

# Theology for Third Graders on the Cusp of Christmas

Colleagues,

The congregation I serve is one of the very few in the ELCA that operates an elementary school. It's a legacy of our roots in the LCMS, one for which we continue to thank God. Of late we see it emerging more and more as a mission field, in sharp distinction to an older identity as the fold in which thoughtful Lutheran parents could keep their little lambs safe from the wolves that roam in public places. Time was, and not so long ago, when two thirds of the families with children enrolled were members of the congregation. In this year's kindergarten class, the proportion is 10 percent. I have an inkling that, for several of these families, Messiah School is the sole point of connection with the story of Jesus and the Gospel that erupts when this story is faithfully told as font and source of God's promises today.

This puts pressure on those of us tasked to convey the promises, whether as teachers in the classroom or as that old guy in the omnipresent black shirt, sometimes with a funny collar, sometimes not, who wafts mysteriously through the school hallways from time to time. With many of the children, the chances to tell the story are fewer than they used to be. Church is not something that mom and dad will take them to, not even at Christmas. So when the school comes together, as it did yesterday afternoon, to launch the Christmas break with a chapel service, one aims to make as much of it as possible within the strict restraints of the time available before the school buses show up.

Today I pass along what those children at Messiah School were

doused in yesterday. Eighth grade students did the dousing, from lectern and pulpit. The format was a little service of lessons and carols, arranged by the principal, who twisted the pastor's arm to compose a brief reflection on each of the lessons, emphasis on "brief." The eighth graders took turns reading first the lesson, then the ensuing reflection, each set followed by stanzas of a Christmas carol that the students had picked to match it.

This will be thin gruel for all of you unless you approach it from the point of the view of the thoughtful critic who wonders how she or he might tackle a similar assignment. You are talking to children. You take them with utmost seriousness as foci of God's attention and love. You assume going in that God has some good news designed precisely for them in the particularity of their momentary situation as seven or eight or nine year old Americans of the early 21<sup>st</sup> century. You have a thick, rich, adult-sized text, and half a minute in which to draw from it a promise the children are able to hear and find comfort in. How indeed does one go at it, if not with these children, then with one's own children or grandchildren?

And for those of you with the nerve and time to tackle this, how might you counsel the undersigned pastor and grandfather to improve on his work next time around, the task being to think as a theologian for the sake of touting Christ and his benefits to a third-grader? Yes, I will welcome responses.

One last thing: since you doubtless popped this post open looking for grownup fare, I pass along a Christmas present that popped up in my Facebook feed yesterday morning, via Valparaiso University's *The Cresset*. It's a reprint, in the current issue, of a 75 year-old essay by O. P. Kretzmann, Valparaiso's legendary president of mid-century past. The title is "[Bethlehem and 1941](#)." That it manages so well to channel good news to

readers in 2016 is at once chilling and wondrous.

*Christus natus est.* Peace. Joy. Merry Christmas!

Jerry Burce

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## **A Brief Service of Lessons and Carols**

**Messiah Lutheran School, Fairview Park, Ohio**

**21 December 2016**

(Hymnal: *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*)

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### **First Reading: Isaiah 9:2, 6-7**

The people who walked in darkness  
have seen a great light;  
those who lived in a land of deep darkness—  
on them light has shined.  
For to us a child is born,  
to us a son is given,  
and the government will be on his shoulders.  
And he will be called  
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,  
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.  
Of the greatness of his government and peace  
there will be no end.  
He will reign on David's throne  
and over his kingdom,

establishing and upholding it  
with justice and righteousness  
from that time on and forever.  
The zeal of the Lord Almighty  
will accomplish this.

*Commentary and Prayer—*

Too many children wake up every morning in hard and dangerous places. The grownups in charge are not good people. They fight with each other. They don't bother to be kind, or try to be fair. Yes, they look after their own children; they'll even do it well. But if someone else's little boy or girl is hurt or hungry, they shrug their shoulders. They'll even laugh about it.

This is not what God wants. That's why God promised long ago to put someone in charge who is good enough, and wise enough, and strong enough to make things right for all God's children, no matter who they are or where they live. God started to keep that promise when Jesus was born. The day is coming when everyone will know him as King Jesus, and every little girl or boy will be safe and well and happy.

*We pray. Come quickly, Lord Jesus, and finish the work you were born to do. And even today, hold all of us in your care and love. Amen.*

**Hymn:** What Child is This? (296; v. 1-2)

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**Second Reading: Micah 5:2-5**

But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah,  
though you are small among the clans of Judah,  
out of you will come for me  
one who will be ruler over Israel,

whose origins are from of old,  
from ancient times.”

Therefore Israel will be abandoned  
until the time when she who is in labor bears a son,  
and the rest of his brothers return  
to join the Israelites.

He will stand and shepherd his flock  
in the strength of the Lord,  
in the majesty of the name of the Lord his God.  
And they will live securely, for then his greatness  
will reach to the ends of the earth.  
And he will be our peace.

#### *Commentary and Prayer—*

Great people sometimes come from unexpected places. Abraham Lincoln was born in a log cabin in the forests of Kentucky. Martin Luther grew up in a little German town that no one would want to visit. The greatest person ever entered the world in Bethlehem, a tiny village that nobody paid attention to at all.

God arranged it this way. All through the Bible we see how God likes to surprise people. Sometime God *needs* to surprise people. Otherwise we’d start to think we were just as smart as he is. How silly would that be? Still, people keep imagining that, and when they do, they turn into terrible people.

So to save us from being terrible, God put his baby Jesus in a place where no else would dream of looking. Today our grownup Savior is still in places—so many places—that smart people ignore. Our school is one of them.

We pray: *Open our eyes, dear Jesus, to see how you are with us in our classrooms and hallways, and also in our homes; and wherever you find us, hold us in your love and power. Amen.*

**Hymn:** 0 Little Town of Bethlehem (279; v. 1, 3, 4)

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**Third Reading: Luke 2:1-7**

In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. (This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.) And everyone went to their own town to register.

So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them.

*Commentary and Prayer—*

We call them refugees, or immigrants, or foreigners. We even dare to call them aliens. These are people who will be trying their best to sleep tonight in tents or train stations, in bouncing trucks or in open, rickety boats. They've been forced to leave their homes. They don't know where they are going, or what they will find when they arrive. Every day they meet people who are scared of them and treat them badly. They wonder if they matter to anybody at all.

When Jesus was born he was one of these people. God put his own dear boy into this great river of refugees because even these people—especially these people—matter so very much to God. You matter to God too, especially when you feel lost and forgotten and so very, very small.

We pray: *Lord Jesus, watch over every child who is traveling in strange places today, maybe with their parents and maybe not; and please find a way to let them know how much they matter to you.*

**Hymn:** Away in a Manger (277; v. 1-3)

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**Fourth Reading: Luke 2:8-14**

And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.”

Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying,

“Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests.”

*Commentary and Prayer—*

Those shepherds were not nice men. They weren't very clean either. We can be sure that as they sat together in the dark they were saying things that you and I would be punished for. No wonder their teeth started to chatter when the light went on and God's angel appeared. They knew what they deserved. They expected to get it.

Instead they hear, “Don't be afraid.” God wants all his children

to hear that this Christmas, beginning with the ones who ought to be afraid, and know it. The shepherds aren't the only ones who have a Savior. Each us of us has Jesus too. He was born to get what we deserve so that we don't have it get it.

*We pray: Dear Jesus, help us understand this Christmas how badly we need you; and when this starts to sink in, tell us once again not to be afraid. Then help us believe our ears so that we sing with joy, like those angels in the sky. Amen.*

**Hymn:** The First Noel (300; 1, 2, 4)

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**Fifth Reading: Luke 2:15-20**

When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about."

So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them. But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told.

*Commentary and Prayer—*

So the shepherds went rushing to Bethlehem to check things out, and much to their surprise, the shepherds found what they had been told to find. There was Mary, there was Joseph. Above all, there was the baby, and because all eyes were on the baby, nobody complained about these rough, smelly strangers who crowded in to see the baby too.



Even today, whenever people keep their eyes on Jesus, they stop complaining about the other people around them. Instead they thank God for those other people. They start thanking God that Jesus was born for everyone, even shepherds; even people we usually don't like very much.

No wonder the shepherds were praising God when they back to their fields.

*We pray: Lord Jesus, fill us with such happiness in you this Christmas, that we will love each other as you have loved us all. Amen.*

**Hymn:** Angels We Have Heard on High (289; v. 1-3)

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**Sixth Reading: John 1:1-5, 14**

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.

*Commentary and Prayer—*

Imagine a night when all the lights go out, all over Cleveland. It happened some years ago, before some of us were born. It took four or five days before the lights came on again. By then all the cellphones were dead, and so were the flashlights. The nights were very dark, and little children were scared.

Now imagine a light that never goes out. However dark it gets, however long the darkness lasts, the light still shines, and shines, and shines some more. It helps the little children feel safe. It comforts their parents, and makes them strong.

Jesus is this light for all of us. No darkness is long enough or deep enough to stop him from shining. His disciples learned that on Easter. It's our turn this Christmas to learn it too.

*We pray: Lord Jesus, you were born to be our light, shining with the love of God for us all. Keep our eyes always on you, so that even when every other light goes out, we will still be glad and full of hope. Amen.*

**Hymn:** O Come, All Ye Faithful (283; v. 1-3)

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**Seventh Reading: Philippians 2:5-11**

In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross!

Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

*Commentary and Prayer—*

What eighth grader would spend all her time hanging out with

second graders? Why would she? Second graders are so far beneath her. She needs to spend her time with the important kids.

