

#764 Book Review – GOD’S REIGN AND THE END OF EMPIRES by Antonio González

This week’s piece is a very recent book review by Ed Schroeder. The book is [God’s Reign and the End of Empires](#) by Antonio González, a Spanish theologian whose author bio can be found [here](#) on the website of Convivium Press. Ed’s meaty review examines what he sees as the “law-shy” nature of Gonzalez’s analysis.

Peace and Joy,
Carol Braun, for the editorial team

God’s Reign and the End of Empires.

By Antonio González. Miami: Convivium Press, 2012.

Paper. 377 pages. US\$32.95.

Where to start? A brilliant book. Long too. By a Spanish Jesuit who is now among the Mennonites in Latin America (Is he still a Jesuit? Maybe. See RC story below.) The book’s title tells the story, as Antonio González sees it. God’s Reign, the “Kingdom of God” in all those Biblical texts, is the end of all empires. They are polar opposites.

Empires are the history of the human race: tower of Babel (=Babylon), Egypt, Rome, Constantine, Holy Roman Empire, USA today. Empires are by definition always opposed to God’s reign, even allegedly Christian ones. The Bible’s core story—from Genesis to Revelation—is the story of that primordial and perpetual conflict.

The Jesus story is God-versus-empire, too. It is in the context of the Roman empire that Jesus proclaimed the reign of God as opposed to the reign of Caesar. Within God's reign, God alone rules, with mercy, love, justice, and special concern for the oppressed. Imbued with this faith, a new community of believers developed, particularly among the poor, who lived what Jesus proclaimed, sharing resources and practicing equality and forgiveness rather than retribution, the ironclad law of imperial logic. God's reign eventually wins, but not by overpowering empires. Instead it is "from below," from among the rejects, the outcasts, the nobodies in imperial societies, that God's reign finds good soil and takes root, "living what Jesus proclaimed."

Yet new empires keep popping up as history unfolds, empires generated by the "Adamic logic" endemic in all the children of Adam and Eve. It is the logic of self-justification. What you achieve shows how good you are, so more achievement = more prestige. That is also the logic on which empires run: bigger is better, more makes you superior. Adam (=all of us) and the empires we build long for this. With instruments of death, if necessary, to make it happen. And they always seem to be necessary.

The empire now confronting us is a brand-new sort. It's not a new nation-state gone whole hog. Not even the USA. It's bigger than any preceding mega-nation-state. Fact is, it has other nation-states in its thrall. Even the USA. It is the economic empire of today's global capitalism. Drawing on topnotch socioeconomic diagnosticians, González presents the raw data (and raw it is) in his first chapter, "The Globalized Empire: The Need for Change."

The remedy for surviving empires in biblical history, and now too—for there is no other remedy—is "God's reign," now fully

revealed in Jesus, where the evils of imperial societies, the very fabric of their foundation and the structures erected thereon, are ended in communities of protests and projects. Not just protests against the empire, but also concrete projects down on the ground, “right now and from below” (the author’s constant mantra), where economic equality prevails, where there is no hierarchy and thus no oppression, and where the “logic of the Gospel” has replaced the “logic of Adam” in the fabric of common life.

As González spells it out, the primal paradigm is the Jerusalem Christians in the opening chapters of Acts. In González’s 21st-century version it looks like Mennonite communities I’ve known, now re- morphed by virtue of the mega-urban, cyber-enveloped (cyber-strangled?), global capitalist world we all live in. The world-scene is radically different today, of course, from that of the once-upon-a-time (mostly) rural Mennonite colonies. But the rubrics are the same: two sets of pared terms. First, “protest and project,” where “project” = concrete alternative to the empire’s project. And second, “from below [=from the oppressed and impoverished] and right now.” Do not expect empires to heal themselves. The disease is incurable.

Today as well, “from below” is where God’s reign is present. “Right now,” new economic communities are undermining the global economic empire. González gives examples. And then he gives encouragement for us today, especially for us in mainline churches, where the logic of empire still imprisons us—and, even more tragic, we are blissfully unaware of our chains.

Some details and some afterthoughts:

After a lengthy initial chapter of socioeconomic analysis probing today’s new empire of global capitalism come five chapters of a biblically grounded case for the book’s title. First: a theological depth-diagnosis of the

sociological/economic data he's already given us. And then come four more chapters presenting the gospel alternative to the "Adamic logic" that animates empires from biblical Babylon and Egypt, Jesus and the Roman Empire, up to the economic empire now circling—and choking—our planet. Despite all the hype about the good brought to humankind by global capitalism today, one half of all the world's people still live on less than US\$2 a day.

In these chapters biblical exegesis abounds. Even in the original New Testament Greek! Though González claims to be doing a "canonical" reading of the Bible with no particular "tradition" shaping his reading, it is through Mennonite lenses that he tells what the Bible says. (More on that below.) Also, at key points his (earlier and still present) Roman Catholic lenses show up, I think. Especially with the appearance of "anonymous Christians"—people following Jesus' ethic and practicing the "logic of the gospel," even though they may never have heard of, let alone trusted, the crucified and risen Messiah. They look like Jesus-followers, even though they never encountered the Good News about "God in Christ reconciling the world to himself, not counting trespasses," as Paul the apostle articulates it in 2 Corinthians 5.

A key phrase from that primordial reconciliation text just cited may pinpoint where González's partisan reading of the Bible shows up explicitly, namely, that according to the apostle, apart from Christ, God does indeed count trespasses. In the language that goldie-oldie Crossings folks learned from Bob Bertram, González is "law-shy." Here's how.

God is indeed, for González, the critic of empires organized on "structures of sin," but never once in 360 pages did I read that God is the critic of sinners, and continues to be the critic of sinners not yet connected to Christ the reconciler. González's God is always and only a God of grace. And with that (prior?)

conviction about God, González reads the Bible from Genesis to Revelation with God, as Lutherans might say, operating in the world always with only his right hand—and since Easter/Ascension doing so via the One now sitting at God's right hand. God extends only his right hand to sinners while the law of God's left hand, God the sinner's critic, is simply inactive.

Is that a pre-conviction in Mennonite hermeneutics? Could be. (See story below.) Also a possible pre-conviction in González's Jesuit Roman Catholic heritage? Could be. (See story below.)

The Mennonite story.

In my day, the Mennonite star theologian was John Howard Yoder. He was a dear friend of Bob Bertram. My friend too. We originally connected at annual meetings of the Society of Christian Ethics.

In the first year of the existence of Seminex (1974) Yoder was guest prof at our summer school. One special treat during that summer session was Bertram and Yoder in a public Lutheran/Mennonite "discussion" of Luther's doctrine of the two kingdoms, the double regimes of God's left and right hands. I remember one exchange. Bob spelled out Luther's left-hand work of God's law, both preserving and critiquing the human race. Yoder's rejoinder was a "yes" to the preservation (that's grace), but "no" to God the critic, and Yoder did so with a patent arch in his big, bushy eyebrows. Bob's response: "John, that arched eyebrow sent a critical message to me, and I'll wager that you think you had divine approval for doing that." People laughed, while acknowledging that the point was serious.

Is God's law the sinner's critic or isn't it? Is God's work in the world *only* grace? With that, we're back in the 16th century where the conflict between the Reformers and the Roman Church—as well as the debate among the Reformers themselves—was about

hermeneutics: How do you read the Bible, what God is doing there? And from that reading, how do you read the world? The Lutherans articulated that at Augsburg (1530) with their claim that law/promise hermeneutics was the right way to read the Bible.

González is law-shy in his reading of the Bible—and he has a lengthy Mennonite heritage backing him up. And is he law-shy from his even more ancient Roman Catholic heritage as well? That could be. The Augsburg confessors put the law-shy tag both on their Roman critics to the right and on the Anabaptist/Mennonite critics to the left. But that's another essay.

The RC story.

For some law-shy signals in the RC tradition, here's another Bertram story, a mid-20th-century repeat of that 1530 hassle. It happened in 1958 at Valparaiso University. I was the new kid on the block in the theology department and had been there only one year. Bertram was our theology-department chair. Somehow he finessed a dialogue series with the theology faculty at Notre Dame. This was long before Vatican II. The first gathering was on baptism at their place. The second was on sin at our place. For that one, both department chairs presented the papers: Bob Pelton, chair of the ND theology department, and Bob Bertram of VU. Pelton presented first: Bertram followed. First response comes from Pelton to Bertram: "It can't really be THAT BAD, can it, Bob?"

