is the first time that a crowd shows up on the shore, and he teaches them.

40. 2:14, he calls Levi. The word for Levi getting up to follow is *anastas*, as in rising. Think of this as another little resurrection, the first step in becoming a disciple.
41. 2:15, the first meal with sinners, not necessarily in Levi's house; in Mk. it could be Jesus' house. 16, the first Pharisaic grumbling about the company J. keeps—or entertains.
42. 2:18, the first query about disciples' behavior—by “some people,” not yet by scribes and Pharisees—the query being about their failure to fast. 2:19, the first parable, the first explicit bit of teaching. New cloth and old garment, new wine and old skins, they're not *simpatico*. This is J. first direct critique of the sin-management system presently in place.
43. 2:23-27, first mention of disciples on “the road” or “the way,” *hodos*, again, a huge word later in Mark. First argument between J. and Pharisees about what is and isn't “lawful.” *Exestin* in Gk., a verbal form of *exousia*, authority. That's what the big issue is finally all about. Does J. have the right, not to say the chops, to override Moses, whether with respect to plucking grain on Sabbath, or healing a withered hand on the Sabbath, 3:1-6?
44. 3:1, the second “again,” as in again in the synagogue, 3:2, the first instance of opponents deliberately out to catch him, 3:5, the first—or maybe second—mention of J. being angry, *orgee*, and the first mention of hardness of heart as the underlying issue. Finally, a second stretching out of a hand, this time an old Adam hand reaching for the new Adam—who responds with a healing.

45. 3:6. The enemies start plotting to destroy J. End of overture. All the themes are in place, all the bells have gotten their first clear ring. Now comes expansion on the themes as the rest unfolds.

Some Key Terms in Mark

euthus, as adjective, rendered "straight":

1:3

euthus, as adverb, rendered "immediately," "at once," "right away," etc.

1:10, 12, 18, 20, 21, 23, 28, 29, 30, 42,43; 2:8, 12; 3:6; 4:5, 15, 16, 17, 29; 5:2, 29, 30, 42 (twice); 6:25, 27, 45, 50, 54; 7:25, 35; 8:10; 9:15, 20, 24; 10:52; 11:2, 3; 14:43, 45, 72; 15:1.

eidw, see (44 occurrences)

1:10, 16, 19; 2:5, 12, 14, 16; 4:12; 5:6, 14, 16, 22, 32; 6:33, 34, 38, 48, 49, 50; 7:2; 8:33; 9:1, 8, 9, 14, 15, 20, 25, 38; 10:14; 11:13, 20; 12:15 (twice), 28, 34; 13:14, 29; 14:67, 69; 15:32, 36, 39; 16:5.

Plus occurrences of-

blepw, 14

thewrew, 7

anablepw, 6

horaw, 7

akouw, hear (40 occurrences)

2:1, 17; 3:8, 21; 4:3, 9, 12, 15, 16, 18, 20, 23, 24, 33; 5:27; 6:2, 11, 14, 16, 20 (twice), 29, 55; 7:14, 16, 25, 37; 8:18; 9:7; 10:41, 47; 11:14, 18; 12:28, 29, 37; 13:7; 14:11, 58, 64.

ekballw, drove out, give the boot to

1:12, (done to Jesus), 34, 39, 43; 3:15, 22, 23; 5:40; 6:13; 7:26; 9:18, 28, 38, 47; 11:15; 12:8.

palin, again

2:1, 13; 3:1, 20; 4:1; 5:21; 7:14, 31; 8:1, 13, 25; 10:1, 10,

24, 32; 11:3, 27; 12:4; 14:39, 40, 61, 69, 70 (twice); 15:4, 12, 13.

The amazement/astonishment group (22 occurrences)-

thambeomai, stupefy

1:27; 10:24, 32.

ekthambeomai, stupefy plus; “freak out”

9:15; 14:33 (Jesus in Gethsemane); 16:5,6.

ekstasis (n) and existeemi (v), state or act of being unbalanced, out of one’s mind, having an out-of-body experience
2:12; 3:21 (said of Jesus: “he’s nuts!”); 5:42 (first as v, then as n, they “ecstasied a mega-ecstasy”); 6:51; 16:8.

ekpleessomai, shocked, stunned, driven from one’s senses, one’s “mind is blown”

1:22; 6:2; 7:37; 10:26; 11:18.

thaumadzw, to wonder, marvel, scratch head in disbelief

5:20; 6:6 (Jesus); 15:5, 44.

ekthaumadzw, the above, and then some

12:17.

phobeomai, fear, be afraid

4:41; 5:15, 33, 36; 6:20, 50; 10:32; 11:18, 32; 12:12; 16:8.

thalassa, sea

1:16; 2:13; 3:7; 4:1 (twice), 39, 41; 5:1, 13 (twice), 21; 6:47, 40, 49; 7:31; 9:42 & 11:23 as teaching images only.

hodos, road, way

1:2, 3; 2:23; 4:4, 15 (teaching images); 6:8; 8:3; 8:27; 9:33, 34; 10:17, 21, 46, 52; 11:8; 12:14 (in opponents’ set-up question).

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