Of course it's not just eighth graders who think like that. Grownups are that way too. All of them, with one exception. His name is Jesus.

This Christmas we remember how God sent his Son to hang out with all the nobodies who fill the world. Refugees. Shepherds. Second graders. Eighth graders. Teachers and pastors and mommies and daddies. Even mighty Caesar in far away Rome is nothing more than a tiny ant where God is concerned. Yet here comes Jesus to spend his time—with us. He treats us all like “the important kids.” Through his great and everlasting love, he turns us all into the children of God Most High.

*We pray: Lord Jesus, help us to look at each other with the eyes of your heart. Show us how precious we are to God—not some of us, but all of us. Then lead us in all our days to walk in this light, to the honor and glory of your holy name. Amen.*

**Hymn:** Go Tell It on the Mountain (290; v. 1-3)

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## Werner Elert on Truth, and Why It Matters

Colleagues,

Ed Schroeder enriches us all this week with a timely gem from [Werner Elert](#), the great 20<sup>th</sup> century Lutheran theologian with whom he studied at the University of Erlangen, and who he later

introduced to a phalanx of his own students, the undersigned among them. I continue to wish that Elert's books were more accessible than they are to American seminarians. If nothing else, they'd discover what deep, careful thinking looks and sounds like. They might also succumb to a taste of Gospel at its best. Thanks indeed to Ed for today's snippet.

Speaking of Gospel, consider joining us in Belleville, Illinois at the end of January for a seminar exploring its implications for today's fractured America. I've tacked some information about that to the end of this post.

Peace and Joy,  
Jerry Burce

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## **Werner Elert on the Importance of Truth**

by Edward H. Schroeder

"What is truth?" the Roman governor asks Jesus during the early Good Friday morning trial as St. John's Gospel portrays it. Jesus doesn't answer. Nor does John tell us what Pilate's own answer might have been. But you don't have to be a cynic to guess something like this: "Truth is whatever I say it is." Whether or not those words were in Pilate's mind, they have been the mantra of leaders since then.

And if they were in Pilate's mind, here's why that is not necessarily cynical. Pilate is Rome's top agent in the Roman army's occupation of Palestine. Though there is armistice at the moment, the context is war. And as someone has said: "In war we have propaganda, so the first thing sacrificed is truth." Is the reverse also true: "When truth is sacrificed we have war"?

That is not a hypothetical question these days in these United

States. What is truth? When the new US president takes the oath of office in January, will he be telling the truth? How important is it if he is or if he isn't? How important is truth for human existence?

These ruminations reminded me of this: My teacher Werner Elert devotes a separate unit of his ethics textbook to just that question. He calls truth an *Ordnung*, the German word for configurations God has "ordained" in creation to preserve human society, to guard it from destruction, to keep the human race going in a now-fractured world. This *Ordnung* of truth is treated at the very end of his long chapter on all the other *Ordnungen*: family, marriage, society, government, citizenship, economic order, work. And it comes at the end of his chapter because, he says, all those fundamental *Ordnungen* depend on truth being "in order" between people for these *Ordnungen* to function at all.

And when truth is not in order, they all crumble.

Here is my translation of that section from *Das Christliche Ethos*, p 182ff.

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### **Truth, Oath and Honor (W. Elert)**

According to the eighth commandment, "thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbor." Here too, as is the case in other commandments, a protective wall is established. What is to be protected here? "Protect your neighbor's honor?" That is as inadequate as to say that the seventh commandment protects private property, as if my neighbor's honor were his private property. The protection called for here is protection of an inter-human relationship, which is destroyed by false witness. If false witness is destruction, then the opposite is what needs protection here. The opposite of false witness is the truth.

In what sense is truth an inter-human relationship? Truth is existence without false appearances. God himself is truth, for his appearance—Greek: God's *doxa*—always reflects who God really is. With God's opponent, who lies, speaking from his own self, the lie is therefore the expression of his essence, who he really is. The devil, since there is no truth in him, is a primordial "murderer from the beginning" ["and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies he speaks according to his own nature, for he is a liar and the father of lies" (John 8:44).] The lie is murder, for it destroys creaturely reality by robbing it of truth, rendering it un-true. Whoever lies falsifies God's creation. Liars, says Christ, are children of the devil. In the Apocalypse of St. John, they show up as neighbors of idolaters (21:3) And according to St. Paul the vices of the wicked arise from their "exchanging the truth about God for a lie" (Rom. 1:25).

Yes, every human relationship is "in order" only when it is in truth, i.e., when each person in relation to the other presents himself as what he really is. What he is, he is as God's created human being. If he presents himself as other than that, he is destroying God's creation. That is why truth is a human-to-human relationship ordained by the creator. Truth is a divine institution wherein each of us is linked to others as who we in truth really are.

Granted, that first becomes totally visible in Christ, who make us in truth what in reality we actually are. Christ himself is truth in person, and therefore the foe of all hypocrisy. But even apart from Christ, where God's law undergirds all reality, it is clear that all of the structures of creation are only so far "in order" when they are true, not untrue, not hypocrisy, not deception, not pretense, i.e., that neither formally nor materially they communicate contradiction, deception, or self-deception.

A marriage is only so far “in order” when each spouse is truthful to the other. So a broken marriage is no true marriage any longer. It can at most be restored when truth is reestablished in the relationship between the two. So also a state is in order only when its procedures truly promote justice and not injustice, when obedience to its laws is not pretense, but is rendered in truth.

An economic order is “in order” only when wages do not simply “buy” labor at the cheapest price, but give truthful value to the laborer for the work performed.

Truth as an inter-human relationship is therefore not a separate entity on its own, but is itself something essential permeating all the structures of human life. For all the other orders truth is what holds them together as well as the criterion for what they are. For every such *Ordnung* is only what its name implies if it is clear of inner untruth and in this sense is truthfully “in order.” Parallel to this the lie, the contradiction of truth, perverts the *Ordnungen*, damages and finally destroys them.

In this sense the order of truth is similar to the state in its connection to the other *Ordnungen*. On the one hand the state, political government, is a distinct order of its own—like family, marriage, economy. However, as the one *Ordnung* possessing coercive power the government engages all the other *Ordnungen* by protecting them from the forces of disintegration which threaten them.

Truth and the state, one might say, serve as watchmen on behalf of all the other *Ordnungen*. Truth guards the interior space of every human relationship; the state’s power guards the outside boundaries.

For this reason they are also linked to each other. For the

state is a God-given *Ordnung* that internally can become un-true, counterfeit and finally destroyed. So the state itself needs truth's *Ordnung* in order for its function as watchman and protector to be in order. In a similar way truth too, as prerequisite for all the other orders to be "in order," needs the government's protection so that it can carry out its watchman's role for the other *Ordnungen*. So long as the lie lives only in a human heart it is thereby inaccessible to the state's monitoring, just as evil desires are. But as soon as the lie goes public, destroying the other *Ordnungen*, government must intervene. That happens, for example, when under "false presentation of the facts" I finesse a deal in business, or when I "put up the banns" [German legal practice for marriage] and falsify the data in the document. This also occurs above all when I "bear false witness against my neighbor."

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*Elert concludes this section linking truth-telling to the oath called for in court—"telling the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth"—and to personal honor, "a treasure," he says, quoting Luther, "which is indispensable for human life."*

EHS

December 8, 2016

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### **About the Belleville seminar, January 22-24, 2017:**

An election happened in the U.S. on November 8. Some people rejoiced at the outcome. Others mourned. This mixed reaction surfaced also among Christians who read the same Bible and wear the name of the same Christ to whom the Bible bears witness.

Whether mourning or rejoicing, these Christians have been asking



the same question. “Where is God in all this?” Or to put that more sharply, “What is God up to in this current American moment?” More sharply still, “What is God asking of me right now?”

We’re going to wrestle with these questions at next month’s Crossings Seminar in Belleville, Illinois (Jan. 22-24, at the Shrine of our Lady of the Snows). Steve Kuhl will lead a classic Crossings workshop that 1) “grounds” our thinking in the Epiphany texts from the Sermon on the Mount, 2) “tracks” the present set of issues these texts are driving us to face, and 3) “crosses” these issues with the word and promise of Christ crucified.

We think you’ll find this of tremendous help as you continue in coming months to respond to the election and its aftermath. Respond we must, and will. This is as true for Christians thrilled by the outcome as it is for the ones who are still in shock. Again the question: “How do we respond faithfully, in a way that is true to the God-in-Christ we happen to trust?”

We hope we’ll see you in Belleville, where we’ll be glad for your insights. Spread the word. Bring a friend.

For all the details, and to register, [click here](#). Be sure to note the discounts for first-time attendees.

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## Post-Election Conversation;

# the January Seminar

Colleagues,

Responses rolled in to the post of two weeks ago about the election of Mr. Trump. I send you a selection of them today. It's as close as we're able to come to conversation about such things within this reading-and-writing community that I spoke of in the post. Unless, of course, one makes a trip to the annual Crossings event in Belleville, Illinois, a three-day conference in even-numbered years, a two-day seminar in odd ones. One of the latter is now scheduled for January 22-24, so I want to tell you about that too. It will offer lots of opportunity for face-to-face talking, especially about the one piece of unimpeachably good news that went public on the Day of Pentecost, and is still floating through the world. Christ Jesus is in charge, as we celebrated this past Sunday, the enduring questions being where, and how, and to what present ends. I hope many of you will be able to join that conversation.