Bob had articulated the Augsburg Confession/Apology Article 2 on sin. He had presented D-3 (diagnosis level three, the sinner's deepest problem, confronting God the critic). Bertram's response to Pelton: "Well, Bob, it must have been that bad if it took the death and resurrection of the second person of the Trinity to fix it, right?"

Law-shy means incomplete diagnosis of the human condition. Too “shy” to let biblical texts of divine criticism have their say. Such texts as these:

- God “visiting the iniquities” of sinners—the very words of the Sinai legal contract;
- Paul in Romans 1:18, “the wrath of God is revealed against all ungodliness.”
- Or the ominous words at the end of chapter 3 of St. John’s Gospel, the very chapter with John 3:16 in it: “whoever doesn’t believe the Son will not see life, but must endure the wrath of God.”

And law-shyness appears in another format in González’s proposal, where God’s law is not given credit as a resource to support a “civil society,” and in its place “gospel-logic” is invoked in order to create communities that love and care for one another. Not so. “Love your neighbor” originates from Moses, not Jesus. The “gospel-ethic, gospel values” proposed by González are the substance of “the law given by Moses,” not the “grace and truth that came with Jesus Christ.”

The “new” commandment coming from Jesus is something else. Without the soteriology coming from Jesus, it doesn’t work. González’s “anonymous Christians,” so he claims, are already “there.” But with no link to that soteriology, they cannot get there. When González in his last chapter finds such folks “doing the right thing,” he calls them anonymous Christians. There are no NT grounds for this claim. They may well be “anonymous Moses-disciples,” but unwitting Christ-disciples they are not.

And the very principle of reciprocity, which vexes González as “Adamic logic,” is the very “logic” intrinsic in God’s law. God put it there. It has divine authorship, divine authority. So being law-shy here impacts both of the classical “two uses” that God implements with his law. First is God’s law as God’s own

institution for our preservation in a now fallen world. Second is God's law as the voice of God the critic, a voice constantly accusing sinners bereft of any Christ-cover.

González sells the law short on both counts. For him it is not God, but the "logic of Adam," that says "Suum cuique" (to each person what he deserves). That logic is devilish, maybe even demonic, he claims, surely not divine. That's what the serpent whispered into the ear of our primal parents. Adamic logic now plagues the human race. Therefore the offspring of Adam build their social institutions on that logic. As happened with our primal parents, after they fell to the serpent's snare to appropriate that logic, oppression, and death et al. have trademarked human history. Empires, always grounded in that logic, are the mega-monsters inflicting doom and gloom throughout history.

God's reign, the logic of the gospel—100% gratuitous—is God's remedy for this malady, from the exodus, the prophets, the Jesus story, the NT epistles, life in the early church. It's all of one piece. Until the Constantinian takeover in the 4th century where the people of God's reign—willingly, for the most part—were finessed into an empire. So González puts the pieces together.

The deepest diagnosis of the human malady, human sin, that we hear from González is the logic of Adam at work in humans. He does grant the law some validity. At Sinai, so says González, Torah is God's gracious gift, rules and regulations for living under God's reign, all initiated as they were liberated from Pharaoh's empire. Another instance of God's unending gratuitous way of working.

Here we're back at the Reformation era one more, reading the Bible with different lenses and, from some of those lenses,

simply missing the depth-diagnosis texts. For Luther those depth-diagnosis texts exposed the malady of sinners “blessed” with God’s law as worse, much worse, than perverse Adamic logic. It’s enmity against God. “Hating me” is one of the diagnostic specs in God’s Sinai-contract. Even worse than that is the lawful consequences of such unlawful enmity, to wit, encountering God the judge, the ultimate evaluator and critic, whose verdict is lethal for his renegades. God “visits” the iniquitous. God’s law “counts trespasses” against the trespassers. The “wages of sin” get paid out. There is one who is Paymaster, Trespass-counter, Visitor who calls on us, as with Adam in the garden, asking “And where, pray tell, are you?” I.e., where are you hiding? And why?

That is the sinner’s depth-dilemma that Jesus has to cope with in order to become Christ the King in the Reign of God, God’s new operational system. Not to rescue sinners from the oppression of empires, but to rescue sinners from the wrath of God. (Both St. Paul and St. John make that audacious claim. Were they mistaken? Misreading the data? Paranoid? Depressed?)

That’s why Good Friday was “necessary.” Not to rescue folks from the bane of Adamic logic. How could Christ’s crucifixion produce that? A good counselor could do that without shedding blood. It’s not “change your logic” that’s Jesus’ agenda. It’s getting those folks who are “not reconciled” to God finally reconciled to God, getting them out from under the Visitor, the Trespass-counter, the Paymaster, who is no tyrant, but just the administrator of the law-rubrics of “suum cuique,” the rule of “just deserts.”

Different—yes, better—lenses are needed for such depth-diagnosis, the “final” diagnosis that probes much deeper than the malady of Adamic logic. Namely, lenses that bring the divine death sentence into view. But then, of course, different—yes,

better—lenses are needed for the therapy appropriate to that diagnosis. Needed are therapeutic lenses to focus on that deadly diagnosis and bring the Reign of God into view to heal the patient, especially to view the grand finale of that Reign that came with Christ. The healing must go as deep as the malady, meet that malady, and overcome it. The cross of Christ and its sequel three days later does just that, so the core Christian kerygma proclaims. It heals the God-enmity/God trespass-counter relationship twixt sinner and creator. This gospel finally trumps the law's lethal verdict. Someone Else, God's own righteous Son, "being made sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God."

God's Reign in Christ for González is God replacing human empires with his own alternative society in world history. But isn't the uniform witness of the NT something else? Namely, that God's Reign is God-in-Christ intervening, encountering "in his body on a tree" and then replacing the wrath of God that spells doom for sinners. That is the Good News that fits the Bad News. Bad news, the baddest of the bad, is not how gosh-awful sinners are, how bad their ethics and logic, how damnable empires are—all of which may indeed be true—but how deadly their dilemma is in being at odds with their creator. That is why God's new regime, God's Christ-grounded mercy-management regimen for sinners, is such Good News.

Despite the plethora of recent academic scholarship (buckets and buckets, especially from NT profs) which claims that God's new operation in Christ is out to replace un-civil societies—and in Jesus' day the mega-society of the Roman Empire (and in our day, you know who)—there are several strikes against that notion, I'd say. One is the "real absence" of any primal texts anywhere in the NT to support that.

Another is that if Jesus was sent by God to undo the Roman

Empire, then he was a colossal flop. There is no evidence anywhere that Rome was any different after Jesus ascended than it was when he arrived. Were his disciples now to make good on that assignment after Jesus failed? Come now! And the irony is this: that when the pagan Roman empire did finally become “Christian” under Constantine, it was Empire that won and the Christian element that was subjugated.

Another strike against this notion is the theological presupposition that regularly goes along with such a reading of the NT. Something like this: since Good Friday/Easter, every sinner’s reconciliation with God is a done deal. Granted, many don’t know about it, don’t trust Christ for it. But all they need is to have their mind changed, their logic renovated. At present they’re in a sort of limbo. God the critic is no longer on stage, if he ever was. God’s grace is now the logic of the world stage. Some folks on that world stage already have learned that and have replaced Adamic logic with Gospel logic. The folks who haven’t need to be encouraged to do likewise. They’d be better for it; but for them already, God the critic no longer exists. If he ever did. Their theological problem is not a God-problem, but a revelation-problem. The theological facts of life are still veiled. They need to have the veil of not-knowing removed.

Biggest contra to the perspective that ever since Good Friday and Easter everything is OK for sinners is the NT documents themselves, all composed years after Good Friday/Easter. None of them says anything congruent with that previous paragraph. Instead, we hear this: “Sinners unconnected with Christ—even now after Easter—continue to be in mortal danger. Therefore, be reconciled to God (Paul’s plea). Believe the Son and have life. Believe not and the wrath of God still sticks to you (John’s claim).”

With such a diagnosis you need a much bigger Gospel, a much more root-of-the-problem-focused Reign of God, a new regime from the very One who is our final critic, a regime that will replace death with life, unfaith with faith.

