

Loving Beyond Barriers

Colleagues,

During the past two weeks ([ThTheol #729](#) and [ThTheol#730](#)) we presented the introduction and first main section of Dr. Michael Hoy's 2011 paper, "Like Living Stones: Chips of the New Rock: Confessional Reflections on 1 Peter 2:1-10 for 21st-Century Lutherans." In last week's section, Mike focused on the risks inherent in living a life of Christian faith. This week we give you the final section of Mike's paper, in which he reflects on love as a fruit of that faith, with an emphasis on taking that love out into the world.

Peace and Joy,
Carol Braun, for the editorial team

"'Like Living Stones': Chips of the New Rock" Confessional Reflections on 1 Peter 2:1-10 for 21st-Century Lutherans Central/Southern Illinois Synod, ELCA June 2-4, 2011

2. How do we bring our faithful love to bear upon God's world today? (Luther: "love toward one's neighbor")

- a. A Kelly Fryer segue. Whenever I need a good zinger, like on a Friday afternoon, Kelly Fryer has one to offer. Take this one from her book, *Reclaiming the "C" Word: Daring to be Church Again*, where she comments: "We have made an idol of church unity. We put in our time and pay our dues and do everything we can to make sure nothing threatens the church we love. We silence dissent. We fend off

controversy. We avoid conflict. We shun risk. We tolerate even the worst behavior if it means keeping the peace. We choose the safe thing, even when we know in our hearts it isn't the right thing. Hell-bent on protecting 'the church,' it even gets difficult for us to hear anymore as the world outside our doors cries out for help, for wholeness, for justice, and for a God who can make things right. It becomes almost impossible to see people out there who are dying not only of hunger, but of hopelessness. We pour so much of our energy into keeping things together in here that it's no wonder we have so little left for the world out there." [Kelly A. Fryer, *Reclaiming the "C" Word: Daring to be Church Again*, (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2006), 5.]

I hear her, loud and clear. Moreover, this particular point that she is making is directed to mainliners like you and me. Still, does she mean "church unity" or does she really mean the church that prizes their fortress walls-behind which they remain united? It seems evident, as one reads on, that it is the latter to which she objects—and I would say, correctly. But the Reformers did not understand their unity as playing their cards close to the vest. They took risks, even boasting how they "were among the first to arrive" at Augsburg, precisely because they valued the cause of Christian unity. [AC, Preface, 5.]

What they objected to is how that unity was founded on an alien foundation, not on the "authority enough" (*satis est*) for the church's union, namely, the gospel and sacraments. [AC 7; cf. also AC 5.] These gifts, however, empower the Christian community, as we even proclaim in one of our offertory prayers, "With [these gifts-and I take that to mean not just our money but also, more

significantly, bread and wine and all that we bring before the Lord's table]"—with these gifts “we offer ourselves to your service and dedicate our lives to the care and redemption of all that you have made, for the sake of him who gave himself for us, Jesus Christ our Lord.” “Care” is old-kingdom talk for justice; “redemption” is new-kingdom talk for mercy. Both are part and parcel of what our lives of love are going to look like for the sake of our neighbor—loving justly, and loving mercifully.

So, as Fryer says, we need to get “out there.”

- b. Love does not make us right; but does it make “right” for our neighbor—also at Augsburg, 1530? Today? We are so well versed in our central Lutheran teaching that we are “justified by faith” that we have, more often than we care to admit (again, repentance is in order), neglected the fruits of faith. I will not belabor the long and hoary history of quietism in Lutheranism—others have already done so quite well.

[Note: Karl Barth, for example, properly disgraced Lutherans for conceding the integrity of the gospel in this bifurcation—or separation—of the kingdoms of the church and state rather than seeing how Christian discipleship impels us to be Christians in the world. Many a Lutheran church in this time—with some exceptions—stuck to their own Sunday morning business, and separated itself from the secular work of addressing the Fuehrer, basing their premise on what they had heard even from Luther centuries before, and prior to that from Paul's letter to the Romans: “Let every person be subject to the governing authorities; for there is no authority except from God, and those authorities that exist have been instituted by God.” (13:1) Never mind the atrocities of evil that were being committed under his reign, while Lutherans sat by

and let the status quo continue. One can understand Barth's rage. However, there were some Lutherans during the conflict with Nazism who made the bold confession and were martyred. Recently, the Roman Catholic church has decided to beatify three Catholic priests from the city of Lübeck, but not the Lutheran pastor Karl Friedrich Stellbrink who stood with them in their bold defiance. A religious news commentator added, "The Vatican's decision to beatify the three priests on June 25—but not Stellbrink—is testing the ecumenical spirit, and some religious leaders worry that the event could drive a wedge between the two communities." The historical irony of this comment, and on June 25 no less, the day when the Augsburg Confession was publicly proclaimed in 1530, is even more remarkable. Omar Sacirbey, "Rome to beatify anti-Nazi priests, but not a Lutheran," *Christian Century* (May 17, 2011):19.]

To be sure, the Reformers clearly understood that faith and love were part and parcel of the Christian life. Philip Melanchthon, in his *Apology to the Augsburg Confession*, contended, "Thus good works ought to follow faith as thanksgiving toward God. Likewise, good works ought to follow faith so that faith is exercised in them, grows, and is shown to others, in order that others may be invited to godliness by our confession." [Apol. IV, 150:188. Cf. Michael Hoy, *The Faith that Works*, (Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, 1995).]

Even Luther understood that when newborn infants long for the pure, unadulterated milk, it is not so that they can continue to fatten up on the promise and let the world go however it will. Their faith grows to also them to risk new encounters with their neighbors. So Luther would encourage those who have been so nourished: "No one should

deal unfaithfully and falsely with the other person.... Christians must deal uprightly and with purity of heart, not perfidiously, with people as well as with God, fair and square, so that no one overreaches the other person in selling, buying, or promising and the like." [LW 30:47-48.] Usury, for example, was a particular evil in Luther's day, and from what I can see it hasn't dissipated too much today.

The problem of usury is a justice issue. But then, so was the pursuit of civil rights. So was overcoming apartheid in South Africa. So was the denial of the gospel's integrity during the Third Reich. Many faithful confessors could also see that as the church hierarchy went along with or even supported the status quo of all these injustices of history; they also came to confess that there is something also about the gospel—beyond justice—that is also at stake: the gospel of freedom (Martin Luther King, Jr., Letter from Birmingham Jail, 1963), the gospel of hope for equality of brothers and sisters (Kairos Document, 1985), and the promise of Christ's Lordship that prevails above all other pretenders (Barmen Declaration, 1934).

However, even if there is not a gospel issue at stake, per se, Christians take seriously that justice is God's justice. And no one should understand that better than the Christian who, in a proper understanding of the two kingdoms, knows that even though there is judgment in justice, Christians—along with all others—have the calling and obligation to advocate, support, and strengthen the neighbor in love.

Notice how it is in 1 Peter. In the verses that immediately follow those of our assembly text, the author

encourages the believers to honor those in secular authority because of their work “to punish those who do wrong and to praise those who do right” (2:14); and later he goes on to say, “Fear God. Honor the emperor.” (2:17) What we should note from this is the imperative to fear God but not to fear the emperor. Honor him, sure, for doing the work that God has given him to do; but don’t be afraid of him. That may also mean humbly and respectfully holding the emperor accountable for what that divine work is—emperors have been known to forget.

- c. What might such love look like? There are several citations of 1 Peter 2 in the confessional writings. But the most detailed reference occurs in Apology IV, the very article having to do with how we are justified by faith.

[Note: 2 Peter 2:1-10 occurs in the following contexts in the confessional writings: 2:4-6: Apology IV (justification), on faith and love (the text in consideration above); 2:5: Apology XXIV (the mass) and FC VI (third use of the law), both on the meaning of “spiritual sacrifices” as sacrifices of praise, preaching of the gospel and faith, “Christians not under the law but under grace”; 2:6: Apology XII (repentance) and Apology XXI (on believing in Christ as the basis of righteousness, not works, nor through the saints); and 2:9: TPPP (the church has the right to choose and ordain in a time when regular bishops being enemies of the gospel).]

One of the critics of the Reformation was the German Franciscan Nicholas Ferber of Hebron. Even though Ferber was not an intellectual match for some of the other critics of the Reformation, like Johann Eck or even Desiderius Erasmus, the Reformers took their critics seriously—also, by the way, a sign of faithful love—and Ferber was no exception. Now, we need to be honest in

saying that the Reformers were not holier-than-thou in their remarks, which were often enough punctuated with expletives—and neither are these foreign to the confessional writings, Luther's especially. But it is also true to say that the Reformation was a polemically charged environment; and given the abuses and injustices and even slayings suffered, the Reformers did their best to put the best construction on their critics.

It was Ferber who cited the passage from 1 Peter 4:8: "Love covers a multitude of sins." And by this he meant, See, it is love, not faith, that makes us right with God! Melanchthon could see that the real problem with this reasoning had to do with hermeneutics—how does one interpret the Scriptures? From many of the texts cited against the Reformers, the Scriptures were being read and interpreted through a legalistic lens—what the Reformers called *opinio legis* (leaning toward the law). It comes so natural so to read the Scriptures—natural in the sense of our Adamic nature. When so reading the Scriptures, we miss the message of the one Foundation in Jesus the Christ and his benefits.

[Note: Later on in the Apology, Melanchthon would address Ferber again for citing the passage from Hebrews 13:17, "Obey your leaders" (Hebrews 13:17). Melanchthon responded, "This statement requires obedience under the gospel; it does not create an authority for bishops apart from the gospel. Bishops must not create traditions contrary to the gospel nor interpret their traditions in a manner contrary to the gospel." *Apol.* XXVIII, 291:19-20.]

Such legalistic reading of the Scriptures is still a current practice, wherever the message is "do this, and you shall live." I hear it in the prosperity gospel that

often sounds like Dr. Phil with a religious zeal; I hear it in the religious-right message of how to get to dominance and victory over all your enemies; and I also hear it in the religious-left message where “Jesus said it” comes out sounding more like a club over the head rather than an invitation to pick up his cross and follow him, trusting that he has already gone ahead for you so that you may follow confidently. Legalism never helps anyone—it’s not even good Law; and it certainly does not give honor to Christ and his benefits for his hearers. So Ferber’s message, “love covers a multitude of sins,” was this same kind of legalism: if you love, you make yourself right with God.

So Melancthon went on to interpret Scripture evangelically for his critics:

“It is evident that Peter is ... speaking about love toward the neighbor because he connects this passage to the text that commands love for one another. Indeed, it could not have entered the mind of any apostle to say that our love overcomes sin and death; or that love is an atoning sacrifice on account of which God is reconciled apart from Christ the mediator; or that love is righteousness without Christ the mediator. For even if there were such a love, it would be a righteousness of the law rather than of the gospel, because the latter promises us reconciliation and righteousness when we believe that on account of Christ as the propitiator, the Father is gracious to us, and that the merits of Christ are bestowed upon us. Therefore a little earlier Peter urges [1 Peter 2:4, 5] us to come to Christ so that we might be built upon Christ. And he adds [1 Peter 2:6], “Whoever believes in him will not be put to shame.” Our love does not free us from shame when God judges and accuses us.

But faith in Christ does free us in the midst of these fears because we know that on account of Christ we are forgiven.” [Apol. 4:238-239.]

And then, having laid this Foundation solidly in faith, Melanchthon goes on to show how this justifying faith encourages us to love others:

“Thus, this text does not speak about one’s own sins, but of others’ when it says, ‘love covers sins,’ namely, the sins of others, more precisely offenses between people. That is to say, even though these offenses flare up, love conceals them, forgives, yields, and does not carry everything to the fullest extent of the law. Peter ... means that in human relations love is not obstinate, harsh, or intractable; instead, it overlooks certain mistakes of its friends and puts the best construction on even the more offensive conduct of others, just as the common proverb admonishes, ‘Know, but do not hate, the conduct of a friend.’ It is not without reason that the apostles speak so often about this responsibility of love, which the philosophers call ‘fairness.’ For this virtue is necessary for preserving public harmony, which cannot last long unless pastors and churches overlook and pardon many things among themselves.” [Apol. 4:242-243.]

The last time we were together at Synod Assembly, there were many other dear brothers and sisters who are not with us this year. Many of them are dear friends and colleagues. I grieve their departure. And I grieve also the departure of my own dear doctor father, Carl Braaten, from the ELCA. To be sure, there were words spoken in these halls that were less than loving, and not only from those who departed. That is why I also applaud the

risking, confessing voice of my dear friend and colleague, Pr. Bill Pierce, who came up to the microphone and led us all in a prayer of repentance:

"Most 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. Amen."

Such penitential love understands that perhaps we all might have listened better, might have found better ways to express ourselves, might even have considered how better to maintain the unity of the body of Christ in faith while also at the same time not ceasing to reach out in love that also bears some penance for all who have been estranged from the church and made to feel unwelcome, even in spite of the gospel's own open arms.

While we follow the apostolic encouragement to rid ourselves, for our own good, of our own evil, deceit, hypocrisy, envy, and slander, there is never a time in which we say "good riddance" to a neighbor. There is a desire to maintain the unity of faith and love in the community of Christ's church, and through the church for the world. Through faithful loving, "even though these offenses flare up, love conceals them, forgives, yields, and does not carry everything to the fullest extent of the law;" and through love, one also presses on toward the goal of "preserving public harmony, which cannot last long

unless pastors and churches overlook and pardon many things among themselves.”