Peace and Joy,  
Jerry Burce

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**"So Where is God Now?"**

**The Belleville Seminar, January 22-24**

I start with the seminar, so that any and all who are interested won't miss the information and can act quickly on it. The event will happen in not quite two months at our usual meeting site, the Shrine of our Lady of the Snows in Belleville, Illinois, fifteen minutes or so from downtown St. Louis. A detailed schedule and registration information is available on the [Crossings website](#).

Two major items are on the agenda.

First, Steven Kuhl will lead a classic Crossings workshop as pioneered in the 1980's and '90s by Bob Bertram and Ed Schroeder. The aim is to crack open a Biblical text in such a way that what emerges is the Word of God, both Law and Gospel, addressing us in the particularities of our lives today. A distinct methodology is involved. Steve will teach that, as he did this past September for a group of pastors and church leaders in Singapore.

Steve's texts are the Gospel readings from the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5-7) that we'll be hearing in church this coming Epiphany season. As we engage the texts, the question he'll push us to ask is "Where is God Now," as in "now the election is over," or "now that half the country is cheering and the other half is writhing in dismay." Where indeed is God for a Crossings community in which some cheer and others writhe, as you'll see below when we get to reactions to my post.

Intruding on this discussion will be the agenda's second large item. This will be a conversation about Crossings itself, centered on questions that the Crossings board is grappling with as it works to develop a vision for the future of the community and a plan to carry the vision forward. Here we pray for the presence and participation of many "old hands," whose wisdom and insight the board hopes to draw on. Those leading the conversation will have their dials turned to listening mode, so please, count on the opportunity to say your piece and have it heard,

The cost of the seminar is \$200. That includes lodging and all meals except supper on Sunday evening. There will special breaks for persons attending a Crossings seminar or conference for the first time: half price if you're a lay person, no charge at all

if enrolled at a seminary.

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**Selected Responses to Thursday Theology #895,  
“The necessity of Christ for his Christians, post election”**

I pass these along without comment, except to thank those who either sent them to me or helped me in some other way to notice them. –JEB

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*1. From Jim Squire, a software engineer, lay preacher, and writer of Crossings text studies–*

I have begun to associate the word apocalypse with this election. I don't know if I am right, but it seems like the veil has been lifted on that segment of the Trump revolution which traffics proudly in racism, white supremacy, etc. that we have assumed was no longer plaguing us. Trump has not only lifted that veil, but he has given them permission to enjoy the fresh air and believe it's their turn. And now we can no longer easily argue as a nation that these problems have been resolved. The argument is over, the apocalypse is here, at least on that score. There's no longer anywhere to hide—in fact there's no desire to hide.

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*2. From Dianne Cecchett, a self-identified independent voter, and a gracious Thursday Theology reader with whom I exchanged a couple of notes this past summer–*

Your commentary amazes me. I guess Love doesn't Trump hate.

Trump is not nearly as bad as you are allowing yourself to believe or be led to believe by a blatantly biased and shameful media. He has faults as we all do but even King David committed

adultery and murder and was loved by God. He was a man after God's own heart. Clinton's "sins" reach much deeper than Trump's, all the way to an arrogance that refused to cooperate in the wake of four deaths in Benghazi. That is unconscionable.

I for one, am proud of Donald Trump. Proud of his brilliance and his amazing courage as that of his family. He told his supporters we would win and it has never felt so good. The man has stood up to a vicious beating by the press, the Democratic Party and its supporters, and even the Republican base. It would have killed a lesser man. Did you just expect him not to retaliate in any way? He didn't have to take any of it. He could have just continued on. He has a great business and a fortune.

I trust in God. I will not be rocked by either a Hillary Clinton or a Donald Trump. I will not judge either Trump or Clinton with a wrath that I thought only belonged to fundamentalist groups.

I look forward to the future. And I am not embarrassed or ashamed of who I voted for. God bless Donald J. Trump.

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3. *From Simon Burce, an attorney with a background in academic theology—*

This was the first election in my lifetime when I carried around a profound sense of unease the next day. I know I'm not alone...in this hour of uncertainty.

That said, in these past few days that initial uncertainty has been joined by a sense of genuine joy. And by that I mean a deep sense of purpose, a renewed calling to respond to the challenges of today by reflecting on God's gift to us in Christ and responding to that gift with courage and conviction. I recall reading in your church's monthly newsletter that the congregation had had enough with being a "welcoming" place. How

easy it is for old Adam to feel satisfied knowing that as long as he's not putting off anyone that would seek out his community, that he's doing a good job in God's eyes. There's an analogy, I think, in the public sector where I for one was very comfortable thinking that the country was drifting forward in the right direction and so long as we had a decent, kind and thoughtful leader in the Oval Office I was off the hook for what happens next. Perhaps I've been too complacent. In fact, I know I have. And so, for that matter, have many people in our country, including some who occupy leadership positions in both major parties and in the media. Shame on the Democrats for ignoring the profound suffering and fear of a huge portion of our country's population, or for giving lip service to their troubles while focusing more sustained efforts on issues that suited the interests of the more powerful among their constituents. Shame on the Republicans for having no cognizable policy agenda these last 8 years, other than to willfully oppose and defy any of President Obama's policies. Shame on Donald Trump for preying on the fears of so many Americans and leveraging those fears for his own self interest. And shame on the media for spending more time in Trump Tower discussing tweets and trashy headlines than writing about the profound effects of globalization on the American working class. And shame on all of us for not taking Trump seriously and for presuming that he had no possibility of taking the Presidency just because he is so uniquely and utterly unqualified for the job that he ultimately won.

In all of this, I think we have to say God Bless America for being a country where we have the right to choose or not to choose to let Donald Trump, a gold-plated two bit hustler from Queens, NY, be our president. Where there is no birthright to power, nobody can claim our presidency for themselves—not the Clintons, nor the Bushes. This president was chosen by us, and

we'll need to deal with the consequences of that choice. However it's reassuring to know that we can affect that choice in ways big and small, limited only by the time, talent, and energy that we can give toward the cause. May the Holy Spirit continue to inspire us all to strive toward that more perfect union that remains always in front of us.

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4. *By Jan Peter Heinstein, in a comment on the Facebook page of Pr. Jochen Teuffel (see [ThTheol 861](#)), where #895 was linked—*

Cool, aber die rassistische Spaltung der protestantischen Kirchen in USA könnte er mehr betonen. Das erinnert an alte Zeiten Südafrikas. [Cool, but he could have given greater emphasis to the racist division in the Protestant churches in the USA, which calls to mind old times in South Africa.]

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5. *From Kurt Hendel, Professor Emeritus of Reformation History at LSTC—*

Christ is, indeed, our hope, and Christ is also our assurance that God is present within and among us and that God will never forsake us. This is the promise that we not only trust but that we also have the privilege to share with all people, no matter who their choice for President was. Christ has already made all things new. The Light already shines in the darkness, and the darkness will never overcome it. Now we need to have the courage to reflect the Light in our words and actions.

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6. *From Pr. John Hitzeroth (ELCA), in a laconic note of the sort old friends and classmates will share—*

For your consideration: "[Stop Shaming Trump Supporters](#)," by Michael Lerner in The New York Times.

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*7. From Joel Grumm, a companion at a few of our Crossings conferences—*

I've been wrestling with my own cognitive dissonance around the "evangelical Christian theology" in my west Michigan neighborhood for more than 20 years now, which embraces a libertarian philosophy. And I too am challenged to understand people I care about and (can hopefully still) respect as "decent folk" in spite of embracing an unabashed racist, misogynist narcissist who is now "my"/"our" president. At the same time, my own anger at others and indeed myself might consume me but for Jesus. Guess I'd better reflect on the messages of my namesake and "return to the Lord your God for He is gracious and merciful..." and then get back to work trying to live the two commandments as best I'm able where God places me...

"Have no fear little flock" may be my "theme song" for the foreseeable future as I stumble forward with my brothers and sisters regardless our 2016 vote...

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*8. From Christine Lehman, another conference companion—*

I think I will up my contributions to the large number of local organizations in Valpo working for peace, justice and mercy, and maybe only read the news once a week. And pray, a lot, and a lot of that for forgiveness, and not for others alone...

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*9. Finally, back we go to Steve Kuhl, whose introduction to next month's seminar is also a response of sorts to the matters raised in #895—*

Whether it has to do with the personal life or public life, when



events and changes overwhelm and disturb our comfort level, people today often frame spiritual questions in the language of God's presence or lack thereof. So where is God now? But that is not the way the "God-question" arises in the Bible. For it evades the basic biblical truth that God is active everywhere.

Therefore, not "where is God now" but "what is God doing now" is the constant God-message of the ancient prophets—and of Jesus. "WHAT is God doing now in your world, your life—and WHAT are YOU doing in response to that?" From the Bible's very beginning (Genesis 3) it is God who is doing the questioning "Adam, where are you?" and it is "Adam" (i.e., we humans) who is the evasive one, with social conflict, blame gaming and scapegoating ("It's the fault of the woman you gave me") being the form this evasion takes. Sound familiar?

But raising incriminating questions (the Bible calls that "law") is not the only thing God is doing in the world. He is also offering an incredible answer to that question (called the "gospel") in the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ, one that begins with forgiveness and culminates in a new creation. Take, for example, the two criminals on crosses next to Jesus (Lk 23:32-38) as an illustration. The first seeks a messiah who will help him evade the sentence of condemnation he deserves. There is no such thing. The second seeks a messiah who will carry him through the condemnation he deserves. Jesus is that kind of messiah and savior. The second criminal's incredible leap of faith ("Jesus, remember me...") is given credibility as Jesus responds, "Today, you are with me in paradise."