But González—along with his colleagues in today's Jesus vs. Empire movement—opt for small change. Literally, a much-too-small change in the tug-of-war at the core of human history. They read all the reign-of-God texts as ethics, references to a human community, real and concrete—"right now and from below"—where relationships and structures operate on the "logic of the gospel," where "love God and love neighbor" really happen. To be in that reign of God, they tell us, is to practice this logic—anti-imperial, non-reciprocal, egalitarian, giving away possessions, trusting God for everything. Eden restored.

Au contraire Luther. Large Catechism, Lord's Prayer, second petition. "What is the kingdom of God? Answer: Simply what we learned in the Creed's second article, namely, that God sent his Son, Christ our Lord, into the world to redeem and deliver us from the power of the devil and to bring us to himself and rule us as a king of righteousness, life, and salvation against sin, death, and an evil conscience. To this end he gave his Holy Spirit to teach us this through his holy gospel and to enlighten and strengthen us in faith by his power." Not an Eden-society restored, but sinners restored back into God's favor. That is already paradise. "Today, with me," Jesus told the capital criminal.

The Reign of God arriving in Jesus is soteriology, not ethics. At Calvary/Easter, God's reign in Christ overrules the law of sin and death for sinners. When trusted, it heals any and every sinner's God-problem. What sinners "render unto Caesar" is another matter. That is also God's agenda, yes. But not Jesus' agenda. When once asked to intervene in a "left-hand-realm"

equity dispute, Jesus responded “Not my job.” The Father had sent him on another assignment. Even more herculean than coping with oppressive empires.

I wonder: do Jesus vs. Empire theologians ever read Augustine’s *City of God*? What triggered Augustine to write this was the widespread grumbling among non-Christians in the fading Roman Empire that the Christians were responsible for the empire’s disintegration. Sounds like González’s thesis.

Not so, said Augustine: Christian faith does not urge its adherents to undermine empires. Its concern is to live in faith and love in whatever society those Christians find themselves. Yes, empires are unrighteous, by definition: one people imposes its will on another people—with empires, on many other peoples. That can never been done without grave injustice. The Lord of the universe evaluates all nations, checking on the justice/injustice present there. Long-suffering, yes, but finally God gives unjust nations (and empires always) their just deserts. God authorizes other agents in the world, his left-hand agents—in the Roman Empire case the Visigoths—to execute his verdict and sentence. Christians didn’t do it. God’s other agents, his southpaw agents, did it. And they didn’t even know who opened the door for them to enter and pillage Rome!

The conflict issues of the 16th century are perennial—possibly as perennial as the rise and fall of empires. Times for confessing return over and over again, beginning already in the church’s very first generation as verified by the NT documents themselves. What triggers them is *not* incursions or opposition from the outside per se, but variant responses from the insiders, the church folks, to those outside realities—either willingly ingested or warded off.

If today’s global capitalism is the juggernaut empire now on the

scene—and the evidence seems compelling to me—then it will generate a time for confessing if (as Bob Bertram compellingly outlines in his posthumous book *A Time for Confessing*) these signals appear within the churches:

- Gospel-plussing: “You gotta’s” being added to the core gospel of God in Christ reconciling the world.
- Authority confusions: Left-hand coercive authority replacing gospel-authority among Christians.
- Church unity grounded on more than the one gospel-and-sacraments.
- Appeals for and with the oppressed.
- Times of ambiguous certitude for the confessors.

Apropos of the global economic empire, evidence abounds (well, for those who have eyes to see it) that God has “Visigoths” already at work to discombobulate it. “Right now” and “from the inside,” where imperial cancer always germinates. And great will be the fall.

González’s book is a tour-de-force proposal for a major movement “right now,” and not only “from below” but widespread “from above (?)” in theological scholarship today. If you want to read just one book about it, read this one. Yet I think it is going the wrong way. Seems to me that González’s reign-of-God theology, as winsome as it is in his presentation, nevertheless diminishes God’s law and proposes an add-on to the gospel. It doesn’t dispute God’s gospel-reign as sinners trusting Christ. But that is not yet a big enough gospel. Undermining empires is also part of the mix, yes, actually the gospel’s very center. But gospel add-ons always also are gospel-diminutions. Adding more, yes, even relocating the center, is diminution indeed. To shift the gospel center from God getting sinners reconciled to God getting empires eliminated is diminution indeed. Most serious of all is that diminished gospels wind up being “other”

gospels.

Is this then a time for confessing? Seems so to me. But not first on Wall Street. Rather, much closer to home, within our Christian fellowship. And if that is so, then González himself—doubtless much to his surprise—gives us the specs for our confession: “protest and (alternate) project...right now and from below.”

Edward H. Schroeder
St. Louis, MO, USA
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#763 Talking with the “Nones”

Colleagues,

The “nones” are on the rise, we hear. In case you missed it, these are the folks who say “none” when pollsters ask what religious tradition they belong to. They don’t do church, period. Ditto for synagogue, mosque, or temple. Talk of the transcendent bemuses them. It comes across as silly, having no demonstrable connection to reality that they can see or imagine, and being therefore of no use in comprehending their lives in the world, let alone in shaping those lives. The Bible is a book they’d just as soon not read. Why bother with nonsense?

Comes the increasingly urgent question: how does someone who takes God-talk seriously bridge the conversational chasm between her and another who doesn’t? How might a Christian someone speak intelligibly with this other about the hope that animates her? How might she tempt the “none” to show the slightest interest in

having that discussion?

On Tuesday this week the 40+ people at the Crossings seminar in Belleville, Illinois, got a surprise lesson in this from Ed Schroeder. It was so good that we'd be cheating the rest of you if we failed to pass it along here.

Ed cranked this piece out on Monday night. In it he addresses the four characters in the 2011 Roman Polanski movie, *Carnage*. You can find plot summaries online. Here's the one from [IMDb](#). (Be sure to peruse before going further.) Marcus Felde had brought the movie along as an example of how issues addressed in a Biblical text surface in secular contexts. We watched it on Monday afternoon. Later that evening Marcus "crossed" both the context and the underlying issues with a superb homily and some follow-up reflections. Meanwhile Ed, who had gone home early, got to thinking what he'd say as a Christ-confessor to the folks in the movie, none of whom exhibit the slightest inclination toward matters overtly religious. Here's what he came up with. Notice, when he talks about Christ he does so only in preliminary kind of way. Mostly he shows them how Christian usages of the words "God" and "law" intersect intimately with their own heated conversations, and he winds up tempting them to hear more about a genuine alternative in the Jesus story. It seemed to lots of us who listened yesterday that he did so convincingly. "Spot on," as my Australian friends might say.

Enough from me. Enjoy. Learn. Join the rest of us in giving thanks.

Peace and Joy,
Jerry Burce, for the editorial team

Ed Schroeder to the characters in the movie Carnage, which ends

with one of them saying, "This is the worst day of my life."

You've been living out a very Biblical kind of story here in the living room (and bathroom and kitchen). That may surprise you.

1. The worst day of my life is what the Bible calls Judgment Day.

Don't have to wait till the end of the world for that. Though that is the FINAL judgment, but Judgment day is every day. You don't even have to believe in God—and still it happens. You've just done it here. Judging each other left and right so that your own FINAL JUDGEMENT, final verdict is: This is the worst day of my life. And after all the judging, what's left? Carnage. Makes me think of Hamlet or Macbeth: final scene = corpses all over the floor. Living by the law, though it seems as though you should be able to use the law of equity/fairness/recompense to "save" things—your sons, yourselves. The cool cat of your quartet is even a LAWyer! As you argue your cases for making "right judgments" about the boys—and then about yourselves and each other—trying to "save" the situation, none of your attempts ever works. Bible-talk for that is "Salvation by the law never works. It always works the opposite. It's an illusion." I don't have to ask you to believe that. You've just shown us viewers that this is the truth of your own lives.

Bible talk for that is that God put such a mechanism into the creation. Once more, you don't have to believe in God to acknowledge that. You've been calling on that law of fairness, of retribution as though it did have a cosmic more-than-human quality, valid throughout the world.

Biblical term for what we've seen in this home is Life under the Law. One big element of which is living by the law of retribution. We can spec that out even more, if you

wish. This living room has been a courtroom. Accusation, defense, calling for each other to be “fair” judges of your cases.