Healing love is what the “living stones” do as they seek to model THE Living Stone Jesus the Christ—healing one another ultimately from our own despair, and healing the world also, which cries out for that same kind of healing.

- d. Got [spiritual] milk? In conclusion, there is today a tremendous missional challenge ahead of us. There are problems of homelessness, poverty, unemployment, underemployment, greed, environmental damages that we have created, tragedies that many have suffered, racism, sexism, political and religious exclusivism, and even a fair amount of imperialism—and if that is not enough, we find many of these things either supported or overlooked by the very power structures that should be keeping us all accountable. It is an awesome task.

It may help to start facing and ‘fessing up to our common humanity with our brothers and sisters, understanding as we do, even theologically, what it means to be losers, to be “no people” and “without mercy.” But we do so because we have a promise that holds us dear, that makes us “God’s people” with “God’s mercy,” and now get to confess that promise by faith and to live it with love.

There is a common theme in all of this, one that we may see with some regularity in magazines or on billboards or in TV commercials: Got milk?

The question’s too good to resist. For a thirsting world, we who are fed and nourished on the pure spiritual milk of Christ’s gospel, have an answer that is both faithful and loving, even full of Easter’s joy that bursts the walls of death.

How dare we risk it with all the risk it takes?

By trusting in the One who risked all for us.

How, then, should we love?

As the penitent and forgiven living stones, chips of the New Rock—which He so dearly makes of us all.

M. Hoy

June 2011

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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Risking in Faith

Colleagues,

Last week (ThTheol #729) we offered you the introduction to Dr. Michael Hoy's 2011 paper, "Like Living Stones: Chips of the New Rock: Confessional Reflections on 1 Peter 2:1-10 for 21st-Century Lutherans." Mike ended his introduction by quoting Luther's own introductory remarks on 1 Peter 2: "We have said often enough that a Christian life is composed of two parts: faith in God and love toward one's neighbor." Today we give you

the next section of Mike's paper. In this section, he focuses on faith—the first of those two parts of Christian life—with an emphasis on the risks inherent in living a life of Christian faith. Next week we bring you the final section, in which Mike reflects on love as a fruit of that faith.

Peace and Joy,
Carol Braun, for the editorial team

**“‘Like Living Stones’: Chips of the New Rock”
Confessional Reflections on 1 Peter 2:1-10 for
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1. What all are we willing to risk in faith?
 - a. Is not risk at the heart of being faith-confessors—also at Augsburg, 1530? Today? The header on the Latin text of the Augsburg Confession (1530) cites Psalm 119:46: “I will also speak of your decrees before kings, and shall not be put to shame.” Notice how this is similar to 1 Peter 2:6, “those believing in him will not be put to shame.” [Cf. also Isaiah 28:16.]
[Note: Luther himself, who lauded the Augsburg Confession from a distance, may well have had a hand in the capstone text from Psalm 119: “I am tremendously pleased to have lived to this moment when Christ, by his staunch confessors, has publicly been proclaimed in such a great assembly by means of this really most beautiful confession. And [so the word] is fulfilled: “I spoke of your testimonies in the presence of kings.” What follows will [also] be

fulfilled: "And I was not put to shame." For "whoever will confess me ... before men, him I also shall confess before my Father who is in heaven." (Matt. 10:32) LW 49:353-56.]

Whatever else the confessors at Augsburg had to be wary of, certainly being "put to shame" was part of the risk in making a theological "defense" (confessio, in Latin; apologia, in Greek) of their faith before "kings." And those kings included not only the emperor, Charles V, but also the court of the "Holy, Imperial, and Catholic Majesty" and, as the Confutation expounded with great pride, its "several learned, mature, and honorable men." And then when they considered that those who stood before them were not the most eminent theologians of the Reformation, they were all the more dismissing. Sure, many of the Reformers' brightest and best helped to craft the document, over several months prior to June 25, 1530. But the presenters themselves, the confessing risk-takers at Augsburg were lay princes and city-council members, all of whom knew very well their place before the emperor, and the risk entailed. [See Confutation, preface.] Many of the ecclesiastical superiors were really not interested in even hearing out these Augsburg Confessors. They regarded them as insubordinate trouble-makers, and they tried to persuade the emperor not even to give them a hearing.

[Note: "The confessors at Augsburg had to count it a favor that the emperor should so much as grant them a 'hearing,' and barely that, and then only to order them to plead guilty. That demand they had to refuse, of course, yet their refusal only compounded

their insubordination and in turn the defensiveness of their whole posture. Not only had they presented their confession originally under the vague onus of trouble-makers. Their confession, the more they maintained it, rendered them all the more uncooperative. Simply as defendants they were now offending against imperial authority as they had long since done against ecclesiastical, the papacy and the bishops, who had tried to dissuade the emperor from allowing a hearing in the first place." Robert W. Bertram, *A Time for Confessing*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 25. Bertram also notes that "for even such ambivalent treatment, Luther, as of 1530-31, was still inclined to put the best construction on the intentions of Emperor Charles V. WA 30/3: 291-296; LW 47: 30-33."]

Hence, part of the risk—but only part—was being shamed before one's superiors, the very ones who are persecuting and criticizing them precisely for making their confession of faith. And there are many who could tell you just how risky that is. Ask Bonhoeffer, in his time of confessing before the representatives of the Third Reich. Or Martin Luther King, Jr., in his time of confessing before this nation that was very much segregated. Also realize what happened to both of them for this risk—how they were both martyred, in a long trajectory of such witnesses. Ask any who have had to face this embarrassing moment of looking like disagreeing insubordinates, which is precisely what they are. Yet, they risk confessing risk precisely because they trust Who it is that says they will not be "put to shame"—namely, Jesus the Christ: "whoever

confesses me ... before others, I will also confess before my Father who is in heaven.” (Matthew 10:32)

Still that is only the tip of the iceberg of what all is being risked.

- b. Why is the risk worth taking? The Reformers soon became aware that their critics’ disagreements had less and less to do with them than it did with what they were defending—the gospel. The gospel was being compromised by an alien gospel that had found foundational status in the very church which they loved; and that alien gospel was being used now to justify people on a basis other than Christ’s benefits. Hence, Philip Melanchthon, in the Apology of the Augsburg Confession, lifted up why the risk was worthwhile: because “the most important topic of Christian teaching [was at stake, namely, the gospel] which, rightly understood, illumines and magnifies the honor of Christ and brings the abundant consolation that devout consciences need.” [Apol. IV:2]

What makes the risk worth taking is knowing full well what one is seeking to defend—the gospel of Jesus the Christ. The “builders,” by contrast, were standing on a castle of sand, not on the Rock of the Living Stone. So even for their sake, this confession is warranted.

But maybe more importantly, standing up for the gospel meant also standing up for the very ones who were being oppressed and deprived of their very consolations and benefits that Christ seeks to bring. It is a risk for the “least of these,” the oppressed; and yet, the risk-taking confessors also

seek to encourage these oppressed to stand up and join the ranks of the proclaiming "holy priesthood." There was no sense in Luther that this priesthood of faithful witnesses to the promise were ordained or lay. All shared in the same promise, and all were empowered by the gospel to be comforted and encouraged to witness. What a breath of fresh air to all who are oppressed, that they are not only liberated by the gospel's promise, but also get to join the ranks of those who now "proclaim the mighty deeds of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light."

[Note: Luther went to great lengths to explain that this holy priesthood in 1 Peter is the priesthood of all believers, not just the ordained; and he might just as well have said the same thing about the entire New Testament. Quoting Luther, "We ask further whether St. Peter is differentiating between spiritual and secular, as today one calls the priests the clergy and the other Christians the laity. They must admit against their will that here St. Peter is addressing all those who are Christians, namely, those who put away all malice, guile, hypocrisy, hatred, etc., who are like newborn babes and drink the unadulterated milk... Consequently, since [Christ] is the Priest and we are His brothers [and sisters], all Christians have the authority, the command, and the obligation to preach, to come before God, to pray for one another, and to offer themselves as a sacrifice to God... They are all alike and only a spiritual people. Therefore they are all priests. All may proclaim God's Word." And even when Luther felt constrained to accept

women into the ordained priesthood, he did at least acknowledge in his commentary something that would have probably raised the eyebrows, if not also the ire, of his critics: "If, however, only women were present and no men, as in nunneries, then one of the women might be authorized to preach." LW 30:53-55.]

- c. What is the deepest risk of all? Still, the critics can come back with the most damning question of all for those who are risking faith-confessors: "Who do you think you are?"

The risking confessors are still seen by their critics as mere rubble. Luther was nothing more than a boar in the vineyard, a creature that had to be dispensed with, and for whom there was already bounty on his head. (That is why he was not also present at Augsburg, much against his own wishes.)

"Who do you think you are?" is a legitimate question. But it also provides grist for the mill for a promising answer. How will you now give "an accounting of the hope that is in you"? (3:15)

The One to whom the risking faith-confessors point is he who, by all appearances, was a loser, a reject, a cursed and condemned criminal, hanging from a tree. This one is the final answer, their final trump, trusted by faith as the one whom they place before all other alternative foundations—even ones that their critics fancy and dangle before the faith-confessors as a way to strike a bargain. But faithful confessors realize just how high the stakes really are: "either fidelity or apostasy, either divine acceptance or divine rejection." [Bertram, *A Time for Confessing*, 3] The same Lord who said,

“whoever confesses me ... before others, I will also confess before my Father who is in heaven,” went on to say “whoever denies me before others, I will deny before my Father in heaven.” (Matthew 10:32-33)

So they run the risk, like Jesus before them, to be branded as blasphemers, ostracized from the community, and left with the haunting prospects that they may have been wrong all along. What do they finally have to go on? Faith, and faith alone. Their risk is putting all the eggs in the basket of their crucified Lord.

- d. What is, therefore, the posture of the risk-taker? The posture of the risk-taker is humility and boldness; or maybe better, boldness in humility. Boldness and humility may not seem to go together, but they do. Bold humility was the posture of the One they follow, who also faced rejection. He didn't laud his authority over others, like the Gentiles do, but chose the path of a servant, and in total humility. (Mark 10:42; Matthew 20:25) “He humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross.” (Philippians 2:8).

So this path of humility is taken up also by the witnessing risk-takers, not only because they follow their Lord, but even more profoundly because they realize that the ambiguous truth of their own lives is not all that different from that of their erring brothers and sisters, all of whom Christ came to liberate. Yet the witnessing risk-takers are bold, because for all their faults and foibles, they are mortifyingly right in making this confession of faith in the gospel.

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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1 Peter 2:1-10 as a Text for Confessors

Colleagues,

Dr. Michael Hoy is your writer today, and for the next two weeks as well. Lots of you will recognize the name. Mike has been writing for Crossings for well over a decade. You'll see innumerable examples of his work under both the "Text Study" and "Newsletter" tabs of our [website](#). In recent years he has served as chief steward of Robert W. Bertram's theological legacy, bringing previously unpublished work to light from his papers, ushering two books (A Time for Confessing and The Divorce of Sex and Marriage) into posthumous publication, and assembling a definitive [bibliography](#) of Bertram's writings.

Mike serves these days as pastor of First Evangelical Lutheran Church in Decatur, Illinois. Last year he was invited to deliver a paper at the annual assembly of his ELCA synod, Central/Southern Illinois. He was lately gracious enough to share that with us so we could pass it along to all of you. It's

a fairly hefty piece of work, so we'll do the passing in three segments, starting today with an extensive introduction.

Have you read enough of Bertram's work to recognize his style? If so you'll be quick to catch echoes of it in the work of his cherished student. Better still, you'll encounter some continued careful thinking around a few of Bob's key themes. Mike reminds us that nothing has happened in the nine years since Bob's death to detract from their urgency.

Peace and Joy, Jerry Burce, for the editorial team

**“‘Like Living Stones’: Chips of the New Rock”
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Throughout this season of Easter, we have been treated to the marvelous epistle of 1 Peter. Just two weeks ago, our second reading was from 1 Peter 2:2-10. And for some reason, the lectionary writers chose not to include the ethical imperative of the first verse, “Rid yourselves, therefore, of all malice, and all guile, insincerity, envy, and all slander.” (NRSV)

To be sure, in the context of the first hearers of the Petrine community, this would have been an encouragement to stay on their path of non-conformity with their previous way of life. The first word of this text, “put aside” or “get rid of,” can mean in some senses “taking off” the old garments of our sinful nature, and taking on then the clothing of righteousness. Would that it were that easy as changing clothes!

[Note: The first word of chapter 2 is the word we have

translated, “put aside,” or “get rid of.” And I find fascinating the diversity of the richness of the word here. In one context, it can mean quite literally, “taking off”—as in taking off some clothes—in this case, the old garments of our sinful nature; and it was used in this way in the book of Acts, where the people “took off” their outer garments and laid them “at the feet of a young man named Saul” in order to throw stones at Stephen (Acts 7:58). But in this context, it seems to have more of the meaning of what we see of its usage in Paul’s letter to the Romans, “Let us lay aside (apoqwmeqa) the works of darkness and put on the armor of light” (Romans 13:12). And it finds a similar expression in the first chapter of the book of James: “Therefore rid yourselves (apoqemenoi) of all sordidness and rank growth of wickedness, and welcome the implanted word that has the power to save your souls” (James 1:21).]