This "question/answer" (law/gospel) complex will serve as our starting point as we wrestle to cross the Word of God to our world after November 8, 2016. The workshop program will follow the three step Crossings pattern:

- + Tracking our world today with help from secular analysts and your observations
- + Grounding our thought in the Matthean texts (Sermon on the Mount) for Epiphany,
- + Crossing the two sets of data into each, exploring the possibilities for discipleship in our post-November 8 world.

*Again the dates and place: January 22-24, Shrine of our Lady of the Snow, Belleville, IL. Hope you can be there!*

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# **The necessity of Christ for his Christians, post-election**

Colleagues,

I foist on you some thoughts that have either screamed or simmered in my head through the hours since Tuesday. If you voted for Mr. Trump, there is much you will not like. Those who voted for Mrs. Clinton may also object along the way. Still, that you're reading this at all presumes a common loyalty to Christ our Lord, and a common interest in sharing his benefits with fellow sinners. So hang in there if you can with this sinner as I pick my six-step way toward that goal. We will all need to be thinking, praying, and perhaps preaching about this very thing when Sunday rolls around. For the record, I thought long and hard about toning down the rhetoric and emotion that you'll encounter here. I decided not to. It testifies to a reality that all of us are dealing in these hard, tough days. *Kyrie eleison.*

## **1. The Morning-After Scream**

He won. My jaw hits the keyboard as I write this. The citizens of my country have just picked a pig to be the next president of the United States. I dare to call this a judicious assessment. It rests on facts that we the people have been witnessing over eighteen terrible months. The man wallows in sin. He does it with glee. There is not a commandment he has failed to violate over the course of his campaign. We have all heard and seen it. i) He doesn't fear God. ii) He wears the Christian name lightly, gingerly—and mocks what it stands for (e.g. “turn the other cheek”; “love your enemies,” as we heard from Christ himself last Sunday). iii) He ignores the Sabbath. iv) He doesn't render to Caesar (“because I'm smart!"). v) He foments hatred. vi) He revels in sexual aggression. vii) He cheats the unfortunates who do business with him. viii) He slanders others with relish; he assaults truth as a matter of course. ix) He covets adulation, to say nothing x) of his neighbor's wife.

He does all this openly, without the slightest hint of shame. That's what makes him so abhorrent. Shamelessness is the hallmark of the person who fancies himself to be a god, beyond the reach of anything others might have to say about right or wrong, good or evil. The god makes the rules. The god does as the god pleases. The rest of you tiny creatures will bend the knee, or else.

And people I know, people I cherish, voted for this man. Among them are some I preach the Gospel to every Sunday.

## **2. Our Christian Embarrassment**

I don't get these baptized, Christ-confessing people who sided with Trump. I'm pretty sure they don't get me. Even of you, a few, perhaps, will want to write me off as another knee-jerk ELCA liberal, now whining as liberals are wont to whine. I am

not that. My loathing of the man began as a visceral and quite conservative reaction to his personality. It festered as I watched his performance in the early debates among the 15 plus Republican candidates. Of all who spoke, none were more devoid of thoughtful substance. None were quicker to insult. None were less respectful of the basic rules that govern decent conversation. No one bragged as Trump bragged. No one matched the brio with which he spouted mean plans and vile promises. He was the worst of middle-school bullies somehow transposed into a 70 year-old body and planted on a platform where only grown-ups belong. The grown-ups I know were embarrassed to see him there. I have yet to meet the Christian parent who would let their seventh-grader evince the attitudes and behavior that we saw on that stage. If I had ever caught one of my boys crowing allusively in public about the size of his penis, I would have sent him to his room for a week. So too with you, I imagine. Yet this man got away with it. And today we are all forced to know him as our president-elect. The American who writes this cringes with embarrassment.

And those dear Christian people, the ones I know and cherish, abetted this shame when they voted for him. I ache to spill with anger about that. What holds me back is the fact of knowing them as I do. They are good. They are decent. They are generous. When together we break bread. We crack jokes. We pray and sing in unison. I like them a lot. Still, they voted for Trump. For the life of me, I just don't get it. I think I am more embarrassed about that today than anything else. How do you love your neighbor well when you can't begin to understand her?

For the record, I suspect that my embarrassment is shared by lots of these dear people, only in reverse. They can't begin to guess how, as they intuit, their friend or pastor could have voted for Hillary. For my part, that only increases the mortification. I don't get Hillary hatred. I fail to see how

anybody could have thought that Mrs. Clinton, for all her reported flaws, was the worse choice. If nothing else, the woman is capable of compassion. There are clear, bright streaks of it in her record as a public servant. In the other guy's record as a businessmen and entertainer, there is none of it at all.

But isn't compassion among the highest of traits that God requires of any human being, to say nothing of a leader? Holy Writ is clear on this. So now the floodgate cracks and the sinner's anger starts to spill—not so much at the dear ones I know as at the Christian scoundrels I do not know: the Graham, the Dobson, the Falwell, Jr., the Ralph Reed. The host of self-righteous big name pastors waving Bibles in the air to urge a vote for the vindictive adulterer. Had they no shame as they desecrated the name of Christ? They have certainly tarred the rest of us with shame, obliging us to cringe in the company of secular friends. “Oh, you're a Christian? One of *those* people?” End of conversation. End of opportunity to speak of God as one for others to trust and hope in. Thank God, I say, for those voices in that conservative, evangelical bloc who dared to demur. But they too are writhing with embarrassment today, or so I should think. And so embarrassing, also for them, is to find our Christian selves so profoundly at odds, so unable to fathom how the other could have voted the way he or she did.

### **3. Of Whom Shall We Be Afraid? (Part A)**

So is God embarrassed by God's Christians today? If so, God isn't saying. He never does. What we ought to imagine is something more fearful, that God is somehow driving our present embarrassment. Jeremiah would remind us of his record for doing such things. If Nebuchadnezzar does not pop up from nowhere, then neither does Trump. Neither does Hillary, for those of you loathe her.

We will spend the next two years reading analyses of what happened on Tuesday. Most all of it will be guesswork, in some cases intelligent, in others not so much. The mere speck I've caught so far—in my grief I've avoided the news these past two days—comes from the left, with a tale about angry, racist, working-class white men as the culprits in chief. I'm not buying that. It doesn't square with those dear ones I know and cherish. Something else was driving their votes. Of my Facebook friends, the ones most eager to tout Trump in recent months have been women. Aside from their politics, I tend to respect them.

The right will have its own interpretive tropes, equally simplistic, equally wrong. What these are I don't plan quickly to find out. Doubtless I should. Wise ones urge us to know our enemies. Wiser ones will tell us to know ourselves. None of us, of course, is eager to do that.

So let's suppose that God is using this election to force that knowledge on us, increasing our shame in the process. I will hazard two weak and wild guesses as to how that might happen. One aims at the right, the other at the left. Pretensions to divinity are the target in both cases.

Two years ago a billionaire named Nick Hanauer published an online article entitled "[The Pitchforks are Coming...For Us Plutocrats](#)." He warned that the obscene concentration of wealth in the hands of a few over the years is bound to spark a reaction. Who can doubt that the sparks have been flying in recent months? Indebted students flocked to Bernie Sanders' campaign, indebted parents to Donald Trump's. That the latter picked a greedy plutocrat as champion is ironic in the extreme. Might it also be deliberate where the hand of God is concerned? When tax rates on the wealthy and support for the poor are both slashed, will the sparks not fly that much thicker? Might this be how the mighty get their long-deserved comeuppance? Those of

us who know God's ways will want to stay tuned, with fear and trembling. My pension is at stake. Yours too, I'll bet. Both with and after that comes judgment.

Speaking of judgment, seats on the Supreme Court are suddenly at stake, and with it the haughtiness of the cultural elite. Christians on the left seem often unaware of their participation in that. I'm still sufficiently in the middle to sense how it can sting. There is something obnoxious and altogether unneighborly in the assumption that once a narrow Court majority has weighed in on an issue, however controversial, the yahoos on the losing side should shut up and get over it. That will not and cannot happen when the yahoos turn out instead to be thoughtful people with large hearts and deep convictions that the will of God is at stake in the issue at hand. Those dear ones of mine who voted for the other guy are surely among them. Again, how they could imagine that someone of this man's character and habits would drive a "pro-life" agenda, I cannot fathom. Still, when I watched the third debate and heard Mrs. Clinton robustly defend a woman's "right to choose" for the entire length of a pregnancy, I had an inkling that she had just lost a ton of votes. I may well be wrong about that. My friends on the left are even more wrong if they imagine that abortion either has or should have gone away as an issue that spurs people to vote Republican. So too with "marriage equality," to use the current euphemism. Quite aside from the merits of the arguments themselves, to speak with Olympian condescension about honest opponents of these things is another way of calling in the pitchforks; and where such condescension is in play, one should always assume that the hand on the biggest pitchfork of them all belongs to God. God loathes Olympian pretenders, as he time and again makes plain. One of his favored ways of dealing with them is to ramp up their embarrassment. Yes, let us tremble.

#### 4. Of Whom Shall We Be Afraid? (Part B)

Still, in the middle of all this we in the Church have Gospel to hear, tell and share. God grant in these days that each of us will do it well.

We might, for example, start talking this Sunday about the strange and embarrassing God who has inexplicably voted for us, not once, but over and over and over again. Tellingly, the theologians' fancy word for this great Biblical theme is "election."