2. I want to move to another item in the Bible’s picture about Life under God’s law—God’s law, namely, the Law of PRESERVATION. In the last 30 seconds of the film (you folks didn’t see it, but the camera and we the audience did) life was continuing. The life of the hamster had been (miraculously?) preserved. And the kids (miraculously?) were playing together again. You might call it Good Luck for the hamster, and “kids will be kids” for the playground. Bible talk for that is that despite what’s doing on in the living room of judgment, destruction, God preserves our world, even though full of fractious (and phony) live-by-the-law people, and sees to it that total destruction doesn’t overwhelm our planet, nor us humans on it. Biblical word for that is God’s goodness even in the face of what we witnessed in your living room. “He sends rain upon the just and the unjust.”

3. Some Other News: You can continue to live another day after this “worst day” the same way you’ve been doing, possibly all your lives, or you can opt to live out another story line.

First, you’ll have to hear it. You’ve doubtless heard about the Jesus story. I’ll rehearse it here with you four in it as members in the cast. The story we’ve seen unfold about you is a classic tragedy. Corpses all over the floor. The Jesus story—even with you tragedians in it, yes explicitly WITH you tragedians in it—is a classic comedy. In the end everybody’s still alive. And there’s even joy. “Best day of my life.” But it’s even better than Shakespeare’s comedies.

To live a different story-line you need to switch gods. You may consider yourselves atheists, or agnostics, I don't know. Bible view of what a god is, is not some supernatural being up there in the sky, but whatever you hang your heart on. And hang on to it for dear life. All four of you have shown us what that is for each of you. Each with a different deity (we can zero in on that, if you wish)—although the same principle is there when you “call on that God.” Namely, “I want to be right, and I want the cosmic (divine?) law of retribution to work to show me to be right. Because I have solid evidence that I AM right.”

So my pitch is to invite you to switch gods, since so far the god you've got has failed. And there is no promise, no grounds for you to hope, that your deity will EVER work for what you trust it to do for you. HOPE needs SUCCESS (somewhere) for it to be a Hope worth Hoping. [An old friend named Bob Bertram coined that phrase.]

So switch gods. Nobody's gonna twist your arm. It's simply an offer. And the spin-offs that come with that offer when you take it are new possibilities for Love (even of those gosh-awful spouses you've exposed each other to be) and real Hope that the days yet to come for you will NOT be additional “worst days of my life,” but good days even when the boys get into a fight and your spouse continues to be imperfect.

HOPE needs success. And FAITH always hangs onto a promise. Even phony faiths. Here's the Promise and Success angles of the Jesus-story. It's all about the four of you.

Wanna hear it now?

Addendum—

Two readers responded to last week's question about the Latin original of the words that were rendered "great sin" in one translation of the Luther quotation and "token sin" in another translation:

First, Rich Jungkuntz:

"The Latin reads, 'Utinam possem aliquid INSIGNE peccati designari modo ad aludendum diabolum, ut intelligeret, me nullum peccatum agnoscere ac me nullius peccati mihi esse conscium!'

"Or see for yourself: <http://archive.org/stream/werkebriefwechse0305luthuoft#page/518/mode/1up>

"For Luther's Works online in the original languages, see <http://www.theologische-buchhandlung.de/weimar.htm> or <http://www.lutherdansk.dk/WA/D.%20Martin%20Luthers%20Werke,%20Weimarer%20Ausgabe%20-%20WA.htm?>"

Next, Gerald Anderson sent us this reflection, also referencing the first of Rich's links—

"Useful piece, especially the part in brackets. Those lines figure prominently in the 2005 Luther movie, when Luther is preaching after a suicide. I've always wondered where in Luther's works that came from.

"Look at <http://archive.org/stream/werkebriefwechse0305luthuoft#page/518/>. Letter to Hieronymus Weller, from Coburg, apparently soon after the presentation of the Augsburg Confession. The text you

referred to in your footnote is 5th line from the bottom on p. 519:

“‘Utinam possem aliquid insigne peccati designare’ With my high school Latin, I would translate it, ‘Would that I could define [design] some [might have the sense of a special something] badge of sin’

“‘Insigne’ seems to have the sense of something conspicuous or distinguishing, which could relate to the translation ‘great,’ but I think the meaning is closer to ‘token’— an identifier.”

And, most recently, from Pam Vetter,

“I haven’t found Luther’s original text of the Weller letter, but as a lifelong Lutheran, I am guessing it’s likely to mirror his famous, ‘Sin boldly! (But believe even more boldly in Christ)’—so ‘great’ rather than ‘token’ would be my hunch. I also think of the hymn A Mighty Fortress: ‘Were they to take our house, goods, honor, child, or spouse; though life be swept away, he cannot win the day. The Kingdom’s ours forever.’”

To all who wrote in: thank you! –JEB

“It Can’t Be All That Bad: Why God’s Deadly Diagnosis Of Our

Human Condition Matters"

Crossings Training Seminar

January 22, 2013

Steven E. Albertin

When I shared the title of this conference ("Good News We Don't Want To Hear – Preaching To A Skeptical Word") with a friend a few months ago, he stared at me rather incredulously. What a strange title! *Why would anyone not want to hear good news?* Then he answered his own question: *Probably because it is too good to be true.* You know what they say about those late night TV ads for some incredible weight loss product that is going to make you look like you are 18 again with all kinds of girls crawling all over you for date and you don't have to exercise or starve yourself . . . all for \$19.95. *If it sounds like it is too good to be true, it probably is.*

My presentation is going to flip this familiar advice on its ear. If people are skeptical of news that is just too good to be true, then they are also skeptical of news that is just too bad to be true.

That has been my experience of preaching weekly in a congregation for over 30 years. Inevitably, some listener in my congregation will complain that my sermons are too dark and negative. "Pastor, it can't be that bad. Our sin can't be that bad, our life can't be that bleak and God can't be that upset with us." Any hint that of what the Crossings Matrix calls D-3 or "The Eternal Problem" or "The God Problem" or "the judgment and wrath of God" or Step Three offends listeners. They disagree with my diagnosis. "We aren't that bad and God isn't that upset. After all, God is good . . . all the time. All the time . . .

God is good."

The goodness of God is a given. "Pastor, just look around you. Isn't it obvious?"

But I am not so sure it is so obvious. That is not what I see when I look at the world in which I live and the lives I saw portrayed in Roman Polanski's film *Carnage* that we saw yesterday. Life can get pretty ugly. People can be cruel. Bad things happen. No wonder Penelope, Michael, Nancy and Alan descend into a cauldron of cruelty and carnage. No wonder that it is with a sense of cynicism and defiance that Alan Cowan declares his religion: "Penelope, I believe in the god of carnage. The god who rules has been unchallenged since time immemorial." (73)

When I ask my critics about Jesus and what he has to do with goodness of God, I usually get some pious rambling about a Jesus who reveals what is already and obviously true anyway. Jesus does not change anything or make any difference to what is already a given. With a tenacious piety they cling to this *a priori*, fundamental theological presupposition that refuses to be confused by the facts and that no one dare call into question: "God is good all the time. All the time God is good."

Hmmmm. But if I ask, "How do you know that God is good all the time? What is the basis of such a belief?" they look at me with disdain and disgust. I get the feeling that they think I am disrespectful and irreverent. How dare I ask a question like this? I'm the pastor. I am not supposed to question the goodness of God. My job is to defend it. That is what good Christians do. They are committed believing, no matter what, that God is good . . . all the time. And all the time . . . God is good.

If I ask how I can believe in God when there is so much suffering, hurt and carnage in life, I usually am told to

“buckle up and believe.” Sometimes I feel badly for daring to imply that God might somehow have something to do with the bad things of life. The pleasantly polite cultural religion of America has staked its hopes on a pleasantly malleable karma that that always seems to work to our advantage. If something goes badly, we just need to work a little harder and make a few more adjustments.

The cultural orthodoxy of *moralistic, therapeutic, deism* (cf. the work of sociologist Christian Smith at Notre Dame) assumes that a God of beautiful sunset, fine music, pleasant feelings and human fulfillment would not have anything to do with really bad things. Bad things happen because people are only human. They make mistakes that a little more education, elbow grease or government funding can surely correct. Bad things happen because God sort of loses control every once in a while. Occasionally it might look like evil has gotten the upper hand. However, in the end the goodness of God will win out. What looks bad now, just looks that way. Just change the way you look at things, believe in the goodness of God, be good and it will work out all right in the end.