In his exposition of this text from 1 Peter 2, Luther perceived a struggle: “St. Peter says: Be armed in such a way that you guard against sins which still cling to you, and that you constantly fight against them. For our worst foes are in our bosom and in our flesh and blood. They wake, sleep, and live with us like an evil guest whom we have invited to our house and cannot get rid of.” [LW 30:47. Italics mine.]

This corresponds with how the Reformers understood the nature of the problem we are up against and from which Jesus the Christ came to save us. “Since the fall of Adam, all human beings who are born in the natural way are conceived and born in sin. This means that from birth they are full of evil lust and inclination and cannot by nature possess true fear of God and true faith in God.” [AC 2:1.] Hence, the removal of these rags of evil, deceit, hypocrisy, envy, slander, and whatever else there is in our sinful nature, requires radical surgery-getting to the root of our problem. As Luther says, our sinful nature “still clings to us.”

By contrast, the balance of our text in 1 Peter 2 speaks glowingly about the community of faith: Through their new birth as “newborn infants,” they progress to becoming a holy priesthood, a chosen race, a royal priesthood and holy nation, and living stones. All of this so that they may be witnesses—confessing witnesses—who proclaim that they are no longer in darkness, but in God’s marvelous light. They who had no hope as “no people” and those “without mercy” may proclaim that they are God’s people with God’s mercy.

How does one move from the old to the new, from the old radical roots in Adam to the new radical roots in Jesus the Christ?

The author of 1 Peter 2 suggests an answer that has baptismal overtones: “Like newborn infants, long for the pure, spiritual milk” of the gospel. The phrase harks back to the baptismal reference in chapter 1, “By his great mercy he has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.” (1:3) We start where we are founded in baptism, where our roots with Adam were drowned into death with Christ, and we rise again with Christ as new creatures.

But might the same also be said about our Lord’s supper? Recently in a first communion class I was discussing the meaning of the phrase, “the forgiveness of sins.” One young girl raised her hand and said, “I don’t have any sins.” Her mother, who was sitting nearby, chuckled. I wondered at this point whether it would be appropriate to suggest what Luther did, that one should beat one’s hands against the breast to see if one is still flesh and blood. [LC 5:75.] But instead, I chose a more personal and penitential direction. I told her that as her pastor I knew better about myself. And that is why I value coming to this table of our Lord for his sacrament of forgiveness, to have cancelled and crossed out all the truth of all my sins, and to do so publicly, together with all my brothers and sisters who

also come to Jesus' table. The sacrament is both mortifying and liberating at the same time. But as we go from this meal, we go with a promise that frees us to say—to say what?—well, maybe what you just said, “I don't have any sins.” Those I have given to Jesus; and instead, I have what he in his body and blood came to give me—righteousness and life.

Sticking with this value of penance, this leads me to yet a third possible sacramental answer. Repentance and forgiveness, I would like to suggest, are not only at the roots of our own practice of baptism and the Lord's supper, but as the Reformers themselves claimed, they are a third sacrament. [Apol. 13:4; LC 4:74.] Their deeper value, as I hope I will have us come to see, is that they bring healing amidst brothers and sisters, even when those brothers and sisters cannot seemingly come together otherwise. Robert Sanderson, the Bishop of Lincoln, England, in the early 1600s, was cross-examining the pride of the Pharisee in Jesus' parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector. The Pharisee prays, “God, I thank you that I am not like other people,” and then he goes on to list who those “other people” are, including the tax collector. Sanderson remarks on how this Pharisaical attitude still pervades today: “Am I any better than he? Of better mould than he? Or better tempered than he? Am I not a child of the same Adam, a vessel of the same clay, a chip of the same block, with him? Why then should I be high-minded, when I see him fallen before me? Why should I not rather fear, lest my foot slip, as well as his hath done?” [The Works of Robert Sanderson, D.D., Bishop of Lincoln, Volume 3 (Oxford University Press, 1854), 263. Available free online, Google Books. Robert Sanderson's sermon was in 1627.]

His expression, “chip of the same block,” is an early precursor to our expression, “chips off the old block.” When we confess our sins, we confess that we are, indeed, the same old “chips off the old block” with Adam; in hearing the absolution and

forgiveness, even making again the sign of the cross, or sharing the words with brothers and sisters, “The peace of the Lord be with you,” the same words that they share in return, we hear and embrace Jesus’ gospel-ing proclamation upon us, that he, THE Living Stone, now makes of us his “living stones,” or as I have suggested, “chips of the New Rock.”

How we move then from the universal truth that in Adam we have all been part of a fallen humanity to the new truth which is also meant to be universal in Christ—this new birth, election, and holy, promise-proclaiming priesthood—comes by way of the cross, penitentially, but with forgiveness.

Karen, my spouse, had just come back from St. Louis where her father is dying from cancer and is now at the time of his own final crossing in home hospice. I could see she was understandably restless and anxious with it all. We talked and prayed late into the evening, and then I made the sign of the cross upon her forehead. “You did the same thing for my dad, too,” she said. “Yes,” I responded, “it’s finally there—on his cross—where we can let all of this rest.”

We trust THE Living Stone who takes upon himself this decaying garment of our sins and makes them his through the cross, and gives to us instead the new clothing of his garment of righteousness and life, which, as Luther said, is “now completely yours through faith”—all other garments and evidence to the contrary. [LW 30:47]

[Note: The word used multiple times here for “believing” (pisteuw; even in its negative form in v. 7, apistew) bears direct resemblance to the noun “faith” (pistis). In fact, it was this faith that trusts Jesus the Christ, THE living Stone, that the Reformers made an impassioned appeal is the real “spiritual sacrifice” of which this text speaks. It is not the sacrifices

of our works, or the kinds of weaker spiritual sacrifices of obligation that were demanded by the church in the sixteenth century, but the sacrifice of praise that comes from our faith that knows on which rock it really stands.]

And yet what did all this promise get Jesus the Christ as he lived and proclaimed the message of the gospel, as the very Living Stone and Foundation for the world? Rejection: “the very stone that the builders rejected has become the very head of the corner.” (2:7) Such rejection is also part and parcel of the living stones that follow after him: “those believing in him will not be put to shame.” (2:6) It implies that shame was something they experienced. Later, the author of 1 Peter will be more explicit about this: “They [your worldly critics and persecutors] are surprised that you no longer join them in their excesses of dissipation, and so they malign you.” (4:4)

[Note: The text of 1 Peter 2:7, from Psalm 118:22, reads, “The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone.” This text is used only four other times in the New Testament. Three of those occur in the Synoptic gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, right after Jesus tells the story about the wicked tenants who despised the messengers sent on ahead by the landowner for his due, and then when the landowner sent his Son, they despised also him. (Matt. 21:42; Mark 12:10; Luke 20:17) Part of the risk for Jesus was in the very telling of the parable. The religious authorities of his time realized that he was speaking this parable “about them.” But fearing the people, they did not lay hands on him. The remaining place where this text is cited is right after Peter’s bold confession on trial before the Council for healing a lame man in the name of the risen Lord Jesus Christ. Peter concludes his sermon there with these words: “There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved.” The Council, while rejecting their confession, also

acknowledged “the boldness of Peter and John and realized that they were uneducated and ordinary men.” (Acts 4:8-13) And in the passage that follows, it is this boldness that inspires the community of believers.]

Yet note the paradoxical blessing that comes despite the rejection. As when Jesus was persecuted and could hear the mocking sound from his critics, “good riddance,” he himself faithfully and lovingly stayed deeply connected with them on the cross, even for their very sake. When 1 Peter 2:1 says “rid yourselves” of the evils, he does not encourage separation from the neighbors of this world, but rather encourages us by faith and through faithful loving to embrace our neighbors and their world. It is as Luther lifted up in his opening expository remarks about 1 Peter 2: “We have said often enough that a Christian life is composed of two parts: faith in God and love toward one’s neighbor.”

Both of these elements, faith and love, are testified to in our confessional writings, and as faith-confessors today we seek to stay in the world with our critics, risking in faith, and loving beyond barriers that would prohibit us.

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The Athanasian Creed

Colleagues,

With Trinity Sunday fast approaching, this week's Thursday Theology is an exchange between Bishop Marcus Lohrmann and a congregant from his synod who asks him some trenchant questions about the Athanasian Creed. The Rev. Dr. Lohrmann (whom we last quoted in [ThTheol #703](#)) is a pastor and pastoral theologian, as well as bishop of the ELCA's Northwest Ohio synod. In this note from 2007, which we gratefully reproduce here, he outlines the Biblical underpinnings of the closing lines of the Athanasian creed, and he offers (as he puts it) a "Lutheran" reading of those lines which at first seem so very un-Lutheran. We pray that his thoughts will help guide your own thinking about the Athanasian Creed in the days leading up to Trinity Sunday.

Peace and Joy,
Carol Braun, for the editorial team

The Athanasian Creed: Some Good Questions and a Response

A member of one of our congregations sent me an e-mail in which she asked some good questions about the Athanasian Creed, a creed that is used in many of our congregations on Trinity Sunday. With her permission, I share the questions:

Today's service included the reading of the Athanasian Creed. This is an important creed for us to read and hear as it really tries to explain the Trinity, a very difficult concept for most of us to understand.

However, the last part of the creed seems to say that we are entered into "eternal life" through the good we do. Our actions

will decide whether we have “eternal life,” or “eternal fire”:

At his coming all the people shall rise bodily to give an account of their own deeds. Those who have done good will enter eternal life, those who have done evil will enter eternal fire. This is the catholic faith. One cannot be saved without believing this firmly and faithfully.

This is seemingly totally incompatible with what Luther taught and how I have been raised in the Lutheran community. I have been taught that it is through “faith” in Jesus Christ, his death on the cross and then resurrection that forgiveness [is assured] for the faithful.

This concept of forgiveness and eternal life through “faith” alone is the “core” of our Lutheran faith. Am I wrong?

Therefore, I come to you to ask the following questions:

- Am I misunderstanding this part of the creed?
- Am I misunderstanding the core of Luther’s philosophy and the Lutheran religion?
- If this section of the creed is not what we really believe, then why do we read and recite it?
- Is there not a better text to recite that supports our Lutheran beliefs?

These are great questions! Below is my response:

Athanasius was one of the “fathers” of the Church who lived in the fourth century and who played an important part in the formulation of the Nicene Creed which was developed at the Council of Nicaea in 325AD. One of the concerns of that Council was to describe the nature of God. The Athanasian Creed was written by Christians in about the sixth century amidst renewed debates about the nature of God, and it was given the name “Athanasian Creed” in memory of Athanasius. The creed seeks to

stress the unity of the divine essence, one God in three persons. Erwin Lueker in Lutheran Cyclopedia points out that "Luther regarded it as possibly the grandest production of the church since the time of the Apostles" (p. 256). This Creed has been used in the Church since the sixth century. Because of its comprehensive statement on the Trinity, it is often used on Trinity Sunday.

I can appreciate your reaction to the first paragraph. I think it can offend "modern sensibilities" and, if not properly understood, cause distress and confusion. I think that by accepting it, the Church wanted to say, "The story of the God revealed in Jesus Christ is critical. It is a matter of life and death. To value the person and work of Christ we need to see in that the reality of God." The phrase "Whoever does not keep it whole and undefiled will without doubt perish for eternity" is strong language intended to urge the hearer to be willing to stake their life on this cross-centered story.

I can also appreciate your reaction to the last paragraphs. They can offend Lutheran sensibilities which emphasize that we are justified by God's grace through faith in Jesus Christ without works of the Law (see Romans and Galatians).

Interestingly enough, however, this is language that reflects some Biblical language. For example, the Gospel of Matthew stresses the "doing of righteousness." Check out the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew 5-8; or Jesus' words in Matthew 7:24, "Everyone then who hears these words and does them will be like a wise man who built his house on a rock;" or 7:21, "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord' shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of my Father in heaven." Matthew 25 speaks of God's judgment in the light of how we have responded to the poor, naked, imprisoned, hungry, etc. The Old Testament is filled with warnings directed against those whose

worship and words are true but are judged “empty,” inviting the wrath of God because care for the poor, for justice, for humility was missing. Here you might think of the Micah text, “What does God require of you but to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with your God.” Many other texts could be cited in the New Testament as well. Scripture does speak of the need to give an account of deeds. Paul can even use that language.

Yet, it is also true that when we see what the Law of God requires, we are tempted to either despair or self-righteousness. To those who despair, God offers the promise of mercy in Christ. Faith is invited. And when such faith is confessed, there is evidence of the Spirit of God. Paul: “No one can say Jesus is Lord except by the Holy Spirit.” To those who are self-righteous, Christ speaks words of judgment.

In terms of the words in the text, I do read them in a “Lutheran” way, although they are words that belong to the Christian community beyond the Lutheran community. When I am asked on that day to “give an account of my own deeds,” I will “plead Christ” and pray, “Dear God, for the sake of Jesus Christ, when you look at me, please see your beloved Son, who has promised to clothe me in his righteousness.” The “account” that I will give is the account of him who has forgiven and claimed me as his own. I would do a similar thing with the last paragraph. To “do good” is not first and foremost to do “right behavior.” It is to live and act in faith, that is, trusting in God’s promises in Christ.