God picks people. Embarrassed and embarrassing people. Of immoral pigs, who is the greater, Jacob or David? Yet both are key bearers of the promise. The promise is this, that once God latches onto a pig in love, he will not let it go. So too with the other denizens of the sty. Judah may be a mess, with fat cats lounging on their beds of ivory as the economy crashes and the poor starve. That doesn't keep God from comforting these people with the great visions of Isaiah. We who dwell in the American sty will also get to hear these things in a couple of weeks.

Meanwhile this Sunday we will all meet Christ in Word and Sacrament. "Behold the Embarrassment," to crib from Pilate. Here is the One dispatched by God to enact the story we heard him spin some weeks ago, about the wretch of a son who heads for the far country to squander the father's wealth with human pigs, and to land in the sty where all pigs belong. In his case the sty has a cruciform shape. There hangs our God, draped in our shame and choking to death on our own consternation. Nowhere to be seen are disciples who, as we've been hearing in our current tour of Luke, have been embarrassing him every step of the way from Galilee to Jerusalem with their quarrels and their odious questions (cf. Lk. 9:54). Still, for their sake Jesus dies. That



becomes plain in the astonishment of Easter, when God casts his final vote on the proposition of Christ-for-us by raising Jesus from the dead. The first people to hear the news are those embarrassing disciples. The first thing Jesus says to them is "Peace be with you." He also says, "Don't be afraid." After that he thrusts them into the enduring embarrassment of touting him as God's Gift and Hope for all people, in all circumstances, not least the ones that prevail in America today. He also gives them the Holy Spirit so they can tout with shameless joy.

## **5. Toward Christian Shamelessness**

Come to think of it, shameless joy is the very thing I need most right now. So do those dear ones of mine, however they voted. So do you, including any of you who may have been badly scraped by things you waded through in the paragraphs above.

There is one place and one place only to find this otherwise impossible gift. Christ Jesus is his name.

"Peace be with you." He says it again, and, in this moment, he says it directly to all of us who constitute this reading-and-writing community. On Sunday I will hear him say it again as I stand with all those dear ones who will constitute the assemblies I will serve as pastor.

I don't expect that those dear ones will be talking politics this Sunday; or if they do, it will be in corners, sotto voce, with a wary eye cast for any within earshot who might disagree with their views. Conversations like this are always tainted with a whiff of embarrassment. We live in fear of the other's critique, or worse, of his anger.

But this, of course, is the very point at which Christ emerges as the Best Gift Ever. The constant challenge is to use this gift—to grasp it by faith, as the old, familiar language has it.

I look at you, you look at me, and what we get to see in each other is a person God voted for when he raised Jesus from the dead. This will be, at first blush, an embarrassing idea. I bumble, stumble, and grope my way as badly as anyone. So do you. I think thoughts and make the kind of choices that leave you speechless. You do it in turn. You will not appear to me at times to be the kind of person a righteous God could get behind. You'll want to mutter similar thoughts about me when cornered with your friends. Yet here is Christ for both of us. And if Christ, then why not me for you and you for me, each bearing the burden of the other's sins and follies, and not once, but over and over, on a patiently enduring basis? Who knows, we might even learn how to be open and honest with the other about our political views without expecting, as sinners do, that the other will spin on her heel and stomp away.

Will Christians in America ever get around to embracing this faith in their relations with each other? The track record is not at all promising. What abides is the Promising One who refuses to give up on his dear ones, pigs though they be in their relations with each other. It has got to be so very embarrassing for him, that we are like this. Still, he's used to it. Dealing with embarrassment, his own as well as ours, is the very thing he lives for.

## **6. The Enduring Comfort**

I don't mean in any of this to underplay the challenges I expect our country to face in the presidency of Donald Trump. His character is bound to shape not only the decisions he makes, but also the people he leads; and having no respect for his character, I can't begin to welcome what comes next. I can only pray that the God who works through sinners to conjure up huge and happy surprises will somehow surprise us all in these next four years.

Meanwhile we step into these years with the words of Christ ringing in our ears: "Don't be afraid." I tend often to focus too much on the eschatological dimension of those words. I could use some help in concentrating for now on their immediate import. Don't be afraid to love each other as I have loved you. Don't be afraid to let your light shine in a world that has a deep abiding thing for darkness. Don't be afraid to turn that cheek or to love that enemy, and to do it especially when things like these are out of fashion.

Don't be afraid to poke the haughty, or to succor the lowly. The legend of Lawrence the Deacon comes suddenly to mind. He's the fellow who, when commanded by the prefect of Rome to hand over the church's treasure, distributed them instead to the poor, the lame, the blind, who he then ushered into the prefect's presence. "Here is the church's treasure," he said, whereupon he was promptly fried on a griddle. It is said that he died cracking a joke.

I will sing the praises of God this Sunday in the company of people who know their Lord and honor his love for every human being. Yes, they do that imperfectly. Why some of them will have voted for the other guy, I still do not get. But I will see them in action. They will love each other quietly. They will welcome strangers who wander in. They will pitch in with generosity to speed along whatever project we're working on to address the needs of neighbors. Some will write letters to congressional representatives. Others will pray for the welfare of the city and the nation. All will struggle to keep the faith we share in Christ, and to let it shape their lives. They will often rejoice in the Gospel. When they do, all embarrassment is gone.

I take it for granted it that scenes like this will keep playing out all over our country, wherever two or three are gathered in Jesus' name, with Christ himself in their midst. Let this be

enough for me to say of the years we face: "Bring them on!"

God plant such faith in all our hearts.

Peace and Joy,

Jerry Burce

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## **Justification by Faith at Ground Level (An Example)**

Colleagues,

I've been working on a couple of essays these past few weeks. The writing comes slowly. Too slowly, I fear, to satisfy anybody's reasonable expectations of timely posts. I hope one of them will be ready for you in a day or two.

Meanwhile we find ourselves in the waning hours of another Reformation Day. There were big doings in Sweden today that merit comment. If any of you care to weigh in on the topic—Pope Francis and the Lutherans—I'd be glad to hear from you, especially if you've been tracking the conversation that led up to it. My own watching-from-afar has been far too casual to generate any rumination worth passing along.

Instead I send you something entirely prosaic, though even so germane to today's big themes. I ran across it by happy accident in my files a few hours ago. It's a little set of eleven theses on the topic of justification by faith as it applies to ordinary people going about their ordinary days in ordinary jobs. I put it together some years back for a study group at the

congregation I serve. It cuts to one of the most important issues that front-line servants of the Gospel are obliged to tackle, and an issue, moreover, that Crossings has sought to specialize in. How do you crack open old language and spill out the contents in a way that people can hear it? How indeed do you do that when the stuff sloshing around inside is ridiculously good news that God wants real-time sinners to savor and enjoy?

Does the little effort below accomplish that? You be the judge. Meanwhile, Happy Reformation!

Peace and Joy,

Jerry Burce

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How Jesus Justifies My Job

### **Some Thoughts with reference to Romans 5:1-11**

*Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, <sup>2</sup>through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand; and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God. <sup>3</sup>And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, <sup>4</sup>and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, <sup>5</sup>and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.*

<sup>6</sup> *For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. <sup>7</sup>Indeed, rarely will anyone die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person someone might actually*

dare to die. <sup>8</sup>But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us. <sup>9</sup>Much more surely then, now that we have been justified by his blood, will we be saved through him from the wrath of God. <sup>10</sup>For if while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, much more surely, having been reconciled, will we be saved by his life. <sup>11</sup>But more than that, we even boast in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation.

+ + +

1. Speaking for all but professional church workers: what two things on earth could have less to do with each other than Jesus and my job? To hint at such a connection would get co-workers staring at me in most workplaces. To propose it openly and seriously would, in some workplaces, get me fired. Or so I suspect.
2. Still, all jobs need at some point to be justified (that includes church jobs); and, says St. Paul, if anyone has this justification business down pat, it's Jesus. More on that below.
3. The pressure to justify my job comes at me from many quarters: from bosses or boards that are fretting over the bottom line; from ambitious underlings who wonder if I deserve my higher pay and position; from spouses and children who want more of my time; from the voice inside that wonders if I'm spending my life well.
4. All these take it for granted that I'm the one who has to do the justifying. In other words, it's up to me to demonstrate that the job itself is worth doing, or that I'm the right person to be doing it.
5. For every person in every job there will always come a

point—more likely, many points—at which these questions become pressing. There will also come a further point at which I fail the test that the questions pose. That these things are inevitable is a piece of what St. Paul has in mind when he speaks of the wrath of God (v. 9; see also 1:18).

6. In other words, the real voice behind all those other pressuring voices is God's voice—his word that both forces and seduces me to prove the impossible, that I am at all times the right person in the right position. The alternative is to admit that I'm not up to the job; i.e. that I'm a failure; i.e. that I've fallen short of the glory of God (3:23).
7. This, of course, is something that self-respecting human beings struggle mightily against admitting. Thus the fear and the fakery that to some extent or another infects every work place—and every worker.
8. Enter Jesus, whose enormous gift is freedom from the burden of having to prove anything about myself, least of all that I'm the right person for the job—any job. That's because Jesus, in his dying, proved himself to be the one and only person who was exactly right for the job of justifying sinners, that is, of making them all right with God no matter (among other things) what job they themselves might happen to be doing or how well they're doing it.
9. To be “justified by faith” (v. 1) means simply that God finds me to be perfectly all right when he catches me trusting that Jesus has made me so.
10. Confidence in Jesus' rightness for me is bound to undermine my compulsion to demonstrate how worthy I am in own right. Paradoxically, it makes me the right person for any job that any one might see fit to hire me for. Why? Because I'll be doing the job for its own sake

instead of using it to prove something about myself. I'll also be at liberty to walk away when it becomes apparent that somebody else can do the job better.