It reminds of the kind of fatalistic faith that I saw portrayed in a wonderful film of the last year “The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel” where the protagonist repeatedly repeats his faith in the goodness of destiny, his synonym for God: “In the end everything will turn out all right. And if things don’t turn out alright, it’s not the end.” This fatalistic commitment to believe that all will turn out alright in the end sounds more Hindu than Christian. Yet this is often how I hear the very people of my congregation speak of Christian faith.

When I hear people talk like this, I sense that they are trying to defend God or get God off the hook. Does God really need defending? Does God need us to make God look good and keep God’s

nose clean?

I don't think so. I think God is up to the task. Besides, defending God seems like a terribly big job and one that I don't think I am up to. God is capable of doing that himself (which of course God has done in Christ crucified and risen . . . more on that later).

This is my point. God's deadly diagnosis of our human condition matters, because without this diagnosis, Christ's work gets wasted and its promising comfort is thwarted.

God's deadly diagnosis matters for two reasons. One is theological. One is pastoral.

First, the theological reason: D3 diagnoses the human predicament from two perspectives. From the human, anthropological side the Law exposes the fact that we are stuck in our sin, trapped in our failed projects and unable to do anything about it. We have "God sized problems," huge, immense problems from which it will take huge, superhuman, divine intervention to free us. Again, *Carnage* provided a vivid picture of just how trapped humans are in that condition.

However, there is also the theological side of D3. The law finally reveals God has handed us over to this predicament. As sinners we are under God's judgment and wrath. This is more than a "God sized problem." This is "The God Problem." God is now the problem. God can only save a world under the judgment of God's law. If God is to love and save the world, God must come to terms with God's own judgment. Solving that problem takes a crucified and risen Christ, the death of the second person of the Trinity.

Then, there is the pastoral, experiential and existential reason for recognizing the depth of D3. If Christ does not provide for

us hope for life, then who does? The world is filled with alternatives all standing in line to offer us their hopes . . . “for a fee.” Of course, it is up to us come up with the fee. It is up to us to make the law work. We still “gotta” DO something. As a result, the unconditional comfort and the blessed good news of Christ is compromised. The monkey is still on our back. We still need to do something. Christ is important but still needs to be supplemented by something we do, our works, our faith, our commitment, our obedience, our submission, our sincerity without which we can never be sure that we are still in the good graces of God.

The deadly diagnosis of D3 exposes the terrifying fact that God is THE final, ultimate and eternal problem for sinners. God’s law, God’s judgment, stands over sinners ready to send them to eternal oblivion. The only one who can solve the God Problem is God. If God’s love is going to triumph and have its way with us, God has got to do away with God’s law and do it in a way that just does not just blow off the law as “a good idea that went bad.” God is serious about God’s law and yet God must break hold the hold of God’s law on humanity in a way that does not pretend that the law never mattered.

The ultimate God Problem is that God has a problem. What is God to do with people who not only behave badly but also want to thumb their noses at their creator? What does God do with God’s law and the sinners that have broken it? At the same time, what does God do with God’s desire to love God’s people no matter what? The depth of God’s deadly diagnosis means that God is going to have to do something dramatic and costly to get God’s people loved. That will take a crucified and risen Son of God. Without such assurance, the comforting and liberating good news of Gospel will always remain qualified. The Promise of the Gospel will be muffled.

That message is difficult to preach to a skeptical world. The world cannot be so bad off and in such trouble that it would take a God willing to love the world this much. People will not accept the depth of this diagnosis and the shock of this kind of indictment unless they already know that they are tethered to someone who will not let them go. It is just too scary to dangle over the cliff like this. People cannot risk admitting that they are in this much trouble unless they know that they are already loved. Such a confession is only possible if one has heard and trusted the promise of the Gospel.

As we apply the Crossings/Law/Gospel matrix to Biblical texts and human lives for the sake of preaching, the subject of this seminar, we need to remember that. Even though the Crossings matrix analysis requires *"Three before Four and not Before"* (D3 before P1 or the Eternal Problem before the Eternal Solution), in the actual preaching and pastoral care of people, such recognition by the hearer happens as a fruit of faith. The preacher theologically knows that 3 must come before 4. But pastorally, in the lived experience of people on whom the Word of God through Law and Gospel is actually doing diagnosis and prognosis, full recognition of the depth of D3 happens in Step 5. The actual crossing and application of Christ in Step 4 results in the Faith of Step 5. Christ makes Faith possible. From faith flows repentance and the acknowledgement of the depth of sin and the terror of God's judgment.

When the preacher insists that the "hearers" of God's Word first acknowledge the depth of Step 3 before encountering Step 4, that you "gotta" admit how bad you are before you are ready to receive the gracious promise of the Gospel, the "hearer" surely will flee in disbelief like the tax collector or resist in defiance like the Pharisee. No wonder that Penelope, Michael, Nancy and Alan in *Carnage*, for as profound as their awareness of their predicament is, are never able to admit that God is the

enforcer of their predicament. The diagnosis is true but the hearers cannot face the burden of this truth without knowing that someone is with them holding their hand and walking with them through death and resurrection. Of course, that someone is Christ.

This administration of God's deadly diagnosis through the Law along with God's life- giving prognosis through the Gospel is at the center of my ministry and preaching. Without God's deadly diagnosis, Christ and the comfort he offers gets wasted. The best way I know to show you how and why this matters, is to give you an example of how that happens in my preaching.

Hence, I offer you this sermon from 2009.

“FORGIVE AND FORGET?” Jeremiah 31:31-34

The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt—a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says the LORD.

But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.

No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, “Know the LORD,” for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the LORD; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.

Someone has wronged you, betrayed you, stabbed you in the back. You are angry, fuming, ready to strangle them. You complain to a

trusted friend about what has happened to you. He tells you, "Steve, you have got to move on with your life. Continuing to stew about this is just going to eat you up. Why don't you just **forgive and forget?**"

Forgive and forget! Ask someone in the coffee shop or at the water cooler what forgiveness means and that is probably what he will tell you. To forgive means to forget about it. To forgive means to stop remembering the hurt or the injustice done to you and putting it behind you. To forgive means to move on with your life and live as if the hurt never happened.

People who offer such advice probably think they are being helpful. They probably think their advice is even comforting. They think that forgetting is at the heart of forgiveness. But how mistaken they are! To think that forgiving distorts the true nature of forgiveness. It trivializes the hurt that it is meant to heal. It deprives forgiveness of its true redeeming power. Ultimately such forgetting is humanly impossible. We might think that we are being helpful and comforting by telling someone to forgive and forget. But we are actually saddling them with a huge burden and an impossible demand.

The recent public outcry over the huge bonuses paid to the executives of insurance giant AIG is another example of how difficult it is for people to "just forgive and forget." AIG was so mismanaged that it had to receive billions in federal "bailout" money to keep it solvent. But when the public found out that the very executives who had mismanaged this company got bonuses, they were not about to "forgive and forget." Outraged, they demanded action. Congress responded by imposing a huge retro-active tax on the bonuses. The people demanded their "pound of flesh" and got it.

"Forgive and forget" seems most difficult is in the context of

family life. Try to tell children to **“forgive and forget”** after they have just had a bitter disagreement. They can’t simply **“forgive and forget,”** because they have got to keep living every day under the same roof with this person whose very presence continues to remind them that “Johnny stole my Teddy Bear!”

Try to tell a wife or a husband to **“forgive and forget”** when their spouse has been unfaithful to them. A grievous betrayal has been committed. If the marriage meant anything, the sin cannot simply be forgotten. To forget means that those marriage vows were not that important. The hurt cannot simply be forgotten. The wounded spouse has a right to her “pound of flesh” and make her spouse pay. To simply **“forgive and forget”** makes a mockery of their marriage and belittles the depth of their pain.

If there was ever anyone who had every right to “get back and get even,” get his “pound of flesh,” and make his demands for justice, it was the prophet Jeremiah, from whose book today’s First Reading is taken.

Jeremiah had dared to speak against the establishment. Contrary to the official prophets on the pay roll of the king, Jeremiah warned of the coming doom because Israel had been so unfaithful.