I like John 14-17 for this stuff. In these chapters, Jesus encourages us to abide in him. To act apart from Christ is to be branches cut off from the vine. To abide in Christ is to trust in him who gives lives. What works should we be doing to get “life”? Jesus offers us a pun in response. “This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he sent.” Again, “to do good”

is to be “in Christ,” to trust oneself to God’s promises in Christ even when our consciences condemn us.

With regard to the last paragraph, again I think the writers intend to say what Scripture says at John 3:16 and elsewhere: To believe this story, to hang one’s heart on it, that is, on Christ, is to get life. Apart from that one gets judgment. The final judgment is of course God’s to make. But it is our task and privilege to share and embody this word of Life that is Christ for the world.

Having said all of the above, I would not recommend using this creed with great frequency but I think it is worth revisiting. If nothing else, its use prompts the great questions you have asked. However, given your questions, I’m not sure it is helpful to use if we fail to take time to “unpack” it. Otherwise our words can be only a “noisy” gong. The use of the three creeds also serves to remind me that whenever I gather at the Lord’s Table I am joined to Christians of every time and place. As I work, by God’s grace and forgiveness, at living the faith in the present, I need to hear the confession of those who have claimed and encouraged Christ in the past.

Submitted by:

Bishop Marcus Lohrmann

April 2, 2007

Two from the “Oops” Department—

- a. Bob Schultz, featured in #726, lives in Seattle, not Portland.
- b. Last week’s offering was #727, not #227.

Our thanks to the eagle-eyed reader who spotted these and told us.

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The Point of Christian Ministry

Colleagues,

Today, the Feast of the Ascension, is the hands-down most under-appreciated day in the entire church year. The congregation I serve continues through the sheer stubbornness of its pastors to celebrate an Ascension Day liturgy with as much pizzazz as we can muster when general interest is low. And it is low. I write this the night before the event expecting that we'll be lucky if 80 people show up, and this after a drumbeat of invitation has gone out to our immediate worshiping community of many hundreds, and beyond that to the majority of other congregations in our ELCA conference which have long since thrown in the towel where Ascension Day is concerned. Even our Catholic siblings have lurched in that direction. In the province of the State of Ohio, which includes the turf I trample, observation of the Ascension was transferred a few years ago to the Seventh Sunday of Easter. Grinding an ax, I venture the guess that at some point Little League coaches went head to head with crusty old bishops in

imposing Thursday evening obligations on the children of the faithful; whereupon parents bowed as parents will to the petty gods that coaches project themselves as being, and at length the bishops blinked.

I wish they hadn't. More and more it strikes me that if Easter gets a packed house, Ascension deserves an overflowing one. The day's news is at least that good. No one tells it better, of course, than Paul in the first two chapters of Ephesians. We'd all do well to read them slowly before going to bed on Ascension night, paying particular attention to the tenses of the verbs as one plunges from chapter one into chapter two. Christ's position at the Father's right hand turns unthinkable fantasy into present reality. For example, "God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus" (2:4-6). No ifs, ands, or buts here. This is the language of the done deal. "Here's where you are, folks. Believe it! Revel in it! Get busy and live it!" And so on.

If only the flock would gather to drink the news in. They don't. Addictions to the habits and assumptions of the present age intrude, as Paul himself kept finding out over and over. The churches of Galatia and Corinth were hardly swirls of Ascension-style joy. Why should I or any other slave of Christ expect more of the churches we labor over today?

All of which brings me to a little offering I dare to pass along for Ascension Day. It's a brief set of theses—bullet-points, in 21st century lingo—on the nature and thrust of ministry in the present era of Christ's rule, when ages overlap (see Eph. 1:21b). I jotted them out some 20 years ago in response to an academic assignment. The overall task was to articulate a

“working theology” of Christian ministry. The job for the moment was to identify the key text that drove one’s thinking on the topic, and after that to reflect on it briefly. I grabbed right away for Paul’s great pastoral plea in 2 Corinthians 5:13–6:2. See below for what spilled out. Most if not all of it will be axiomatically obvious to most of you. Still, two decades later it strikes me as worth revisiting both for me and for anyone else who grieves or gripes about the emptiness of churches on Ascension Day and wonders what to make of that. If that includes you, you’ll find Bullet-points 8 and 11 to be especially apropos.

Peace and Joy,
Jerry Burce, for the editorial team

2 Corinthians 5:13–6:2–

For if we are beside ourselves, it is for God; if we are in our right mind, it is for you. For the love of Christ urges us on, because we are convinced that one has died for all; therefore all have died. And he died for all, so that those who live might live no longer for themselves, but for him who died and was raised for them. From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer in that way. So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be

sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

As we work together with him, we urge you also not to accept the grace of God in vain. For he says, 'At an acceptable time I have listened to you, and on a day of salvation I have helped you.' See, now is the acceptable time; see, now is the day of salvation!

1. Christian ministry in general, to say nothing of ordained Christian ministry in particular, both begins and ends in that which God has done for all the world and for every human being in Christ Jesus.
2. One might ask whether it is in fact legitimate to speak of my theology of Christian ministry, or yours, since that ministry, no matter by whom it is held, is necessarily shaped and defined with respect to both content and purpose by theou-logos, that is, the Word of God, and more specifically still, the Word who became flesh and dwelt among us full of grace and truth—or as Paul would have it, the God who was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself.
3. Christian ministry is, in essence, a work of proclamation. That proclamation, in turn, is in content Christocentric; in character hortatory; in mood imperative; and in spirit urgently invitational. “Be reconciled to God, not later, but now, in this acceptable time, and in this day of salvation.”
4. This invitation rests on certain specific assertions, and among them, first, that of fundamental importance to human life is the relationship of trust which exists, or for that matter which fails to exist, between human beings and God; second, that God on his end has acted unilaterally and unequivocally to make that relationship possible as a

present reality; third, that this acting of God is none other than the ministry of suffering and death undertaken by Jesus of Nazareth who was and is the Christ in whom God was reconciling the world to himself.

5. Christian ministry presupposes not only the possibility, but indeed, the ubiquity of human sin, by which is meant an absence of "rightness" with God. It seeks to answer the sinner's question (the very asking of which is proof of one's status as sinner) of how it is that one might become right with God (the presumption and perception being that one is not yet that which one wishes to become).
6. To the extent that the aforementioned sinner's question is not being asked, it is the task of ministry to provoke it. This is the precise point at which the Law of God has its distinct and proper function within the context of specifically Christian ministry.
7. Christian ministry is a continuation of the ministry of God in Christ to the world. Those who engage in Christian ministry do so in the enormous presumption that they are envoys of Christ and living, breathing instruments through which God Himself is at work. As Jesus says elsewhere, "The person who receives you receives me."
8. Christian ministry is a work of constant repetition, a necessarily endless inviting of those whose sensory perceptions are drowning in old creation to trust what they hear of God's new creation in Christ, lest the reconciling grace of God should be received by them in vain, and they, for their part, should remain stubbornly unreconciled to God—or as St. John would say, disbelieving. (Note that these words of Paul, so full of urgent passion, appear in his second—or is it his fourth?—letter to a group of people for whom the Gospel is no longer brand new.)
9. From a strictly human point of view, Christian ministry is

an insane and a pointless enterprise, best avoided by those who would do something useful with their lives.

10. From God's point of view, Christian ministry is the apogee of temporal human purpose, than which no calling is higher.
11. Those who engage in Christian ministry are of necessity locked in a struggle between the aforementioned points of view. This is nothing other than the omnipresent struggle between faith and unfaith, i.e. between trusting the Gospel of God's reconciliation in Christ Jesus and disbelieving it. The ministering one is therefore constantly addressed by the very apostolic exhortation which is given him or her to proclaim: "Be reconciled!" Indeed, the first and foundational task of ministry is to fasten one's own ear to that very word, and having done so, to pray for that gift of the Holy Spirit by which alone the word of reconciliation can be received and trusted.

Addendum:

Consider the following from Matthew 9:36ff.: "When Jesus saw the crowds he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Then he said to his disciples, 'The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest.' Then he summoned his twelve disciples and gave them authority..." Note here the motivation for Christian ministry, which is nothing other than the passionate compassion of Christ himself, directed in the first place to those whose distress is the greatest. Note also that laborers (i.e. ministers) are sent by God. They are not self-appointed. Note further that Christian ministry begins with prayer to "the Lord of the harvest," who is apparently inclined to answer the prayer with the sending of none other than the pray-ers themselves.

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Politics and Theology

Colleagues,

We're going to make you work this week. We think you'll decide it was worth it.

What follows is an email interchange that happened not quite two weeks ago. On one end was Rich Jungkuntz who got a mention in the first of last week's post-scripts. Rich studied theology at Concordia Seminary and Christ Seminary–Seminex in the '70s. He jumped (or stumbled?) from there into a career of working with refugees and immigrants through an assortment of agencies, some private, some public. In 2009 he took an early retirement and is presently trying to figure out how to persuade Thai immigration authorities to let him hang out in his wife's home village for as long as he'd like to. That's where he wrote from, northeastern Thailand, not all that far from the banks of the Mekong River, with Laos on the other side.

And there, in that corner of God's earth, Rich keeps up with theology. You'll see that in his instigating note.

The one instigated was Robert C. Schultz, whom some of you may have met at past Crossings conferences. Bob lives in Portland, Oregon, where he retired after a peripatetic teaching career that started at Valparaiso University, passed through the Lutheran Southern Seminary, and led eventually to posts at Roman Catholic institutions. Bob was among a handful of pioneering Missouri Synod seminary graduates who, in the early 1950s, headed over to Germany for doctoral studies. Bob landed at Erlangen, where he came under the sway of Werner Elert. Perhaps you don't know Elert? He was a marvelous confessional theologian who did the bulk of his work in the second quarter of the last century. He contended mightily with Karl Barth over issues that have classically divided Lutherans and the Reformed. Along the way he wrote a handful of thick, dense, and immensely rich volumes on dogmatics, ethics, and the history of doctrine, a couple of which texts were required reading for students of Bob Bertram and Ed Schroeder in the 1970s. Ed had had the good fortune of taking a class or two with Elert during his own studies in Germany. For his part, Bob Schultz names Elert as his doktorvater.

Elert got a certain amount of attention in U.S. Lutheran circles during the '50s and '60s. Fortress Press published one of his books. Concordia Publishing House came out with a couple of others. When winds shifted within the LCMS he became a theologian-non-grata, so to speak, above all for the challenge he mounted against the old habit of trying to anchor confidence in the Gospel in a prior construal of the Bible as verbally inspired and inerrant. In recent years he's been attacked from a different direction, namely by theologians associated with Lutheran CORE who blame him for what they perceive as the ELCA's drift into moral decay. Ed Schroeder wrote about this some time ago. See Thursday Theologies [611](#) and [612](#).

Back to Rich Jungkuntz, who read Elert at seminary during the

years of Missouri's tumult over the Bible. With the above as background you'll understand his note. You'll also be more equipped to follow Bob Schultz's response, a response we wanted to get to you because of the history Bob relates. We were unaware of much of it. Guessing that many of you were too, we figured you'd appreciate some new learning as much as we did. I for one have long thought that matters of culture and politics have far more to do with the shape of our operative theologies than most of us would care to admit. Bob does a nice job of backing up that point.

Just by the way, Bob is presently busy with a new translation of The Christian Faith, Elert's opus on dogmatics. Rich has been helping him out as a reader. This too will shed a bit of light on the nature of their exchange.

Peace and Joy,
Jerry Burce,
for the editorial team

From Rich, to selected recipients—

Thought you Elertians would enjoy this.

From a review of **The Sacred Text: Excavating the Texts, Exploring the Interpretations, and Engaging the Theologies of the Christian Scriptures** Bird, Michael and Michael Pahl, editors:

"The final essay in this section is John C. Poirier's **thought-provoking** "Scripture and Canon." Here Poirier challenges current reasoning about Scripture's authority based on "inspiration" and **suggests that Scripture's authority is derived from the doctrinal centrality of kerygma.** This, Poirier suggests, is closest to the New Testament's view of Scripture. In support of

his argument, Poirier provides an alternate reading of 2 Tim 3:16, 2 Pet 1:20–21, and Eph 2:19–20. Moreover, the role of kerygma and the biblical author's relationship with Jesus was one of the pivotal reasons for a work's inclusion in the New Testament (emphasis added)."

Source: http://www.bookreviews.org/pdf/8115_8873.pdf

But "current reasoning" of inspiration as source of Scriptural authority? Has it not been thus since... forever?

Cheers!

Rich

Bob, responding–

Thank you for the referral to this material.

There is an interesting similarity between the approach taken by Elert in Sections 32 and 34 of *The Christian Faith* and the approach of this article.

However, there are also radical differences going back to the differences between the basic formulation of the issues in classical Calvinism and classical Lutheranism. These differences have been blurred since the late 16th century. This blurring was motivated not by theological but by political reasons.