11. In practice, I find myself constantly torn between trusting Jesus and trying to prove something about myself. That struggle, however, does not negate the fact that Jesus is and always will be right for me.

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## **Bill Burrows on Spirit, Church, Gospel, and the Centrality of Christ**

Colleagues,

Last week I sent you a batch of responses to assorted offerings of the past several months. I left one item out. To add it would have broken my evolving rule of thumb that 2000 words, give or take a few hundred, is enough for one week. It seemed in any case to be meaty enough for a post of its own. So here it is, a thing for all of us to chew on these next few days.

The author is William R. Burrows—Bill, as we've gotten to know him, whether by meeting him at Crossings conferences (two of them so far) or through snatches of his long, ongoing conversation with Ed Schroeder that Ed has thought to share over the years. Bill is a Roman Catholic theologian with pronounced sympathies for Martin Luther and company. He started his career in Papua New Guinea as a missionary priest with the [Society of the Divine Word](#). On leaving the priesthood, he landed at [Orbis](#)



[Books](#), where he shepherded innumerable volumes into print, especially in the area of missiology, an Orbis specialty. He is currently on the faculty of New York Theological Seminary as Research Professor of Missiology in the Center for World Christianity. To know him at all is to find oneself thanking God for his erudition on the one hand, his graciousness on the other.

In the item below, Bill is using my remarks at the Crossings conference in January (ThTheol 888-890) as a springboard for his own reflections on matters of the Spirit in the church's thinking today. On reading it through I reverberated at many points, and continue to do that. You will too, I'm guessing. For any who don't know Paul Tillich, I added a link.

What I appreciate most about Bill are the connections he makes between my confessional Lutheran thought-world and the conversation of the broader church, especially in Roman Catholic circles. Here again I think you'll concur.

Peace and Joy,  
Jerry Burce

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*From William R. Burrows in personal correspondence, shared with permission—*

What strikes me as dangerous in the current default language about the Holy Spirit is that it seems not to respect the Scriptural dynamic where, to use H. Richard Niebuhr's term, the entire structure of Christian existence is "Christomorphic." Add to that the Cruciform image that is at the core of Jesus becoming the Christ in the crucifixion and resurrection. That defining Christomorphic element seems missing among many, and Spirit-talk seems to me to be a way of baptizing whatever

someone or a group has decided on other grounds we should be doing – for example, attending to the demands of the justice, peace, ecology triad. Then it gets extended to, again for example, things like transgender and other sexuality issues.

In an age where people seek deep inner confirmation that they're anchored in the transcendent, many borrow from Native American, Buddhist, or Wiccan traditions to construct their own personal religion. "Christian" Spirit-talk gets dragged in to validate their proclivities. In the deeper Christian tradition, though (take the famous Romans 5:5 text; St. Ignatius' rules for discernment; Luther's recovery of the meaning of the Gospel), the role of the Spirit is one of confirming in the gut one's embrace of Jesus as the Christ and strengthening one to become "other" Christs. In other words, the Spirit is the Revealer who makes the words of Scripture into the living Word that enlightens us and strengthens us to become a new person in Christ (Eph 4:22-24 & passim). For those whose hearts are open, the Spirit makes the rituals of baptism, eucharist, marriage, confirmation, and so forth expressions of ratifying the big "Yes" of trusting God in Christ. And for those for whom such rituals are empty forms, the Spirit works to open the inner eye to the possibility of embracing God in Christ.

At this point, I think. I twig into your language and concerns in the January address on the Spirit-driven double life. If I may use different language, [Tillich's theonomy](#) is profoundly Pauline (and Lutheran), but as churches we seem to neglect the primacy of the conversion to Christ, who is the portal to theonomous living. We want people to act as if they were profoundly touched by Christ, where in fact, a large percentage in our congregations have really not undergone that radical conversion to Christ as ministered by the Spirit. And truth be told, one wonders about the quality of the inner life of many priests and ministers.

To act theonomously, though, a fundamental breakthrough conversion has to have occurred. This is the basic insight of the Pentecostal renewal movement. And, of course, even if we've made that fundamental Christian conversion, the "old man" still lurks within each of us. My favorite philosopher-theologian, Bernard Lonergan, remarks somewhere that the saints realize the depth of their sinfulness, a depth that the unconverted person has no inkling of. Unconverted Christians see Law as an external command and, when they look at their lives and compare them with the lives of criminals, the dissolute, and so forth, they think of themselves as, well, maybe not perfect but pretty darned good. Again in Lonergan's terms, the old man is a complex underlying manifold of unintegrated emotions, habits, self-interested striving and self-deceptive rationalization. Tillich's theonomously living person, on the other hand, is someone profoundly grateful for the blessing of the work of Christ and simultaneously struggling to live the depth of the Christ-life at home, at work, and in the larger world. And in that process, unintegrated emotions have to be integrated into a total person whose habits promote good deeds and overcome egotistical self-interest while illuminating areas of self-deception. There is no rulebook one can follow to fulfill the obligation s/he feels to be creatively loving, "another Christ" in daily life. The written law is the floor beneath which s/he knows she must not fall, but the inner demand that you're articulating in your talk is one of feeling obliged to put creativity in action. Lonergan speaks of making good things happen that would not happen if that person were not set free to be creative.

One last thought: I think that those who urge us to be involved in politics, striving to solve the ecological crisis, tear down racial prejudice, end inequality, and so forth, are urging us to do good things. It gets murkier when they urge us to be "modern"

in accepting every new insight into sexuality and gender identity, but I think we need to be open to the reality that we live in an unfinished universe and maybe such changes reflect ways in which changing circumstances do amount to “changes” in what is “natural.” But I digress. To return to my train of thought, when they want to make the church into an interest group that pushes this or that agenda, they’re missing the fact that human beings are spread out on a huge continuum. For some, the horizon of their activities and the demands of the double life will be confined to being honest, loving, and creative within the confines of home and work. But so much of our moral language today seems to envisage all Christians having to be active on much broader stages and the churches propelling those movements. It helps me to have a wife who works as a school psychologist. When my friends use soaring language about things like ending world poverty or reversing climate change, she reminds us that a very large percentage of the families at George Fischer Middle School have a hard time getting through the day and that dozens of her kids are emotionally impaired.

I often quote my good friend, Samuel Escobar, a Latin American Evangelical. Sam was all in favor of grand schemes to save the world from its follies. He was equally firm in the conviction that the primary obligation of the church is to preach the Gospel and become a community that nurtures people in the Christ-life. I think that if we do that, our congregation’s members will respond to the promptings of the Spirit in whatever sphere of life they are in.

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*Addendum, in a follow-up note—*

What I find very interesting today is the way in which conservatives jump on one set of ethical concerns and liberals jump on another. That Christ may have been about something truly

universal that cuts through either set of cultural preoccupations seems a silly question to most moderns. Getting one with God (at-one-ment) and sharing the deeper ministry of Christ in bringing persons to live “with the grain of the universe” seems fanciful. To quote Lonergan:

“The crisis, then, that I have been attempting to depict is a crisis not of faith but of culture. There has been no new revelation from on high to replace the revelation given through Christ Jesus. There has been written no new Bible, and there has been founded no new church to link us with him. But Catholic philosophy and Catholic theology are matters, not merely of revelation and faith, but also of culture. Both have been fully and deeply involved in classical culture. The breakdown of classical culture and, at last in our day, the manifest comprehensiveness and exclusiveness of modern culture confront Catholic philosophy and Catholic theology with the gravest problems, impose upon them mountainous tasks, invite them to Herculean labors....

“There is bound to be formed a solid right that is determined to live in a world that no longer exists. There is bound to be formed a scattered left, captivated by now this, now that new development, exploring now this and now that new possibility. But what will count is a perhaps not numerous center, big enough to be at home in both the old and the new, painstaking enough to work on the transitions to be made, strong enough to refuse half-measures and insist on complete solutions even though it has to wait.” [\*Collection: Papers by Bernard Lonergan\*](#), S. J. (New York: Herder and Herder, 1967), p. 266-7).

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# An Assortment of Readers' Responses

Colleagues,

Every now and then one of you will send me a note about something you read in the latest post. I stash these away as they come in, now and then flagging an item that ought to be shared more widely. Here are a few from the current collection.

+ + +

1. Late in June you got a reflection by yours truly on John 20:23 ([ThTheol #882](#)). I pitched the notion that the translators we rely on, usually without question, might well have been botching this verse all along by turning opaque Greek ("if you hold them, they are held") into determined English ("if you retain the sins of any, they are retained"). In an ensuing argument for reading the two halves of the verse as parallel expressions, I observed that the second edition of BDAG, the standard Greek-English lexicon, offers "retain" as a meaning of the Greek verb in question, but only at the tail end of a long entry, and with John 20:23 as the sole verse to which the meaning applied. That struck me as pretty thin. I wondered if BDAG's third edition, not on my shelves, had hung on to this. It had, as I learned a few weeks ago from friend and colleague **Dick Gahl**: "I finally looked it up," Dick wrote. "BDAG, third edition, *krateo*, entry #7: "'to cause a condition to continue, to hold in place'; specifically to John 20:23, 'pronounce the sins unforgiven (opposition to *aphienai*).'"

So I pass this along for the record. Also for the record, I continue to wonder which came first in arriving at this as the "definition" of the word in this particular and sole instance: was it the lexicographer's investigation or the theologian's

prior assumption, anchored in the long and perhaps erroneous history of the verse's interpretation? Again I wish that Fred Danker were with us still so I could ask him—e'er so politely, of course.