Because Jeremiah had dared to speak out the defenders and protectors of the establishment, had him arrested and imprisoned. Locked in public stocks his enemies mocked and beat him. They could not bear to hear the truth of what they had done and what God was going to do to them.

Now, Jerusalem was falling. The Babylonian hordes had descended from the north. The walls of the city had been breached. The temple was burning. The king had been captured and along with other leaders had been led away in chains to the Babylonian captivity.

You would think that Jeremiah would have been delighted with the fate of his enemies. They were getting what they deserved. However, then he does something utterly strange. He takes what little money he has left and purchases a piece of land outside Jerusalem. How crazy is this? At a time when everyone else was selling, trying to abandon ship and get out of town with whatever money they still could get, Jeremiah does just the opposite. In the midst of destruction he bets on the future. He invests in the land that everyone else was abandoning.

Then he utters the remarkable words of today's First Reading. Here in the midst of the shattering of the old covenant of Sinai, Jeremiah promises that God is going to make a new covenant. Unlike the old covenant written on tablets of stone, stone that could be broken and shattered, this new covenant will be written on people's hearts. As a result, they will WANT to keep them. They won't have to be continually told to shape up. It will be a GET TO instead of a HAVE TO because God "will forgive their iniquity and remember their sin no more."

In the surprising forgiveness of this new covenant we see a foreshadowing of the same kind of forgiveness God worked in Jesus and continues to work among us today. Through Jesus' death and resurrection God forgives the sins of the world. **But this forgiving is not forgetting!**

God is not some sleepy old man in the sky who is oblivious to our sins. God is not like some enabling parent who always overlooks the alcohol abuse of his teenager. God is not happy with our sin, our betrayals, and our violence, but God loves us. God will not just look the other way and pretend that they never happen. Someone must pay. Someone must suffer the consequences.

When Jeremiah decides to use his own money to buy a piece of land and redeem it from the ownership of the Babylonians, he

demonstrates the essence of the new covenant. God **forgives not by forgetting** but by choosing to **remember Israel's sin in a new way**.

What Jeremiah did is what God would do for us in Christ. Instead of holding our sins against us and making us pay, God "bites his tongue." God "bites the bullet." God chooses to give up His right to get His pound of flesh from us. God "pays, sacrifices and suffers. God is the one who bleeds. God gets His "pound of flesh" . . . from Himself, from his "only begotten Son," Jesus dies "for us" and suffering punishment intended for us and in exchange offering us forgiveness and new life.

Every time we begin our worship with the Rite Confession and Forgiveness, Jeremiah's new covenant is re-established. Our sins are not forgotten. God remembers them. "If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us." We remember them. "We confess that we are in bondage to sin and cannot free ourselves." But, then we are told the glorious good news. God has chosen to remember them in a new way. The destruction we deserve God has turned into good. How? He "has given His Son to die for us and, for his sake, forgives us all our sins."

God does not forget our sin but remembers our sin in a new way. God does not hold them against us. God forgives us.

When we believe this amazing promise, everything changes. We forgive those who have wronged us. We don't forget what has happened, but we choose to remember the wrongs in a new way. We no longer hold them against those who hurt us. Instead, we join God in breaking the painful and deadly cycle of "getting back and getting even" that so torments this world of ours.

Several years ago an incident happened on TV's "American Idol" that illustrated so well that forgiveness is not "forgiving and

forgetting.”

Mandisa, a young African American singer was a contestant on the show. Judge Simon Cowell made several comments about Mandisa’s weight during her audition. When he first saw her, he quipped that we are “going to have a bigger stage this year. Later when Paul Abdul commented that Mandisa had a “Frenchie” growl to her voice, Cowell responded that a more apt comparison would be to France itself. These were among the comments that drew the ire of the National Association to Advance Fat Acceptance, and would be one of the reasons Mandisa would entitle her 2007 album “True Beauty.”

When Mandisa presented herself to the judges prior to the final cut-down to the season’s 24 semi-finalists, she told Cowell, “What I want to say to you is that, yes, you hurt me and I cried and it was painful, it really was. But I want you to know that I’ve forgiven you and that you don’t need someone to apologize in order to forgive somebody. I figure that if Jesus could die so that all of my wrongs could be forgiven, I can certainly extend that same grace to you.”

Such forgiveness can do great things. Mandisa did not just forgive and forget. The pain was real. It could not just be forgotten and shoved under the carpet. Nevertheless, Jesus’ forgiveness of her enabled her to forgive Simon. She would “bite the bullet,” she would give up her right to “get back and get even,” she would remember his sin in a new way and no longer hold it against him.

Such forgiveness can change people. Simon told Mandisa that he was “humbled” and immediately apologized to her.

This is the new kind of life that the new covenant makes possible. Such forgiveness is not something we “gotta” do or else. That was life under the old covenant. Under the new

covenant such forgiveness is a gift through which we can partner with God through Jesus in redeeming the world. What the world and people like Simon Cowell meant for humiliation and ridicule, we can change and transform into goodness and life. By refusing to demand our “pound of flesh,” by refusing to “get back by getting even,” but instead choosing to “bite the bullet,” to turn the other cheek, to be generous, to love our enemies, to be merciful as our Father is merciful, and to **forgive but not forget**, . . . a new world begins to take shape in the midst of the old. The Kingdom of God begins to arrive. And what the world meant for evil, God has transformed into good.

There, . . . did you hear it? God’s deadly diagnosis matters. Why? Because when we realize how deeply we are in trouble, we are even more amazed by what God did in Christ and what comfort that is for our lives. I once heard the Christian “anti-rock group” rock group, *Lost And Found*, put it like this. “If the good news is not good news, then the good news is not the good news.”

Thanks be to God. Because of the crucified and risen Christ, . . . it is good news.

[WhyDeadlyDiagnosisMatters \(PDF\)](#)

#762 Nervy Faith, or How to

Appall a Pietist

Colleagues,

Something a bit lighter for once, and why not, it being the season of light and laughter as the Spirit makes epiphanies pop here and there.

I pass along a little thing that an old friend sent me the other day. The immediate source is the online version of [Lapham's Quarterly](#), a magazine that addresses matters of current interest with voices from the past. The topic of the latest issue is "Intoxication." It includes the excerpt from Luther that you'll get to below, culled from a letter he wrote to a favorite student named Jerome. My friend, who never calls me by nickname, thought I'd appreciate that. I did.

Then I caught myself appreciating the real gift in this piece. So will you. It's not the feature that seems to have caught and titillated the *Lapham* editors, namely Luther's attitude toward beer. The far greater surprise, especially in an American Protestant context, is his attitude toward superficial sinning in general. He doesn't fear it. It doesn't bug him. Far from tut-tutting and wagging his finger after the fashion of the long-faced elder, he finds a positive use for it as a weapon against the tempter who will use God's Law to gut God's Gospel and undermine the sinner's confidence in Christ. Sounds familiar, does it not? Who of us has not fallen for that over and over again? So enjoy this bit of genuine Lutheran refreshment.

Next question: why do we insist on hiding such gifts from our children?

By the way, the *Lapham* editors cut away the most important lines

of the piece. I found them in a Google-books edition of Luther's *Letters of Spiritual Counsel*, assembled and translated by Theodore Tappert. See the material in square brackets at the end. Of course you'll find [the whole letter](#) in the Tappert edition. Do check it out. It's well worth reading.

Peace and Joy,
Jerome (Jerry) Burce, for the editorial team.

Luther, writing in 1530 to Jerome Weller—

Whenever this temptation of melancholy comes to you, beware not to dispute with the devil nor allow yourself to dwell on these lethal thoughts, for so doing is nothing less than giving place to the devil and so falling. Try as hard as you can to despise these thoughts sent by Satan. In this sort of temptation and battle, contempt is the easiest road to victory; laugh your enemy to scorn and ask to whom you are talking. By all means flee solitude, for he lies in wait most for those alone. This devil is conquered by despising and mocking him, not by resisting and arguing. Therefore, Jerome, joke and play games with my wife and others, in which way you will drive out your diabolic thoughts and take courage.