You may remember that the Peace of Augsburg of 1555 tolerated Lutheran princes in the empire until the essential issues would be resolved by a council. The text of that political document did not define who was a Lutheran. In 1555, even the Lutheran territories that later came together under the Formula of Concord (FC) had differing definitions. That FC definition of Lutheranism had political implications. Basic Calvinist and

Zwinglian positions were rejected. However, some of the most politically and militarily powerful non-Catholic princes—especially in Saxony and in Southwestern Germany—held positions that were really Calvinist, Zwinglian, or Heidelberg Catechism that were rejected by the Formula of Concord.

There was no uncertainty about these non-FC princes' differences from the Formula of Concord on the part of either these princes or their theologians. Roman Catholics were also clear about that. Roman Catholics then claimed that these princes were not really Lutherans and challenged their toleration under the Peace of Augsburg.

If the FC Lutherans were to survive politically and militarily under the Peace of Augsburg, they needed to unite all the Protestants they could find, especially the most politically and militarily powerful non-FC Protestants. That is why the FC is—I think surprisingly—not interested in the conversation with the Counter-Reformation theologians of the Council of Trent. Trent is basically ignored. Rather the focus is on differences between Lutherans, Calvinists, Zwinglians, and Heidelberg Catechism types. By 1600, the FC Lutherans are from a military and political perspective an essential but also the least important group among the Protestants.

At the end of the 16th century, both the FC Lutherans and the RC rulers of Bavaria were still hopeful that the conflict between the Lutherans and the RC (in this case, Jesuits) could be resolved. To that end a colloquy was held in 1601 in Regensburg, site of the failed meeting in 1541 between Cardinal Contarini and Melancthon, Bucer, and others. In 1601 both sides expected that the other would be overwhelmed by their arguments and come to truth. Lutherans presented only one thesis: that Scripture is the sole judge of doctrine.

Quick and broad analysis: This departed from the FC in two ways. First, the distinction between law and gospel is no longer a factor. Second, Scripture is no longer the norm applied by the theologian to the task of judging but is rather the judge itself.

The Jesuits basically asked how—supposing they agreed with the Lutherans—they could know whether the Calvinist or the Lutheran interpretation of Scripture was correct. The Lutherans responded that God would reveal that on the Day of Judgment. The Jesuits responded that they couldn't wait that long.

The Lutherans were unable to respond and the colloquy ended with their disgrace. Basically, the person they were trying to convert felt so sorry for them that he stopped the disputation.

The papal party had asked similar questions in the past, e.g., please tell us how many blind men were outside Jericho when Jesus left town. But the Lutherans had avoided being trapped by focusing on issues of law and gospel. At Regensburg they took the bait.

Within 20 years, they had adopted the Calvinist doctrine of verbal inspiration.

Having given up hope for conciliation with Roman Catholics, the FC Lutherans were now totally dependent—going into the Thirty Years War—on political and military alliances with other Protestants. That now became the focus. Since the other Protestants were the dominant force, Lutherans had to adopt some basic Calvinist presupposition in order to enter into conversation and to make it clear that their rejection of Calvinist teaching in the FC was not their final position. The FC left no room for moderation on the person and work of Christ or on predestination. However, it was still possible to find that basis in the doctrine of Scripture.

There were also reasons to move away from law and gospel. Lutherans had become Aristotelians in the latter part of the 16th century and the dynamic distinction between law and gospel in FC V was increasingly uncomfortable. In the Apology of the Augsburg Confession (1530), Melanchthon defined the distinction in terms of content. FC V defines it in terms of process and acknowledges that the distinction cannot be based on content—at least sometimes not. FC VI is so broadly written that they would have to clarify it later.

So they built a fence around law and gospel and moved it from the beginning of systematics to a carefully limited role in the doctrine of the means of grace.

Now they could say to the Calvinists and other non-FC Protestants, there's a lot of what we agree on—basically on the doctrine of Scripture and the basis on which we will decide the issues. We Protestants are every bit as close together as the RC are. The Jesuits and the Augustinians have their differences, but they agree on how they are going to solve them. We Protestants are just like them except that we are resolving our differences by agreeing to accept whatever the Bible says. This was the broad-tent Protestantism their governments needed going into the Thirty Years War. You Calvinists and Zwinglians aren't so bad after all because you would agree with us if only you more accurately interpreted the Bible.

Rich, I see that is still the presupposition underlying your e-mail. Still, the article is speaking about the Bible in a better way, I agree.

However, as an Elertian, I would respond that this way of talking about Scriptural authority as anchored in the kerygma pertains to the gospel but never the law. On the one hand, this should not concern us. From a theological point of view it

really doesn't matter whether the law as we hear and respond to it is true or not. The law is anything and everything I experience that results in my not trusting in God. For example, as a pastor, I attempt to help people clarify the difference between real guilt and neurotic guilt. I may be right in the way in which I do that or I may be wrong. However, the mistrust of God which they both generate is the real issue of pastoral concern.

To be sure, all of us could benefit from more clarity about the law. Bonhoeffer was an official of the German government's CIA. All the signers of the [Barmen Declaration](#) had taken an oath of loyalty to Hitler. Bonhoeffer was part of the plot to assassinate Hitler. The USA supported Stalin and financed his war crimes. These days Obama has decided not to prosecute the members of the Bush Administration who committed war crimes and appears to me to continue to authorize them. Even so I will vote for Obama in November—assuming I am still alive. These are important issues. However, for my theological position, it doesn't matter. What does matter is whether the message of reconciliation is valid.

I have my own opinions on law and social policy. I hold them very strongly. On some of them, I disagree with the ELCA. However, my most serious issue is that the ELCA does not distinguish its certainty about these social issues from its certainty about the gospel. In that respect, it might properly be called crypto-Calvinistic.

In this respect the article you send is hopeful but also troubling. It continues to mislead by answering a question about the Bible in ways that are relevant only to the gospel—not the law, not the whole Bible.

Bob Schultz

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Johannes Bugenhagen, Public Theologian

Colleagues,

Too few of us, I fear, know much about Reformation history beyond snippets of Luther's biography and the vague impressions of Melanchthon we may or may not have garnered while working through the Augsburg Confession and its Apology at some point too long ago. Lost in the background, meanwhile, are other giants of the day whose work, both academic and ecclesiastical, was of the essence in establishing the distinction between Law and Gospel as the theological gift of gifts that keeps on giving 500 years after Luther tumbled to it.

Today we meet one of those background giants, if ever so briefly. Making the introduction is the Rev. Dr. Martin Lohrmann, pastor of Christ Ascension Lutheran Church in Philadelphia. A 2004 graduate of Wartburg Theological Seminary, Pr. Lohrmann pursued further studies at the Lutheran Theological Seminary at Philadelphia where he earned a PhD under Timothy

Wengert. His work on Johannes Bugenhagen, the pastor and theologian who both married Luther and preached at his funeral, has just been published by Lutheran University Press under the title “Bugenhagen’s Jonah: Biblical Interpretation as Public Theology.” You can get it directly from the publisher (www.lutheranupress.org/Books/Bugenhagens_Jonah) or, as ever, from amazon.com. (Tough luck, you Barnes & Noble fans. You won’t find it there.) Herewith a teaser, penned by Martin, to whet your appetite.

By the way, Martin was a member of the youth contingent (= anybody under 50 years old) at the Crossings Conference in January. We’re delighted indeed to have his voice included in the ongoing conversation, all the more as it advances our Easter theme of meeting up with Christ in Galilee (see [ThTheol #722](#)). Isn’t that what Bugenhagen was up to in 16th century Wittenberg? It’s for sure what Martin is doing in 21st century Philadelphia. That his labors might be blessed, we pray: “Come, Holy Spirit.”

Peace and Joy,
Jerry Burce, for the editorial team

“Bugenhagen’s Jonah: Biblical Interpretation as Public Theology”

Johannes Bugenhagen (1485-1558) was the head pastor in Wittenberg during the early decades of the Reformation. He worked closely with Luther and Melanchthon to reform church and society and was also a professor at the town’s university.

After Luther died in 1546, Lutherans in Germany lost a war to the Holy Roman Emperor, Charles V. Charles was a devout Roman Catholic who wanted to bring the German Protestants back into the Roman fold. The future of the Reformation was very much in

peril.

During this time, Bugenhagen lectured on the prophet Jonah. Those lectures became his 1550 Jonah Commentary (his last major work). Why did he choose Jonah? Because to troubled communities and preachers, Jonah proclaims the theology of the cross and the hidden wisdom of God. As Bugenhagen wrote in the university records in the fall of 1547, "Today, at the third hour, I will begin to lecture on the prophet Jonah, in which we learn what it says in Psalm 51: 'For behold, you love the truth, which is hidden, and you reveal your hidden wisdom to me.' May Christ be among us in his Spirit."

Bugenhagen found a good ally for teaching and preaching in this prophet. Jonah himself lived under the cross and the just condemnation of death, which Bugenhagen could also say of himself and his fellow Lutherans. Nevertheless, God saved the prophet in order to preach faith and salvation to others. Bugenhagen prayed for the same for his church. He wrote,

"By fleeing, Jonah sinned most gravely against God, who sent him to the Gentiles. And later he was angry and murmured against God, that he had spared Nineveh. Paul had been a blasphemer and persecutor of God's church; Peter denied Christ; the apostles fought about primacy. Christ censured them, for in danger on the sea they did not invoke God and did not trust in God, to which Christ said, 'Where now is your faith?' Therefore God protects his chosen and beloved ones even in sin, so that they might not perish in eternity, even in the middle of the sea, in death and hell (as is often sung in the Psalms), even against the sentence of divine law, as you see in the people of Nineveh, etc."

From the brief biblical book of Jonah, Bugenhagen expanded his commentary into a massive (400-page) statement about repentance

and faith. Historically, he was addressing the Council of Trent, the Augsburg Interim, and—eventually—the accusations of other Lutherans who found fault with the Wittenberg theologians in those years. But he was also teaching the positive effects of Evangelical Lutheran teaching. His entire career had been marked by attention to the right relationship between faith and good works, as expressed in the Augsburg Confession's articles 6 & 20. Because of this focus, he taught that "what a thing is" (theology and biblical interpretation) always relates to "what a thing does" (good works of love and service that come from faith). A good tree bears good fruits. Christian faith changes hearts, minds and—in Nineveh's case—entire communities, even when grace is hidden in divine and human wrath in this world. Expressing this conviction, Bugenhagen summed up his teaching: "All history is in the image of the passion and resurrection of Christ."

My research of Bugenhagen examines how his biblical interpretation informed both his theology and his leadership of the church in Wittenberg during a time of serious uncertainty. It explores his relationships with Luther and Melanchthon, his ability to express their shared theology with clarity, and his ability to apply that faith in practical ways.

I conclude with another one of Bugenhagen's statements about the connection between Jonah's experience, Christ's cross, and God's power to save:

"Christ asked the Father that death might pass from him [Mt. 26:39] and 'he was heard because of his reverence' [Heb. 5:7]. But how was he heard? With ridicule before the world, as they cried out under the cross, 'If you are the son of God, come down now off the cross,' etc. [Mt. 27:42]. God cast him to death and hell and then exalted him, setting him at his right hand, etc. 'This was the Lord's doing, and it is marvelous in

our eyes' [Ps. 118:23], a verse that spoke of the resurrection. It is right that Christ suffered and in this way entered into his glory."Thus, Jonah pitifully expected to be swallowed, which is horrifying. For not only was he swallowed by the sea or even by the whale, spending three days and three nights there, but even through death and hell he was protected by God for life. He was stuck inside of death, neither able to die nor to know liberation. This is what is sung in Psalm 4:3: 'The Lord has made his holy ones wonderful; the Lord will hear me when I cry to him'...

"These promises are ours today in this oppressed church. When we invoke the name of the Lord and are hopeful, God wonderfully liberates and glorifies his holy ones."

Martin Lohrmann
Christ Ascension Lutheran Church
Philadelphia, PA

Post-scripts:

1. On Famous Last Words—Our recent Holy Week offering about Easter preaching ([ThTheol #221](#)) included a recollection of Jaroslav Pelikan's deathbed confession in 2007 of the Christian's Easter-grounded faith. It was such a breathtaking gem of pithy, can't-be-said-better assertion that it got widely reported at the time. Still, there was something in our replay of it that left Ed Schroeder scratching his head a little. So he promptly called some original sources (who doesn't Ed know, thanks be to God) and got back to us with the following:
"The authentic text [of Pelikan's confession] is 'If Christ was NOT raised, nothing matters. SINCE Christ IS

now raised, nothing ELSE matters.' It's a classic law-grammar, Gospel-grammar distinction (ala Luther/Elert). 'IF..., then...' vs. 'SINCE..., therefore...', all with a quintessential Pelikanian rhetorical twist."

Did we like that? We did, so much so that we promptly posted it on Facebook. That led Crossings fan Rich Jungkuntz to start scratching his head a bit in northern Thailand where he lives these days. Rich promptly went to the internet, did some poking around of his own, and got back to us with the observation that there are several variants of Pelikan's saying floating around out there, none of which exactly match what Ed reported. And wouldn't you know, one of those variants shows up in Ed's own Thursday Theology essay of 30 August 2007 ([#481](#)). OK, so apart from the intriguing glimpse this affords into the way that oral history works, do we much care about the variants, Ed's included? Not really. Fact is, we like the ring of the latest recension so well that in true post-modern style we'll happily take it as the final word on the final words, thanking Ed for nailing it down; to which we also and merrily add the post-final words of essential Easter doxology: "He is risen indeed. Alleluia!"