2. The same post on John 20:23 snagged a response from **Ed Schroeder**:

"Here's my Aha-version of this verse from some time ago. It's not theologically different from yours, but grammatically. It starts with a verb in the aorist subjunctive, a hypothetical:

"'If you were to carry out the forgiveness authorization you now have (since I'm sending you on the same assignment on which the Father sent me), it would work. Sinners would be forgiven. If you (present subjunctive) were to leave them still stuck in their sin (by not carrying out the job I've just assigned to you), they'll stay stuck. Not that you are authorized to decide whether to unlock or lock the forgiveness door. That's nonsense. Only God does the locking/unlocking. You're now authorized and have in hand the "key" to unlock. If you don't do it, it won't happen.'

"If there is substantive parallelism in the picture, it could be between these two verses:

'As the Father sent me, so I you,' and 'When you do forgiveness, it happens. When you don't, it doesn't.'

"There is a triple parallelism, one might say, in the substance of all three of Jesus distinct messages. i) Peace to you. ii) Receive the Holy Spirit. iii) As Father sent me, so I send you. (And in case you might still be fuzzy about that point of that sending (*missio*), it's forgiveness of sins—which is also the substance of the two prior messages.)

"Forgiveness might be seen as the cantus firmus of John's whole

gospel. Right from the get-go, it's the first item specified in chapter one as Jesus' job-description, 1:29. The other bookend is the text we're talking about. The Jesus and Peter appendix in chapter 21 is a reprise of the cantus firmus."

+ + +

3. Speaking of Ed Schroeder, on July 4 ([#883](#)) we sent you some thoughts of his about the ever-popular assumption that the church's job is to lead the world in "building God's dominion on earth" (so the phrase, printed in a church bulletin, that Ed was responding to). Ed's reflections—"On Kingdoms and The Kingdom, as we titled it—brought two responses.

First, from **Bill Buegge**, with a useful reminder about the imperative of attending carefully to the vocabulary we use when we aim to communicate with people today:

"All the references to 'kingdom' in the above make me wonder whether the Bible isn't caught in the language of the worlds in which it was written. Maybe today, when there aren't many kingdoms, when kingdoms that exist are failing, we'd refer to the Democracy of God? Or (to really annoy) God's internet? Or God's Caliphate? Certainly not 'the Dictatorship of God'! That would be weird.

"The problem for me when I think of 'kingdom' is that Walt Disney cartoons in lavenders and pinks dance through my head."

And this from **Tim Rahn**, who unwittingly primed the pump for some posts-to-be, in the near future, I hope:

"Good stuff as always. I've always been skeptical and unsure of what the ELCA's tag line, God's Work, Our Hands, means. It usually means that some peace and justice agenda is involved. I thought that was the specific work of God's left hand. It seems this dominance of bringing in the kingdom has all but



overshadowed the real work of the church and that is one Gospel and sacrament ministry. Thanks to Crossings for [pushing] the right hand proper agenda of dispensing the unique forgiveness that Jesus brings.”

+ + +

4. Steve Kuhl’s exploration of Pentecostalism, delivered to you this summer in three parts, fetched an important comment from **Travis Scholl**, the managing editor of *Concordia Journal* and other publications of Concordia Seminary, St. Louis:

“Thanks for this. I wanted to let you know that Leo Sanchez, who teaches systematic theology here at Concordia and directs our Center for Hispanic Studies, has spent a lot of time focusing on the doctrine of the Spirit, with particular emphasis on the two-thirds world and the explosion of Pentecostalism in Latin America. You—and perhaps even the whole Crossings community—might find his newest book interesting: [Receiver, Bearer, and Giver of God’s Spirit: Jesus’ Life in the Spirit as a Lens for Theology and Life](#).

“He will be continuing this thinking and research in the upcoming year through a grant from the Louisville Institute. He really is one of the bright young theological minds in American Lutheranism today, and I wanted to make sure he was on your radar screen.”

[*Editor’s quick response:* Yes, I’ll look for the book. Thanks so much, Travis, for reminding us that gifts from God continue to unfold on both sides of the big Lutheran barricade. For the fact that we keep needing such reminders: Kyrie eleison. Or again, “Come, Holy Spirit!”]

5. Reader **James Koenig**, a church musician in Manhattan Beach, California, also weighed in on Steve’s essay—

"[Raised] with thoroughly Lutheran underpinnings, I gained a whole new perspective on some positive contributions of Pentecostalism through Dr. James A. Forbes Jr., Senior Minister Emeritus of the Riverside Church in New York City. Prior to that I had always associated Pentecostalism with an ultra-conservative social agenda. I am reminded of how certain aspects of Lutheranism take away something of the portals of the mystical in worship and practice. One often encounters a rather antiseptic suburban sterility in worship— even to the point of the new 'church speak' referring to a sanctuary as 'worship space' as if the word 'sanctuary' is either too big or too 'high handed.' Ask refugees about 'sanctuary' and you get a better understanding of the whole concept of a place set aside. What we've done, in my opinion, is something akin to what the Calvinists did 'back in the day' when they stripped decoration from church as if it was a sign of idolatry instead of an opportunity for 'entry.' It's almost like a predilection for 'bland' food over anything 'spicy'—or God forbid, something as sensual as 'aromatic.' At any rate, I highly recommend James Forbes excellent little book, [\*The Holy Spirit and Preaching\*](#)."

6. A couple of you let me know how unhappy you were with Mike Hoy's analysis of the Donald Trump phenomenon (#884, "The Donald and Me"). It struck you as skewed, unfair, Democratic propaganda dragged in where politics don't belong, i.e. a venue for theology. This too begs for further reflection in posts to come. I bring it up at the moment simply by way of a warning as I feed you a second paragraph in Jim Koenig's response to Steve Kuhl's essay (see above). It will grate on some of you. Others will cheer. Those cheering will struggle to grasp why others do not, feeling scraped instead. I commend to everyone's perusal a [\*thoughtful and respectful account in today's New York Times\*](#) of the burdens presently weighing on some conservative Christian evangelicals in a corner of Iowa. May it generate a modicum of

sympathy and understanding among those who view “those others” as a horror. (Such a pass we have come to, when those who bear Christ’s name are so woefully divided in their deepest passions and convictions that love all but disappears.)

In any case, here is Jim, Part Two—

“It was interesting to observe representation of God and religion in the two conventions [this summer]. Conservative David Brooks wrote that Trump is ‘a morally untethered, spiritually vacuous man who appears haunted by multiple personality disorders. It is the ‘sane’ and ‘reasonable’ Republicans who deserve the shame— the ones who stood silently by while Mr. Trump gave away their party’s sacred inheritance.’ I personally kept recalling other times and other examples of the Republicans being willing to co-opt their party and making strange bedfellows. I remember when the elder George Bush was running. I was watching the convention and suddenly out walks Ralph Reed of the Christian Coalition as a major speaker. I thought ‘They have made a deal with the devil.’ It made me mad. I was so utterly offended that they had him—then later Jerry Falwell—allegedly representing the ‘Christian’ perspective. That’s not my Christian perspective. Last week there were moments when I felt like I had ‘been to church’! There were truly Spirit-filled moments. The wonderful presentation by Rev. William Barber II, pastor of Greenleaf Christian Church in Goldsboro, North Carolina, raining fire and brimstone on Trump and championing justice, equality, LGBT rights was an exciting and righteous presentation of progressive Christianity with Pentecostal style and underpinnings. (He’s a friend of James Forbes Jr.) These were interesting two weeks. And of course where the Holy Spirit dwells other spirits that are not so holy abound and are riled up. Ours is to discern, forgive, and also to insist.”

*Editor's comment:* And some, also among us, will see the devil where Jim saw the Spirit—which makes the stuff of our latest posts all the more urgent as matters for the Church to grapple with, and for Thursday Theology to keep focusing on as well. God grant that we will.

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7. Finally, a bit of humor to leaven the lump. And this comes from—guess who?—Jim Koenig, reflecting last January on #869, an essay by Ed Schroeder on “Radical Hospitality.” It addressed the question of whether the Lord’s Supper is meant to be so “open” that it’s open also to the unbaptized.

“A colleague whose area was youth ministry was ‘corrected’ by a sabbatical pastor when she used the term ‘altar.’ She was told ‘It’s not an altar— it’s a table.’ (Are we now talking about pulpit and table fellowship?) Why can’t it be both? The metamorphosis of altar into table and table into altar is quite striking and spiritual with its layers of meaning.

“No, I don’t think that anyone at a church service who just follows suit and goes to communion will implode on contact. Still, we must not lose the reverence for the sacredness of the “meal” in the process. Anymore I shake my head when I hear the extensive communion menu. It’s like a Saturday Night Live routine. ‘All are welcome. Communion will be served on the floor today. Take a chunk of bread and dip it in either the light colored grape juice or the red colored wine. If you have a problem with the common cup, individual glasses are available. If you are gluten free, gluten free wafers are offered from the assistant.’ ‘Chunk of bread’: are you kidding me? Yes, the sacred ‘chunk’ is the new language of the mass. And a pottery crafted double intinction vessel for dunking is not really a common cup. And then to top it all, there is a pump bottle of Purell hand cleanser on the altar or table or whatever it is—

“—yes, whatever it is. We are sadly parsing out the practice while losing the sense of the mysteries of the faith. The Lord’s Supper for its intimacy has been referred to as God’s conjugal visit. (Post communion prayer: As you live in me may I live in you until eternal life.) I say that whether you do it on the altar or on the table— it had better be a love feast, and a love that passes understanding. It should be neither red meat for watch-dogs, nor a thing to be taken lightly.