Be strong and cheerful and cast out those monstrous thoughts. Whenever the devil harasses you thus, seek the company of men, or drink more, or joke and talk nonsense, or do some other merry thing. Sometimes we must drink more, sport, recreate ourselves, aye, and even sin a little to spite the devil, so that we leave him no place for troubling our consciences with trifles. We are conquered if we try too conscientiously not to sin at all. So when the devil says to you, "Do not drink," answer him, "I will drink, and right freely, just because you tell me not to." One must always do what Satan forbids. What other cause do you think

that I have for drinking so much strong drink, talking so freely and making merry so often, except that I wish to mock and harass the devil who is wont to mock and harass me. Would that I could contrive some great* sin to spite the devil, that he might understand that I would not even then acknowledge it and that I was conscious of no sin whatever. We, whom the devil thus seeks to annoy, should remove the whole Decalogue from our hearts and minds. [When the devil throws our sins up to us and declares that we deserve death and hell, we ought to speak thus: "I admit that I deserve death and hell. What of it? Does this mean that I shall be sentenced to eternal damnation? By no means. For I know One who suffered and made satisfaction in my behalf. His name is Jesus Christ, the Son of God. Where he is, there I shall be also."]

** Tappert: "some token sin." Which is it, "great" or "token"? If one of you has access to the original Latin and can look it up, I'd love to hear from you. -JB*

#761 Reclaiming the Sain in Sain Sex

This week's offering is by Dr. Michael Hoy, pastor of First Evangelical Lutheran Church in Decatur, Illinois, and former editor of the Crossings newsletter. Mike is the steward of Bob Bertram's professional papers, and he edited Bertram's latest, posthumous and unfinished book, *The Divorce of Sex and Marriage: Sain Sex* [Chesterfield, MO: Crossings Community, 2012], which was reviewed in this space by Dr. Kathryn Kleinhans last month ([ThTheol 757](#)). Here Mike responds to Kit's review. Peace and

Joy,
Carol Braun, for the editorial team

Reclaiming the Sain in Sain Sex

I have been asked by dear friend and Crossings ThTh co-editor Jerry Burce to respond to the review of Robert W. Bertram's, *The Divorce of Sex and Marriage: Sain Sex* by another dear friend, Kit Kleinhans ([ThTheol 757](#)).

I know that Bertram really felt this work was important—too important to let it go unpublished. As editor of all three of his unpublished books, I had to make some choices. While I knew this book was the one Bob most wanted finished because he could see a church tearing itself apart on the issue of human sexuality, I still felt compelled to save it for last precisely because it was the least finished. I wish I knew how to fill in all the blank pages that went unwritten before he died. I am grateful that Kleinhans understood this—that my work as this book's editor was a labor of love for a man whom we both admire.

Several years ago, I was invited to write an article on Bob Bertram's theology, published under the title, "The Soteriological Mission of Theology: Robert W. Bertram" [*dialog* 31:1 (1992): 48-53]. What I didn't know was that Bob was also invited to write a response to my article. He was, as Bob always seemed to be, ingratiatingly kind in his response, even as he was now being "publicly identified" with me in having to respond. It was an incredible compliment, even a flattering recommendation. I sense that he learned this kind of response from his Lord, who took in strays (in this case, me; but also Kit, and Bob, and a whole host of others), and then had the courage of presenting them to the Father as his best friends.

Still, Bob did have one minor, and I would say gentle, correction of my essay. And his correction rested on the key word that mattered the most—soteriology (the word about salvation): “As Hoy hints, one of the strategies of this counter-insurgency is to use traditional churchy terminology, even such otherworldly sleepers as ‘salvation,’ but to use them now in such a sneaky way as to smuggle back into those outworn terms their original earthy puns.... Hoy blabs the Secret by talking about ‘salvation *for* the world.’ He might as well have spilled all the beans and admitted, as he does in the arcane circle of his parishioners, that it is a ‘salvation *of* the world.’” It may seem a subtle distinction, but it is loaded with the nature of how it is that Jesus the Christ infiltrates the world with the goal of making it whole, redeemed, precious. I’m still seeking to get that message out to my “arcane circle of parishioners.”

I hope Kleinhans will excuse this “anecdote,” something which she finds too much a part of Bertram’s book. Bob was always a good storyteller, though we ought not forget the Story he really was trying to tell. My purpose in telling the above anecdote is to set the tone for what I believe is the real intent of Bertram’s *Sain Sex*. He is bringing Jesus the Christ to bear on saving the world. But what is he seeing as that which is being saved here? Answer: SexMarriage, which is now so deeply divorced. As far as I know, that is not historically different even a decade after Bertram’s final crossing.

Bertram perceived this, and moreover perceived that the church in its conversations on sexuality was missing this. Instead, the church was—and apparently still is—too preoccupied with homosexuality, although Bertram makes it clear that homosexuality is “not the issue.... Marriage is” (33). How do we understand what marriage truly is, especially when we seem to have so many blinders on (or, as Bertram calls them, borrowing

from Jesus' own teaching moment, our specks and logs)?

I will be the first to concur that Bertram's style of writing is unique to him, and often misleading to many. But it is essential to note that the largest section of his book, had he finished it, would have been Part Two, where he hoped to make a case for a theology of marriage. We have only the skeleton outline for that part.

His only finished section was the first part, the hermeneutics of repentance. And it is largely on this section that Kleinhans offers her three critical points in review. If I may summarize, they are as follows:

1. Bertram's assessment of same-sex unions is dated and conditioned by opinion polls and state laws which have since changed.
2. Bertram's use of an entire group of people (viz., gays and lesbians) as the foil for the "edification of others" is unethical.
3. Bertram relies on unsupported assumptions, particularly the assumption that "homosexualism" (homosexual sexual practice) is sin and that there is only one valid means of intercourse (penis-in-vagina).

Notice how all of these criticisms focus precisely on what Bertram called the "speck" of homosexualism in the speck-to-log analysis. Kleinhans attempts to say here that Bertram really had no right to use homosexualism even as the speck. Why? Because (in keeping with her three points) 1) a negative evaluation of same-sex behavior per se is no longer publicly valid; 2) the very nature of the analysis is unethical; and 3) it rests on a false assumption.

Now let us ask the more immediate question. Why did Bertram use this—homosexual sexual practice—as the speck? Why, as Kleinhans

suggests, pick on this? Let's take a fuller look at her three points.

1) Yes, things have changed since Bertram's late 1990s/early 2000s assessment of them, though I find it questionable whether her own data suggests a majority turn-around. Nonetheless, it is indeed possible that trends are pointing toward a public assessment that differs from what Bertram contends. Okay. As Bertram suggests, there was also a time when divorce was the critical "speck." That, too, has changed. Still, notice here (and again later) that when she seeks to entertain how Bertram might react ("I knew Bob Bertram well enough to know..."), she suspects a criticism. Here she suspects that Bertram would contend any arguments for same-sex marriage focus on an understanding of marriage as "public commitment." Notice, though, that Kleinhans not only affirms that this may be the case (and shame on the heterosexual community for doing the same) but she also offers us no alternative understanding of same-sex marriage that is theologically valid. What, then, is the theologically valid argument for same-sex marriage? That would, more likely, be Bertram's question to her.

2) If Bertram has a liberationist appreciation of gays and lesbians, he sure has a funny way of showing it. Criticisms of gays and lesbians, particularly in their sexual practice, seem unfair and unjust. Heterosexual couples are judged by their idolatry, while same-sex couples are judged by their practice. "Homosexualism" itself is a loaded, prejudicial term. These points I take to be at the heart of Kleinhans's criticism here. It is a stinging judgment, and one which Bertram, I am sure, would himself take seriously. Yes, how unfair, indeed! Yet the prejudicial, unjust criticisms are not really unique to Bertram. He is reflecting a culture that has itself missed the mark in its assessment of sin. Yet the greater sin—this, I believe, lies at the heart of Bertram's hermeneutics of repentance, as Fred

Niedner marvelously lifted up in his Foreword—is the damned sense of *any of us* assuming we are right while others are wrong. Bertram wants in particular to focus that light on the damning (and damned) judges—the heterosexual “marriageolaters” (certainly, though not exclusively, those often right-wing homophobes who argue for marriage as between a man and a woman, but really, like all of us, have no clue what marriage is). But to characterize a group of people as foils for the edification of others? I don’t think so. It was never my experience of Bob that he would seek to do that; in fact, he did just the opposite, seeking to defend those most persecuted. What “edification” does Kleinhans see when the real emphasis is the *condemnation* of unfair, unjust judges, including (Bertram would gulp) “myself”? Is it time for a sain-ing?