2. On Your Own Less Famous though Nonetheless Important Words—We could use them. Back in November, when we launched this adventure of Thursday Theology post-Ed, we tossed out an invitation to those who may read it to pitch in with their contributions. We meant it then. We mean it even more today. We're still guessing that lots of you have things to say against the backdrop of the Law/Gospel distinction that the rest of us would be glad to read and learn from. So we invite you yet again to send us your stuff. We'd love to read it ourselves and to weigh it for publication. We could use the help, to be frank. So

please, Be Ye Not Bashful. Dig up that best sermon, cut loose with the burgeoning thought, and hit the send button. The addresses to use are cabraunATaolDOTcom or jburceATattDOTnet. Thanks!

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Following Jesus when things fall apart (Part 2)

Colleagues,

Last week we reprinted [Part 1](#) of Pastor Felix Meylahn's presentation at the Fourth International Crossings Conference, in which he described the liberation struggle in his native South Africa and the subsequent "second falling apart" of South African society. This week brings the conclusion, in which Felix lays out his thoughts on how our "ambidextrous" God "handles" us in the context of our daily lives, with an emphasis on what this means for his South African community in their current historical moment of brokenness. As you read, please refer to the attached drawing by Felix's daughter, Mia, which beautifully illustrates the core idea of falling into the hands of the

ambidextrous God.

Peace and Joy,
Carol Braun, for the editorial team

Following Jesus when things are falling apart – a post-liberation perspective from South Africa By Felix Meylahn

B) Following Jesus when Things are falling apart – Or falling into the hands of the “ambidextrous God”

There is a verse in the letter to the Hebrews (10:31) that has always intrigued and frightened me. It sounds even more frightening in German: “Schrecklich ist’s, in die Hände des lebendigen Gottes zu fallen.” Hebräer 10:31 – “It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.” Hebrews 10:31

And yet, I believe, to fall into the hands of the living God is our only hope, and the preaching of the Gospel of Jesus Christ could be described as precisely that for both the preacher and the hearers: a falling into the hands of our “ambidextrous God.” This phrase or metaphor has helped me to understand better what has been happening to us in South Africa. In this critical, dangerous, and often hopeless situation, I see God getting a hold of us with both of his hands and not letting go. I will try to describe now, what that means to us as South Africans. (Remember that I am speaking for myself and for the members of my congregation and community.)

- a. **Before “Liberation”** it was all so clear and simple—we knew what we had to do: resist Apartheid, support those who struggle for freedom, take God’s “preferential option for the poor and the oppressed” and make it a practical reality in our communities. Much good was done, and this

way of life, practiced by many brave Christians, despite all its ambivalences, was a major factor in bringing about the changes that led to the liberation from Apartheid. But, in view of our present situation and the symptoms I have described, I have to ask the question: Did we not confuse our activism, and even our political ideologies, with the Gospel, using the Law only against the others and claiming the Gospel for ourselves in smug self-righteousness? Looking back at that time, I shudder to remember the smug hypocrisy that I and many others displayed as we condemned the “others” and yet lived quite well in a system that granted us privileges while harshly discriminating against others. But, as much as we should critically reflect on our own part in the past, there is something more than our personal failings at stake here: to put it in rather harsh theological terms, the “wrath” of God’s left hand, of God’s Law, is showing us in no uncertain terms that God’s law is not to be mocked.

- b. **The “post-liberation” reality** that I have merely begun to describe above reveals the costs at which the glorious “liberation” was bought: The “People’s War” strategists taught the youth that education, law and order, obeying civil authorities, as well as thinking for yourself and taking responsibility for your actions are not to be seen as valuable in the “struggle,” as things one should strive for, whereas disobedience to state authority, destruction of public property, “making the country ungovernable,” and, of course, blind party loyalty (ignoring nepotism and corruption in your own ranks) are acceptable means of gaining and keeping power. Whoever did not abide by these “rules” was eliminated by the most horrible death imaginable (“necklacing,” a tyre drenched with petrol, hung around your neck and set alight). The results of this “education” are clearly visible today. In addition, the

youth have learnt that entitlement on the basis of your “victim status” is the best card to play and if that is somehow questioned, it can only be because your questioners are irredeemably racist. Teachers in schools and universities are often threatened with assault by students who fail their end-of-year-exams, because “they have the right to pass” and the professors are just being racists, who do not want them to earn the degree to which they are entitled. The concept that (in its first use) the Law is there to sustain and protect life and make living in a community possible has gotten lost along the way. I suppose that this is not something unique to South Africa, but the stark consequences of such forgetting can be seen clearer there than in a society where a lot of “first-use-of-the-law-things” still seem to function quite well. I have a question that I would want to ask you here today in this regard, because I am not quite clear on this yet. Looking at the stark consequences of ignoring our joint responsibility for “first-use-of-the-law” matters in our South African context, could one say that the killing/drowning of the old Adam, second use of the law can also be seen in this “falling apart,” in other words a kind of socio-political second use?

And could such communal second-use experiences drive communities to the crucified Christ, like the second use of the law does with the individual Christian? Perhaps I’m completely off the track with this, that’s why I thought I should ask.

Let me describe the stark consequences of ignoring the first use of the law briefly as they are experienced by various members of our congregation/community:

- Two of the **teachers** in our congregation were “redeployed” to teach in “township schools”

("townships" are very poor areas, often with no formal housing for the residents). They were asked to teach subjects they had not been trained to teach and they struggled for long periods without receiving their salaries from the Education Department. In addition, one was constantly under threat of violence, being harassed repeatedly by colleagues, because he was speaking up against the corrupt principal of the school. How are they to co-operate with God's caring left hand in such circumstances? And yet that is exactly what they are doing: quietly and with admirable determination, these two teachers have kept at it. The one just said to me, "I cannot leave those children in the lurch!"

- **Nurses** and other **medical staff**, working in "government hospitals", to which again the poorer people, with no health insurance, have to go for medical treatment, report circumstances that are the stuff of nightmares. No linen for the beds, no medical supplies (these are often sold by corrupt staff members to boost their meager incomes), and far too many patients. How are committed nurses and doctors to work well in such circumstances? But that is exactly what these members are doing. Facing the daily chaos with more courage than I could ever muster, they continue to serve, caring for the patients far beyond their official duties.
- I have already mentioned the struggles that **lecturers** at university and other staff working at tertiary education institutions are having with students who insist that they have a "right" to a degree. How tempting a call to a foreign university can be, if this is what you are dealing with daily.

But these lecturers and teachers stay, because they know that South Africa needs well-trained and -equipped academics, if it is to survive as a rainbow community and make a real difference for the whole continent.

- There is a grass-roots organisation in the townships, calling themselves **Abahlali baseMjondolo** (shack dwellers), that have established themselves along autonomist Marxist principles to fight the battle against a government on the local level that has not come through for them in any way, although at election time far-reaching promises of poverty alleviation, etc., have repeatedly been made. The Abahlali refuse to vote at election time; they organize themselves for education (a kind of grass roots university) and community safety in their areas (since the police are incompetent and unwilling to help). According to some sources, they are the one group that the ANC really fears, because they could mobilize the disgruntled masses (who elected the ANC) to rise up against their corrupt rulers. This is why these groups are being violently harassed by police and ANC cadres, and there is a smear campaign to cast doubts on their integrity. But in spite of this very harsh treatment, they doggedly carry on serving in their communities. The leaders are not paid for their work of organising and leading the movement, and they do not want to compete for power as a party—they are trying to make life work in their communities, trying to do the necessary work of caring for life, and in my estimation, unwittingly co-operating with God's left hand. I could continue describing the critical situation our country is in and the many people that

are quietly going about keeping life safe and possible, but I need to get on to the next part of my presentation.

In describing our situation like this, which could be understood as mere moaning and groaning, I need to remind myself and others to not fall into a similar trap of smug hypocrisy about these problems in the “new” South Africa, as happened to us under the previous regime. We are all in some way or another co-responsible for the situation, and there are none that could be called innocent or blameless. Troubled consciences abound, because it is certainly not just a matter of separating the good from the evil and then siding with those that are deemed to be good. If we want to stay, we need to soberly face our own failings and those of each other with the clarity that comes from living as forgiven sinners.

- c. And yet, many **People are leaving the country**, because for them the situation has become unbearable. Many trained and skilled people cannot find work (often because untrained or not well trained people are appointed on the basis of their race). Many others do not want to continue living under the constant threat of violence. I know of no family in my congregation/community, white or black, in which there has not been a case of serious crime perpetrated against them with impunity by criminals who get away with it more than 50% of the time, because the justice system is so corrupt. So they leave, and those that remain either can't leave (for financial reasons) or are tenaciously holding on to the idea that they do have a responsibility, a calling (vocation, “Berufung”) to be in South Africa, and to do their share of the work of “care and redemption” in this part of the world.

- d. My question as a pastor and particularly as the trainer for the “lay preachers” of our church is this: what does the task of preaching, fulfilling our calling as servants of the Word, contribute towards dealing with this crisis situation? The more my work has been governed by the distinction of “Law from Gospel” (getting to know the Crossings Community and your resources on the internet has revitalized this thinking in my work tremendously), the more have people been saying to me: “We need that Word!” “We come on Sunday to get our shot of Gospel adrenalin for the week!” I have tried to understand what is happening, why they say that and how it works-I’m a little scared that systematizing it too much may in fact mess it up—but for my own clarity I need a system of sorts, even though every system is also an oversimplification of the matter. Such a systematization does help me to keep my focus clearly on the distinction of “Law and Promise” and helps me to recognize it at work in the people around me and in myself.
- e. I have found for myself as well as for the members of our congregation and church, that such clear “law – gospel” distinction, **the understanding of God as “ambidextrous”**, as caring for and redeeming the whole of creation is a welcome help in keeping us in South Africa and keeping us sane while we work and live there as disciples of Christ. After again reading Werner Elert, Christian Möller and Oswald Bayer together with the writings of Ed Schroeder and Robert Bertram and many others on the Crossings Website, I believe that this kind of preaching, this way of “experiencing” the Word, is a rediscovery of the **sacramental character** of the Word and of its proclamation. C.f. Christian Möller, *Seelsorglich Predigen* [Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, Göttingen, 1983], “Die Gleichzeitigkeit von Jesu und unserer Situation ist ein

sakramentales Ereignis,” page 22, and again on page 23 Luther’s “sacramentaliter meditari”. Christian Möller puts it very succinctly: “Den biblischen Text sacramental zu meditieren, heißt für Luther, ihn mit der Erwartung auszulegen und zu predigen, daß Gott auch tut, was er verheißt (Ps.33:9) weil Christus für sein Wort einsteht, es mit seiner Gegenwart begleitet und in die Herzen der Menschen übersetzt.” (Seite 24) “For Luther, to meditate on the biblical text sacramentally means to listen to and to preach the text with the expectation that God will do what He promises (Psalm 33:9), because Christ stands in for his word, accompanies it with his presence and translates it into the hearts of the people” (my translation). And recently Oswald Bayer has reminded me again of the “Performative Word” that does what it says! Based on this rediscovery of the “sacramental word,” I’d like to introduce to you a **“pattern”** that I am using as a “grid” for my thinking, preparation, and practice of teaching and preaching God’s Word in the South African context, so that the Christian community to which I belong and in which I serve up the Gospel can itself also discern and consciously experience/recognize the two hands of God in their lives, and thus become “coworkers of joy”(2 Cor.1:24) with and for one another in Christ.

C) Finding ourselves in the Story of God’s Faithfulness>

The model presupposes/takes as its point of departure Luther’s three experiential “rules” for being a theologian (oratio, meditatio, tentatio), and then takes the “Law – Gospel” framework also found in his Small Catechism and combines that with the three steps of meditation used by the mystics of the middle ages (purgatio, illuminatio, unio) which Luther had learnt and practiced during his years in the Augustinian Order and later filled with new theology, in order to understand what

the “Word of God” is doing to us and with us—or, to use the ambidextrous metaphor, how God is handling us, what it is like to fall into the hands of the living God—or, to use narrative language, how we find/discover ourselves and the life we are called to live in the Story of God’s Faithfulness, which kills us and creates us anew as free children of God.

Luther encourages all Christians into a life-long catechumenate which takes us into the pattern and process of Baptism. Johannes Viebig calls this the “practice” of the Word of God. And Martin Nicol’s Book, “Meditation bei Luther,” shows in a lot of detail the meditation practice in which Luther lived and worked all his life, and it shows very clearly, how the Reformational rediscovery of the Gospel was in fact the result of this continuous “practice of the Word of God” in **prayer, meditation,** and **agonizing struggle** (oratio, meditatio, tentatio). This threefold experience (Erfahrung) of the Word of God is what makes one a theologian, says Luther.

In his Small Catechism, chapter IV Part 4 on Baptism, Luther reminds us that Baptism “signifies that the old person in us with all our sins and evil desires is to be drowned through sorrow for sin and repentance, and that daily a new person is to come forth, and rise up to live before God in righteousness and purity forever.” How does such drowning and being raised up happen in daily life? It happens when we practice the “Word of God”.