3) Is “homosexualism” a sin? Are there not ways of intercourse other than the “penis-in-vagina” version that are equally valid and that also create unions? According to Kleinhans, Bertram makes assumptions about the answers to these questions.

Does he? They are assumptions, to be sure. But are they Bertram’s? Or are they the assumptions of the very culture of damned “marriageolaters” (The Husband, in Bertram’s story, being a case in point) that he is critiquing? Maybe, also, including himself as one.

Let’s note, first of all, that Kleinhans herself does not offer her own theological assessment on the first point, that “homosexualism” is sin, aside from her understandable distaste for the word.

But as to whether or not such practice creates unions, I think Bertram would say it does. For Bertram, *all* sexual practice is unitive. That does not, however, make all sexual practice *marriage*. The unitive power of sexual practice invites,

but also indicts, a whole host of sexual activity, including the practice of “penis-in-vagina.” But even that last practice alone does not constitute marriage. When Kleinhans judged Bertram for denying marriage to a woman married to an impotent war veteran, had she missed Bertram’s story of a loving marriage from *Elegy for Iris*?

If you’re looking for any prognosis from Kleinhans to respond to her diagnosis, you will not find it. In essence, it is only a half-Crossings matrix, and really not as theological as I would have hoped. Her best indicators toward a prognosis come in her first three paragraphs. Here she grasps how it is that all of us come to the table of our Lord Jesus the Christ, where his body is again ours, and ours (such as it is) his. He, too, thankfully, never shied away from any of us.

I think Bertram grasped that, also. Why else the suggestion of *hilaritas* in “Whose All?!” with which this book concludes. And I think that Kit may also come to see that she “knew Bertram well enough” to know that this gospel (not criticisms—those are only penultimate) is really what he was all about, also in *Sain Sex*.

#760 See my lawyer

This week’s Thursday Theology is a Pentecost sermon by Steve Albertin, my fellow editorial-board member and a frequent Crossings writer. Pentecost may feel far away, but Steve’s main points are timeless: the judgment inherent in God’s law, the salvation given to us through his Son, and the role of the Holy Spirit as our divine Advocate.

Peace and Joy,
Carol Braun, for the editorial team

“SEE MY LAWYER!”

John 15:26-27; 16:4b-15

Day of Pentecost

May 26/27, 2012

Christ Church

The Lutheran Church of Zionsville (Indiana)

Rev. Dr. Steven E. Albertin

The legal profession has always been a lightning rod of controversy and a source of contention. William Shakespeare in his play *Henry VI* once recommended that we ought to kill all the lawyers for all the harm they do.

Much of the criticism and ridicule that is directed at lawyers is unfair. It reflects more the distortion of a stereotype than the truth of reality. Who of us, if we were in trouble, would not want a lawyer? If we were the target of an unfair accusation, who of us would not be grateful to say, “See my lawyer?”

Forty-six years ago the Supreme Court’s Miranda decision guaranteed every person accused of a crime, regardless of his or her race, religion, economic, or social status, the right to say, “See my lawyer.” The hard work of lawyers puts the guilty in jail and keeps the innocent out of jail.

Today we celebrate the birth of the Church on that first Pentecost when (according to our first reading, from the book of Acts), in the midst of tongues of fire and the sound of a rushing wind and the miracle of many languages, the Holy Spirit

was poured upon Jesus' disciples.

In today's gospel Jesus calls that Holy Spirit...a lawyer.

It is Maundy Thursday. Jesus gathers his disciples in the Upper Room to celebrate the Passover. He knows that danger is near. His betrayal, arrest, and crucifixion are at hand. He declares that he is about to leave his disciples. They are afraid to be alone without their Master. Then Jesus says something that is simply amazing. Even though He will be leaving them, He will not abandon them. In fact, He is leaving them so that they will actually be better off. He is leaving so that He can send them a lawyer, an advocate, the Holy Spirit to defend and protect them in times of need. In the future whenever they have their backs to the wall, with complete confidence they can say, "See my lawyer."

That day arrived on Pentecost.

A lawyer is skilled in the art of rhetoric and persuasion so that he can defend and speak well of another. Jesus says that is the job of the Holy Spirit. His first job is to speak well of Jesus TO US, to make the case for Jesus as our Savior so that we would believe in Him. The Holy Spirit helps us to believe the gospel and the good news it offers.

That is how Martin Luther describes the work of the Holy Spirit in his explanation of the third article of the Apostles' Creed in the Small Catechism. He says,

I believe that I cannot by my own reason or effort believe in Jesus Christ or come to him. But the Holy Spirit has called me with the Gospel, enlightened me with his gifts, and sanctified and kept in the true faith.

But the Holy Spirit, the lawyer, does even more. He not only

makes the case for Jesus TO US, he makes a case for us TO GOD! Like a lawyer defending his client, the Holy Spirit speaks *for us and on our behalf* TO GOD.

Can you imagine standing before God with our whole life in our hands? What would we do? What could we say in defense of ourselves, standing before the creator of heaven and earth, who owns the universe and knows everything about us?

Do you remember Ken Starr, the special prosecutor appointed to preside over the investigation of President Clinton back in the 1990s? Whatever you might think of Ken Starr and his investigation of the president, it is not surprising that after spending \$50 million he was able to turn up “dirt” on the former president. Who of us would be able to withstand someone spending \$50 million to investigate us? Surely after spending that kind of money any lawyer would be able to discover our sins and misdeeds, the secrets we would like to keep covered up and buried in the past, the skeletons we would like to keep hidden in the closet and under tight wrap. The deeds of which we are ashamed and the slips of which we are embarrassed would be brought to the light of day. And if \$50 million could do this, can you imagine what almighty God could do to us? Who of us could ever hope to withstand an investigation like this?

We encounter that God every day in the criticism of our teachers, the demands of our employers, disapproval of our rivals, the rejection of our friends, the complaints of our spouse, the accusations of our enemies, the shame of our failures, the slow decay of our aging bodies, and the disappointment of not making the team or being invited to the big party. We want to run. We try to make excuses. We rationalize. We blame. But there is no escaping the criticism and the constant pressure to make our case and prove that we are right.

Can any of us hope to stand up to such criticism, especially if the one shaking His finger at us is not merely our boss, our friend, or our rival...but God?

We may not think that we can, but Jesus does! He tells us what we can do. It is really quite simple. He says, "See my lawyer." The Holy Spirit will be our defender and lawyer. He will make a case for us in response to all the critics who wag their fingers, list our failures, and expose our dirty underwear for all the world, and God, to see.

However, the Holy Spirit has a strange defense strategy. We expect a lawyer to defend us by disputing the charges against us and proving our innocence. A lawyer should offer evidence to get us off the hook. However, not this lawyer! Not the Holy Spirit! This lawyer does not defend us by refuting the charges against us and proving that we are better than we seem. He does not overlook our foibles. Instead, he reveals our guilt and then does something that is utterly mind-boggling. He talks not about us and what we have done but about Jesus and what He has done. He points to Jesus' life, death, and resurrection, as if that is all that matters.

If any other lawyer would try to use this kind of legal strategy in a court of law, he would be laughed out of court. Even worse, he would be declared out of order. And worst of all, he might even be disbarred for dishonoring the court with such an outrageous strategy. It would be like a lawyer arguing for the innocence of his client, who, even though he was caught with blood on his hands and the murder weapon in his pocket, couldn't be guilty because his friend was innocent. It would be like Johnny receiving an F on his math test but arguing that he should receive an A because his best friend got an A. It would be like a worker arguing with his boss that he ought to get paid for forty hours of work even though he didn't show up for work

all week but his friend did.

It is absurd, but that is precisely the strategy that the Holy Spirit uses to make His case on our behalf.

As we meet the Creator of heaven and earth, the ultimate judge of all places, things, and people, in the criticism and demands of daily life, God says, "Explain yourself. Show me why I ought to acquit you."

We answer, "Yup! You got me, but...See my lawyer."

And our lawyer, the Holy Spirit, says, "See Jesus, whom You, God, sent to suffer, die, and be raised on behalf of just such sinners as these. Now, this was all Your idea in the first place. Are you going to renege on what You did?"

And God says to us, "Well, with this kind of a lawyer what can I say? Your sins are forgiven! You are free. Go and tell the rest of the world the good news. They too can say, 'See my lawyer!'"