In an article called, “Evangelische Meditation als ‘Übung des Wortes Gottes’, Anstöße aus Luthers Kleinem Katechismus und Erfahrungen mit Meditationstagungen” (in Herausforderung: Religiöse Erfahrung, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, Göttingen, 1980), Johannes Viebig, in view of the meditation retreats that he leads, asks the question: “How does God meet us personally? And we found the answer: in his ordering Word, in the witness of

what he did for us and in his giving himself to us (Hingabe), through which he binds us to himself. In this we rediscovered the three phases of meditation, the 'purgatio' (Reinigung), the 'illuminatio' (Erleuchtung) and the 'unio' (Einung)—and that these three ways of meeting God (Begegnungsweisen) are congruent with the order found within the Small Catechism of Martin Luther, which mirrors these three steps: In the **Ten Commandments** we encounter the **ordering Word**, which purges us, the 'purgatio,' in the **Baptism Creed** we have the **witness of what he did for us**, the 'illuminatio,' and in the **Communion** at the Table we have **the giving of himself to us**, the 'unio'" (Viebig 82, my translation). The basic distinction of "Law from Gospel" and its impact on us can be seen working behind the scenes here. The Law does the "purging" and the Gospel does the "illumining" and the "unio," the binding together with God in Christ.

In my work as pastor in the congregation, in preaching, teaching and pastoral care, in the retreats that I lead with our church wardens and our confirmands, I have taken this scheme and developed it further into a pattern for discerning how God handles us in our context, in our daily life. I'd like to briefly show this pattern to you, using a drawing by my daughter, Mia Meylahn, which shows the two hands of God and the gift these hands give to us through the Word, as summarized in the Small Catechism.



To make it easier to remember left and right, the hands are facing away from the viewers, as if they were our hands. Of course they should be turned around towards us, since they are God's hands, giving the gift of Life in Christ to us. But that would just make things more complicated, as the left hand of God would then be on our right and the right hand on our left.

On the left we have God's Left Hand, the Law, the Ten

Commandments; this is the hand which cares for the whole of creation. It makes life possible, bearable, livable for all beings, and it calls, entices and even forces all to work with it for the sustaining of creation. Much of what I have been talking about above happens here, as we experience the left hand of God caring for us and as we work with it to “make the new South Africa” work as best we can.

But this hand is also experienced in the terrible, fatal experience of wrath (the second use of the Law), which drowns the Old Adam, punishes and puts down all that within us that is born out of mistrust and unbelief, all the stuff we do to impress God and boast before humans. As I asked before, could we see this part of God’s left-hand-work happening in the terrible falling apart that we are experiencing in South Africa today? Is this the cross we are called to bear as we stay, work, and struggle on in South Africa? If yes, then we can only do it because we have “inside information” about God’s further plans of action, we know about the Right hand of God.

On the right, then, we have God’s Right Hand, the Gospel, the hand that reaches out to us, that grabs a hold of us and does not ever let us go again. It is inscribed with the Our Father Prayer, although, of course, the Gospel is more centrally found in the Creed (especially in the Second Article). However, the Lord’s Prayer, and in particular the explanation that Luther gives to the “Introduction,” i.e., the “Our Father in heaven”, is to me a core experiential description of how the Gospel-God deals with us, how the Right Hand of God handles us: “With these words God wants to attract us (Luther says, “Gott will uns locken”), so that we believe he is truly our Father and we are truly his children, in order that we may ask him boldly and with complete confidence, just as loving children ask their loving father.”

And in His two hands, God holds out the greatest gift there is: His Son Jesus Christ, and in Him we receive faith (Trust) in the triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. How? We are called, invited, or even grabbed by the scruff of our necks, to join the creative and loving dance of the Holy Community (perichoreisis), the dance of "care and redemption." This Divine "handling" takes place through the Word and through the sacraments of Baptism and Holy Communion, as well as through Confession, which Luther never quite took off the list of the Sacraments. These different aspects of God's handling of us, the dynamic Trinity and the gifts of new life in Baptism, Communion and Confession, are composed into a star of David, reminding us of the truth that "salvation comes from the Jews" (according to Christ in the Gospel of John), and in the midst of these peculiar people, the Jews, we find the Saviour of the World, the crucified Lord, Jesus Christ.

As you can see I am still stammering about these matters myself, but I have had some very interesting conversations about this drawing and the message it tries to convey. And what is more, it seems to reach down deeper than our understanding, because it uses the image of the ambidextrous God holding out the gift of Christ to us, and as we are joined to this Christ in Baptism (we celebrate the remembrance of Baptism regularly in Port Elizabeth), we come to understand at an experiential level, that, united with Christ, we are safe (saved) in these two hands of God. And then the adventure begins of discovering exactly how that is true for us.

Then the teachers, the nurses, the doctors, the lecturers, the shack dwellers get to know, experientially, perhaps through prayer, meditation and agonizing struggle, or more probably, through hearing the proclamation of the Word, that while the left hand of God lies heavily upon their shoulders, pushing them to stand firm for the sake of the children, the patients, the

students, the community, and while this heavy hand makes them realize that they are co-responsible for the mess, for the “falling apart” all around them and they experience how their trust in themselves has to die, how it is in fact killed every day—while experiencing all of that, they suddenly or gradually come to the glorious illumination, the discovery that they are also, gracefully held by the other, the right hand of God, where they find sustenance for their failing faith/trust and true peace through forgiveness for their troubled consciences. And bound together with Christ in their Baptism, they discover that whoever is plunged into the waters of union with God in Christ, surfaces next to the Poor, and discovers that he/she loves God by serving the neighbour. “Wer in Gott eintaucht, taucht neben den Armen wieder auf.”

I end off here, with the hope that I have been able to give you some insight into how the community I serve tries to hear the Word of God and live by it (which is my very simple understanding of discipleship), as it faces the critical situation in which South Africa finds itself at present.

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Following Jesus When Things Fall Apart (Part 1)

Colleagues,

One of the most arresting presentations at the Fourth International Crossings Conference came on the last day, when Felix Meylahn, who is a pastor and trainer of lay preachers in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in South Africa, told the story of his country's journey from colonialist and white-supremacist oppression, through the struggle for liberation, and into the current state of brokenness which he describes as a "second falling apart" of his beloved homeland. This week and next, we reproduce his conference presentation here. This week's installment sets up the essential historical background, with an emphasis on the role of the Church in the struggle for liberation, and on Felix's own experiences as a student of liberation theology during that time. Next week comes the conclusion, in which he explains how hope for his country's future must lie in the preaching of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, which produces what he calls a falling into the hands of our "ambidextrous" (that is, left-handed and right-handed) God. Taken together the two parts present a striking picture of modern Christian discipleship in a time of crisis. We expect you'll find Felix's story to be as eye-opening as it was when it first held the conference attendees in rapt attention this past January.

Peace and Joy,
Carol Braun, for the editorial team

Following Jesus when things are falling apart – a post-liberation perspective from South Africa

By Felix Meylahn

A. Brief autobiographical and historical perspective on the South African Context

a. Introduction – Who am I and where do I live and work?

I was born in the Northern Cape on Pniel, a mission station of the Berlin Mission Society, where my father was appointed agricultural manager (to generate funds for the mission work of the Lutheran Church in Southern Africa). My first language was German, then I learnt Afrikaans in primary school, was taught Latin by Irish monks (CBC) and learnt to speak English under the tutelage of an Anglican Canon (Kimberley Boys' High). I will briefly come back to my place of birth a little later. I studied theology together with students from all the various Lutheran Churches in Southern Africa at the joint theological training institute (funded by the LWF) which is linked to the University of Natal in Pietermaritzburg. And now I am a pastor in the "Evangelical Lutheran Church in Southern Africa (Cape Church)" and work in the Port Elizabeth Congregation (Friedenskirche). I am also a member of the Church Council of our church and the Bishop's "vice" (Deputy of the Bishop). Our congregation in Port Elizabeth was founded by German immigrants just over 112 years ago, but we have since the early 70's become more and more an English speaking Lutheran community in which people from all the different backgrounds feel at home.

b. The first "falling apart"

After this personal introduction let me begin with a description of the historical context of my presentation, which will make clear why I use the “falling apart” phrase in my title. I believe it is very important to mention that we all see things through our own eyes and lenses. What I present here is thus my perspective, which, although I have tried to make it as wide and unbiased as possible, is still limited and one-sided, and should obviously not be taken as the only view of the situation in South Africa. However, the perspective that I offer is not based purely on my own view but tries to give an account of the way many people in my community/congregation experience and perceive South Africa today. At first, a little historical review: The continent of Africa has been ravaged by Colonialism and imperialism for many centuries. The effects have been well documented in various studies (Pakenham’s *The Scramble for Africa* is still a good overview). But I’d like to refer you in particular to a novel by Chinua Achebe, who movingly describes the detrimental impact of colonialism on his own culture in the book *Things Fall Apart*. He describes hauntingly how, through the onslaught of western imperialism together with the work of Christian missionaries, Western, Christian “civilization” has fragmented and almost totally destroyed the once stable culture and belief system of his people. Of course I do not insist, as some critics do, that the missionaries came merely as the “advance troops of the colonialists” to soften up the people for later exploitation. I believe that many missionaries had the best intentions and brought much to Africa which even today is worth keeping (education, medical

training and agricultural know-how and, of course, the Gospel of Jesus Christ, which liberated many from fear and superstition). However the criticism holds true that unwittingly the missionaries did prepare the way for the devastation of colonialist exploitation.

c. The rise of the "liberation movements"

Across the continent there arose at the turn of the previous century liberation movements of various kinds. I can't go into too much detail here, but I need to mention the founding of the African National Congress in 1912. Its first secretary was Sol Plaatje, who was raised and educated by Lutheran missionaries on Pniel, the Berlin Mission Station in the Northern Cape Province which I mentioned as my birthplace. The history of the rise of African Nationalism and Black Consciousness is very interesting and important to understand the later developments in South Africa, but again I can only refer you to the literature. One of the first books on the subject written by an African is Sol Plaatje's "Native Life in South Africa", first published in 1916 in response to the "Native's Land Act" introduced when South Africa was part of the British Commonwealth in 1913. The author was part of a delegation sent by the ANC to Britain to ask the Queen and the British parliament to address their grievances against the harsh laws instituted against black South Africans, but this was to no avail.

d. Diamonds and Gold

I need to speed up a little to get through important stretches along the road to the "New South Africa". British imperialism was insatiable and, among others, Cecil John Rhodes had the dream of

acquiring land all across Africa from "Cape to Cairo". The agricultural and mineral wealth of the continent was just too tempting to leave unconquered. When Diamonds and later Gold were discovered in the two Boer republics of the Freestate and the Transvaal respectively, a war was instigated (the so-called "Boer War"), which today is seen by many as the first desperate attempt at a "liberation war" of a South African "tribe" against the imperialism of Britain. The "Afrikaner" people, who called themselves "Boere," farmers, were made up mostly of Dutch, German and French descendants, who had been living in Africa for several generations by this time and had often freely mixed with indigenous people as well as with slaves from the Far East. For the first time in military history, the British used "concentration camps" to imprison the women and children of the farmers (where many of them died) and a burnt-earth policy to force the heavily outnumbered "Boere Kommandos" to capitulate.

e. The rise of Afrikaner Nationalism

In the wake of the lost Boer war and jumping on the bandwagon of nationalisms arising around the world, the "Afrikaners" started seeing themselves as a "Nation" oppressed and exploited by foreign rulers; the Reformed theology of their pastors added fuel to this understanding, using language like, "we are the chosen people to bring the faith to the heathen of this land." In 1948 the "National Party" came to power in the "democracy" of the Union of South Africa and began instituting an ideology that became known as "Apartheid". The basic idea was that different ethnic groups should stay segregated and be allowed to develop separately. Looked at from the

perspective of world history the implementation of "Apartheid" as a government system was the legal codification of the elitist, western world-view (white or European supremacy) joined with a Nationalism that took its cue from Nazi Germany. The main ideologues of Apartheid studied theology and law in Nazi Germany during the late 30's and early 40's.

f. The "liberation struggle"

Another jump to get through this background stuff: The opposition to racism, which had already taken a big step with the founding of the ANC in 1912 of course grew immensely as the harsh racist laws of Apartheid were implemented. But the ANC was not the only, nor even the most popular liberation movement initially. Other strong protagonists of the liberation struggle were the Pan African Congress (PAC with a strong Black Consciousness element as represented by Steve Biko) and the Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP), which had a strong national following until its leaders were systematically eliminated by ANC cadres. (See Anthea Jeffery's book, *People's War: New Light on the Struggle for South Africa*, for the details.)

Under the influence of Gandhi and others the struggle for the most part was a nonviolent one until a faction within the ANC came to the conclusion that nonviolence was not going to bring the necessary results and founded the military wing of the ANC (MK. "Umkhonto we Sizwe") and began the violent struggle against Apartheid. In 1978 a senior delegation made up of members from the ANC and the SACP went to North Vietnam to gather information and to receive training in "People's War," a strategy

developed by General Vo Nguyen Giap, commander of the North Vietnamese army. The ANC adopted this military and political strategy as its blueprint for taking over South Africa by force. As Anthea Jeffery writes,

“A people’s war, as the term suggests, revolves around the use of people as weapons of war. As many people as possible must be drawn into the war, whether by joining organizations allied to the insurgents, or taking part in demonstrations, or helping with the propaganda campaign, or taking part in violent attacks. In addition, all individuals within the arena of conflict—including those who support the insurgents—are regarded as expendable in the waging of the war, in the same way as arms and ammunition are expendable in a conventional conflict. It also means that children are just as expendable as adults and that there is no bar against using children either as combatants or as targets for attack. As a combatant, a child may be more willing to take risks, and as a victim of violence the child has much greater value in subsequent propaganda and mobilization.”

For a summary of the various elements of this strategy and the long-term consequences becoming visible in South Africa now, see the detailed study by Anthea Jeffery.

g. The church’s involvement in the “struggle”

As is well known, prominent members of the Christian community in South Africa were part of the liberation struggle from the beginning—well known

among them are Father Trevor Huddleston, Archbishop Desmond Tutu and Allan Boesak. (John De Gruchy's books, *The Church Struggle in South Africa* and *Bonhoeffer and South Africa*, are well worth reading for a detailed history of the church's resistance to Apartheid.) As soon as I began my studies of theology at the University of Natal in Pietermaritzburg in 1981, I tried to inform myself about liberation theology and the struggle for freedom. At first we joined clandestine seminars on liberation theology, led by Father Theo Kneifel, which were announced innocently as meetings of the Catholic Students' Society on the Campus. We read various "banned" works, mostly by South American liberation theologians. We lived together in a residence for theology students, in which black students were officially not allowed to live, but we managed to dodge these rulings for the most part. We studied liberation theology, we read Bonhoeffer, saw many parallels between the Barmen Declaration and the South African situation, and saw this concern expressed in the now famous "Kairos Document," which has a very clear theology of resistance and liberation, and was co-authored and/or signed by some of the theologians who taught us.

"It was all so clear and simple" is a thought that often goes through my head now. We knew who the enemy was and what "they" were doing wrong and we also knew how it should be "done right." So we gave our support to the "struggle," even joining in with the international call to support the ANC financially, some of us actively joining the UDF (a movement founded to represent the liberation struggle inside South Africa while the ANC was

officially banned). The worldwide pressure that was created especially by the church's support of the liberation struggle was an important factor influencing the Nationalist Party to dismantle Apartheid and hand over power to a democratically elected government.

h. Freedom

At last we had a new Constitution, a "New South Africa," and we were a "Rainbow Nation." We are the most progressive democracy in the world, on paper. I remember with great fondness the 27 April 1994, the day of our first democratic election. I was then serving in Philippi, a congregation on the "Cape Flats," near Cape Town—in one of the most diverse and volatile communities in South Africa at that time. On the day we all came to the polling station in peace and joy, stood in the long queues for over seven hours to be able to make our mark on the ballot paper to elect a new, fully representative government to rule in justice and peace. I will never forget that day! There are many beautiful examples of the "rainbow nation," a phrase coined by Archbishop Desmond Tutu, actually becoming a reality—just one example that I need to mention is the Alexander Road High School which my children attend.

i. The second "falling apart"

But, sadly, things are falling apart again. The first 17 years of "freedom" saw an unprecedented increase in nepotism and corruption among the elite rulers of South Africa (see R.W. Johnson's *South Africa's Brave New World—The Beloved Country since the End of Apartheid*). The saddest part of this

development for me is that many of these leaders were once our heroes, they stood up for justice, freedom and accountability against all forms of discrimination and now they have fallen into an elitist, greedy, power-grabbing way of leadership, that they back up with an African National-Socialist ideology, that in too many ways reminds me of the ideology of the “previous regime.” It is as John Holloway puts it, that, “the nationalism of the oppressed (anti-imperialist nationalism), although it may aim at radical social transformation, is easily diverted from its broader aims into simply replacing ‘their’ capitalists with ‘ours,’ as the history of anti-colonial movements makes clear” (*Change the World Without Taking Power: The Meaning of Revolution Today*, Pluto Press, London, 2010 [New Edition], page 64). And so, after all the idealism, the courageous struggle for freedom and justice, things are falling apart again. From our experience in South Africa I have to fully agree with John Holloway’s sad cry: “How many times has the scream against oppression been diverted into the assertion of national identity in national liberation movements which have done little more than reproduce the oppression against which the scream was directed?” (ibid. page 73) Some of the symptoms of this new “falling apart” that I see are these:

- Appointments to government positions are made according to party loyalty and often family loyalty and not according to competence.
- Billions of Rand could not be accounted for in the Eastern Cape Province’s Education Department last year (the poorest of the Provinces of South Africa).

- The so-called “Secrecy Bill” (giving the government the right to declare any information secret and threatening vicious punishment on journalists—25 years’ imprisonment)
- Poverty, social disintegration, and unemployment are worse than ever before, while the ANC members of parliament and local government officials are living in decadent abundance, granting themselves salary increases and so-called “performance bonuses” every year far in excess of the inflation rate. The activists of the liberation struggle have become mindless consumerists who unscrupulously take what they can get without regard to their fellow South Africans for whom they allegedly struggled for freedom and justice.
- This year (2012) marks the centenary of the founding of the ANC (1912). The higher party officials celebrated this before a huge crowd of supporters with expensive champagne and other luxuries. I quote from the “Tuesday column” on Facebook by one of our foremost anti-Apartheid journalists, Max du Preez, called “‘A Better Life for All’ will have to wait” (posted: 10 January 2012):

“Just about the most memorable moment was when deputy president Kgalema Motlanthe, surrounded by the ANC bigwigs with glasses of champagne in hand, proposed a toast ‘to ANC unity’ and told the ordinary faithful that if they did not have champagne, they could take photographs of their leaders drinking, or

raise clenched fists. 'The leaders will now enjoy the champagne, and of course they do so on your behalf through their lips,' he said. As they have been doing for quite a while now."

- Very high crime prevalence, very often accompanied with extreme violence. The rape statistics show that a woman is raped every 20 minutes in South Africa and many white farmers have been murdered or driven off their land by threats of violence).
- With the exception of the Revenue (Tax) Department, no Government department is functioning efficiently. Corruption and mismanagement are rife.
- Government schools, especially in rural areas, are in total chaos and the teachers often do not get paid, and do not come to school because they "have" to earn money with other "business," etc. Jonathan Jansen, black rector of the University of the Freestate in Bloemfontein, and a well-known educationalist, wrote in the Sunday Times that if he was a poor black South African, he would rather send his children to school in Zimbabwe than to a school in rural South Africa.
- "Race" has to be filled in on all documents and applications, and is then blatantly used to discriminate against "white" students and candidates for appointments, bursaries, etc.

This all begs the question, why? There is, of course, not one simple answer, but way back in 2001 George Soros already said,

“South Africa is in the hands of global capital. That is why it can’t meet the legitimate aspirations of its people.” Today I believe one would have to add: The ANC elite, many of whom have become multi-millionaires over these last 17 years, are not even trying to meet those legitimate aspirations, they are merely making sure that they remain in power.

Coming next week: The final two sections (**Following Jesus when Things are Falling Apart** and **Finding Ourselves in the Story of God’s Faithfulness**) of Felix Meylahn’s conference paper.

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Seeing Christ in Galilee

Colleagues,

I sometimes think that we who carry on the Crossings project these days lose sight too easily of the aim Bob Bertram and Ed Schroeder had in mind when they launched it a quarter century ago. Their target audience was the laity, and more sharply, John and Jane Christian as we catch them trudging away from their weekly celebrations of Christ’s Easter into another week of life

and labor in a world that belongs to God without necessarily looking and feeling as though it does. Bob and Ed were looking for a method to help John and Jane take the Word of God along with them in a faithful and useful way, where the Word in its two-fold dimension as Law and Promise might inform their everyday experience and shape it as well. Pushed to its deepest level, their driving question came out like this: "What use is Christ crucified for daily living?"

It struck me this past Easter Sunday that St. Mark was begging us all to press that very question. The begging emerges from the instruction the young man delivers to the women. "Tell his disciples that he's gone ahead of you to Galilee. There you will see him...." (16:7a,b) So what is Galilee, if not the place of everyday living replete with its unclean spirits, unruly winds, diseased sufferers, hungry, milling crowds, etc.? And how will today's disciples, heading into it with their faith-vision goggles strapped on, hook up with the crucified and risen Jesus "just as he [promised] you" (16:7c)?

We're going to probe that latter question over the next few weeks with the help, again, of some of the superb things that some of us got to hear at last January's Fourth International Crossings Conference. We start today with a homily delivered by Steve Albertin of the editorial team. This is the first of a series he prepared as conference chaplain on texts drawn from the Sermon on the Mount. Early this Easter Week I read it again and was startled both by its timeliness for this current moment in the church year and by its strength in addressing that question posed first by Mark and much, much later by Bob and Ed. May you be startled and strengthened as well.

Peace and Joy,
Jerry Burce, for the editorial team

“WHO DO YOU THINK YOU ARE?”

Matthew 5:1-12

Crossings Conference

Homily 1

January 23, 2012

Morning Prayer

You are patiently waiting in a traffic jam when a car suddenly speeds by on the shoulder passing up all the traffic and cuts in at the last moment just before the lane ends. How can someone be so rude and inconsiderate? All you want to say is “Who do you think you are?”

I am sure that Jesus encountered a similar reaction when he uttered the Beatitudes. He brashly declares that the world is not as it appears to be and that he has the authority to create a new one. Those who heard him must have wondered, **“Who do you think you are?”**

Jesus dares to rearrange the world as we know it. “Blessed are the poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek, the merciful, the pure in heart...and those who are persecuted, reviled and against whom all kinds of evil is spoken.”

Like some brash heckler in a crowd or some speeding driver who cuts in line, Jesus thumbs his nose at a world that has got it all wrong. No wonder Jesus’ critics complained, **“Who do you think you are?”**

It gets worse. Jesus not only defies the social conventions of the world, he dares to contradict God. God gives people what they deserve. God blesses those who follow God’s Law and curses those who don’t. God loves the righteous and punishes the

wicked. BUT Jesus insists that God is partial to those who don't deserve a thing and smiles on those for whom life has gone south.

Those who heard him must have wondered, "**Who do you think you are?**"

And Jesus sighed, "I'm glad you asked. Watch, listen, and you will find out."

Jesus' answers startle and surprise. He dares to call the creator of the universe, "Daddy." As an uppity adolescent in the temple in Jerusalem, he declares that he must be about his "father's business." He wasn't referring to the carpentry business in Nazareth. He audaciously claims that "No one comes to the Father but by me."

Repeatedly Jesus dares to hang out with sinners as if God approves!

Jesus tells stories that portray what God is up to in him. In these odd stories merit does not matter. Here there is no ladder to climb or pecking order to defend.

Laborers in the vineyard are all paid the same whether they worked all day or for only the last five minutes.

A shepherd runs a crazy business by leaving behind 99 sheep unprotected in the wilderness for the sake of one dopey sheep that got lost.

A father welcomes home a wicked, ungrateful, and undeserving son who had wasted his life in riotous living.

In this new and crazy world God blesses the poor, the hungry, the sorrowful, and the outcast regardless of how undeserving they might be.

“Jesus, **who do you think you are**,...God or something?”

Such an upstart cannot be tolerated! Blasphemy! Jesus must die.

It was people like us who killed Jesus. It was people who wanted to be good, who get out of bed on a Sunday morning to go to church, who go to conferences in the middle of winter, in the cold, who could not tolerate this recklessly generous Jesus.

So they, we, hung Jesus on a cross. They, we, mocked him and demanded that Jesus come down from the cross. When Jesus doesn't come down from the cross and dies, they, we, are relieved.

“See, he was wrong. God only loves those who are worth loving. Jesus was misguided. God will not be mocked. Everyone finally gets what they deserve. Jesus, did you actually think that you could get away with undermining God?”

But because that was not the end of the story, we are here today. When Jesus was raised from the dead, all bets were off. It was a stunning conclusion to Jesus' story, every bit as stunning as it was that day when Jesus uttered these blessings on the mountain. When God raised Jesus from the dead, God vindicated everything that Jesus had said and done. Yes, Jesus got it right! “Blessed are the poor, the hungry, the sorrowful and the outcast!”

Because Jesus Christ is risen from the dead, Jesus truly is what he claimed to be. The reversal he authorized in the Beatitudes was not wishful thinking or the deranged dreams of some fool. It was no pie in the sky sweet by and by. It was “the real world!”

When we believe what Jesus says, we “get to” live our lives differently. We “get to” live with honesty, integrity, doing what is right and not just what is approved by the latest opinion poll. In the midst of an anxiety-ridden world, we like

lilies in the field do not need to worry about what to eat or what to wear.

Even when we are at the end of the line, the back of the bus, the rear of the room, the bottom of the list, the last one chosen because no one wants us on their team, or as their pastor, sitting on the bench because the coach won't play us, alone on a Saturday night without a date, even when we wonder if we can make ends meet, if we can survive the terrifying diagnosis, even when tears flow down our cheeks, we can rejoice and be glad, because standing there next to us with his arm around us is Jesus!

We can turn the other cheek and go the extra mile. We can believe that our dreadful past has been forgiven. We no longer need to be ashamed. We can come clean. We can tell the truth, in this brave, new, real world of the Kingdom of God.

So, when someone snidely remarks, “**Who do you think you are?**” we can answer, “Just ask Jesus. He says we're blessed.”

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