“A communion hymn, to the tune of ‘Lord Keep us Steadfast In Thy Word’)

O keep us from their cooties Lord  
And may the church not make us bored  
Upon your altar/table be  
The blood that’s shed for you and me.

And may the follies of the church  
Not leave us in a rubric lurch  
O may our practice bless and please  
The God who brings us to our knees.

(About that kneeling, it’s a choice  
I’ll cross myself, God hears my voice  
We offer Jesus come and see  
We each have our own recipe.)

O grant this Eucharist to be  
a means of grace for you and me  
And though it’s clumsy welcome all  
A ladder up, after the fall.”

+ + +

Amid all, peace and joy to one and all, from the One who speaks the word and makes it so. Thanks to all who contributed, and to all who keep reading.

Jerry Burce

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# Two Questions for the Baptized Person (Part Three of a Keynote Address)

Colleagues,

My younger daughter gets married this Saturday and expects her dad to come through with a sermon. So with that overwhelmingly in mind, I send along today's installment without prefatory ado. What you're getting is the third and final installment of my keynote address at the Crossings conference last January. You'll need to have scanned the first two parts (ThTheol [887](#) & [888](#)) to follow the argument.

May the Holy Spirit woo us all this weekend with God's incomparable love in Christ.

Peace and Joy,  
Jerry Burce

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**The Spirit-given Challenge of the Double-Life** (*continued*)

## **VIII. Every Person's Essential First Question**

The power of God, Type E, the kind that people hanker for, is deadly. It stings, as Paul will say, 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 15. Even so it's familiar; and until we're stung, we tend to like it. We

like it so well that we'll even prefer it to the new kind, Type X. Jesus points this out himself in Luke's version of the wineskin parable. "No one after drinking old wine desires new wine, but says, 'The old is good.'" That's in Luke 5, and only Luke 5. The Pharisees Luke talks about were deeply hooked on the taste of old wine. So are lots of Lutherans.

Quickly, let's recall. God's power Type E works *on* us, as *objects*. God gives. We get. God gives not. We get not. Were this the only thing to talk about this evening, we'd observe how this Power Type E is the engine that drives the world as we know it.

Thinking on, we might explore the oddity of people's expectations of Type E power: how they imagine, for example, that God being good is bound to give us stuff that we call good, forgetting that what's good for God is often really, really bad for the sinners that God in his goodness is trying to control.

Or we might talk at greater length about the way God's exercise of Type E power leads always, and without fail, to a great, irreparable dispute between God and every sinner, sinners concluding that God has done them dirty, God for God's part refusing to put up with that nonsense. Some of you spent much of today exploring the Crossings method of unpacking a Biblical text. The one side, the diagnostic—that's where God's Type E power is at issue and in play, top to bottom.

Enter Christ Jesus, the Son of God, born of Mary, and now let's see how Type E power comes crashing down on him. For our sake, for our salvation, "God made him to be sin who knew no sin"—yet again St. Paul, still trying, trying, trying in chapter 5 of the Second Letter to wean the Corinthians off their fundamental folly, their absurd, insane addiction to a core precept of Type E power-in-operation: to get you've got to earn. To be right you've got to do right. And if something looks shabby, an

apostle, for example—one Paul in particular, in case anyone is wondering—it probably is shabby, not blessed by God, as some at Corinth seem to be suggesting.

But isn't that how the world still works, the world we see that is? In this world I'm under the gun to be as righteous as can be, as good as I can manage; and this, that's true of me, is true of you as well, and of every other human being, be they baptized or not. It's true of the communities we form and the institutions we organize and run, including ones with labels like ELCA or NALC or Wartburg Seminary or Messiah Lutheran Church. I can't recall a day going by when I haven't had to ask the question: what must I/we do today. Those better organized than me, my wife, for example, make little lists that they carefully work through. What must we do to finish our work, to care for our families, to serve our customers, to keep sticky fingers out of the till, or, in my daily digs, bad guys from hurting little children at our school? What must we do to be better, more deserving, a tad more righteous? What must I do to keep, God forbid, from wasting this day—which, if I do, I'll hear about, God channeling his opinion, for sure, through someone else. The frowning boss. The weary spouse. That teacher, appointed by God, to mark my test with a C-. Or an A+, in which case I beam, don't I. Look, I say, the mark of a righteous student—and isn't that the aim, to come out righteous? Not, of course, that I'm altogether there yet, or anywhere close, for that matter.

But so long as I'm not there yet, the question persists. I cannot *stop* asking it. "What must I do?"

## **IX. The Baptized Person's Second Question—Greater, Unsettling**

Comes the dilemma, and with it a challenge.



Even as I live this life, the one my mother pushed me into, I live another life, the one that God the Holy Spirit either pushed or drowned me into, depending on which baptismal metaphor you want to play with.

This other life is Christ-life—or to stick more closely to Paul, life *in* Christ.

In this other life “What must I do” is a stupid question. It doesn’t belong. It makes no sense. Remember, in Christ-life “all things are yours.” A parenthetical question to talk about later: why wasn’t this drummed into us when we were little baptized children? Why in my own case did it startle me so when I stumbled across it at age 28? Yet here it was, and is, and always will be, God’s Gospel—nothing less, that is, than the Holy Spirit’s declaration of present reality, anchored in Christ: *all things are yours*.

This being so, what *must* you do? The only sensible answer: “Nothing at all.” Think about it. You wake up one morning with a billion dollars in your bank account, dropped there, no strings attached, by a mad and wondrous donor. What *must* you do? Answer: “Nothing at all.” Addendum to that answer: “Stop babbling. Start exulting instead in the only questions that your new and sudden circumstance begs you to ask: “How *might* I spend this day?’ ‘How *might* I use the treasure I get to wallow in the whole day through?’”

It occurs me to that most of us—working stiffs that we are, obsessed day in and day out with all those things we don’t have yet and have got somehow to obtain—would have a tough and terrible time adjusting to this new circumstance. Suddenly gone are all those spiky, pressing obligations that shape and order our schedules. It’s one thing to take a week’s vacation, though even then there are things I’ve got to do. It’s quite another to

be on permanent vacation for the rest of my life, with not a care in the world, at least where I'm concerned. Would I not go crazy?

Welcome, then, to Type X-powered reality. In my seminary days a professor made some of us bog our way through a poor translation of Werner Elert's *The Christian Ethos*. It was thick and dense and magisterial—and ever so marvelous. With all my heart I recommend it to seminarians here if you're lucky enough to find a copy.

There were in that book a few lines that burned tracks in my brain. Here's one of them: "The person who has experienced liberation from nomological existence floats in empty space where he feels giddy." I kid you not, that's what it said—again, "The person who has experienced liberation from nomological existence floats in empty space where he feels giddy." Yes, that's bad translation from tough theological German, but still, the point comes through. Life in the Spirit, Type X powered life, is weird. The rules are gone. At first it's dim; it's murky; I'm not sure what to do. No doing is required, and I seriously dislike the feeling this creates. It's like stumbling through a haze.

And I dislike it all the more when I find myself stuck simultaneously in the old life, Type E powered, where the rules abound and I'm forced to earn my keep.

It's precisely here that the two-ness we've been speaking of gets unpleasant, and living with it becomes like walking through that Beijing smog. And I'm not at all surprised that Paul, the apostle of two-ness, continues in churches today to get much the same rough treatment he got in those churches he founded way back when.

How does a person or, even harder, a church of persons carry on

in two God-given systems that ask us to operate on contrary assumptions? In the one, righteousness of a sort is the goal you're aiming at. In the other, righteousness of another astonishing sort is your jumping off point. In the one, rules are of the essence. In the other, rules are absurd. In the one you're a work in progress with heaps of work that has got to be done. In the other you're a finished product who is free to play the whole day long, and, in the joy of that play, to spread the riches around.

Paul's point to his churches, especially at Corinth and Philippi, is that the second system takes precedence. It's the one that baptized people are called to pay attention to first and foremost, and to trust, and to practice, above all in their dealings with each other. To read his letters is to see how hard he has to work to make the point.

The challenge at this conference is to listen to Paul, or rather, to the Holy Spirit speaking through Paul, and to practice what the Spirit preaches.

I, for one, don't see the churches I know doing that very much at all. That too is something we can talk about later, if you'd like.

## **X. Two Lives to Lead, Two Questions to Ask. Simultaneously.**

As for now, I wind things up by tossing out my own chief contribution to the conversation we're going to have.

Baptized people, at once saddled and blessed with two lives overlapping, two forms of God's power working either on them or through them, have two questions to ask. Not one, but two.

Question 1. "What must I do/you do/we do? What must they do?" Can we dodge this question? No. Does baptism relieve us of the

imperative to ask it? Again, no. It's of the essence in the life we were *born* to live, and sooner or later to lose. It drags in its wake a couple of other questions: a) How do I get what I need/want, assuming I don't have it yet, and, once I think I have it, then b) how do I *keep* it?

Question 2 is a different creature altogether. It starts with an altogether different assumption, intrinsic to this second life-in-Christ that we were *baptized* to live. So it doesn't ask, "How do I get, how do I keep," but, to the contrary, "How can I spend?" How can I spend what I have already in such absurd, profuse abundance? How can we spend it together with joy and abandon? What holy prodigality shall we indulge in today to our Lord's beaming delight?

Or to clean that up and sharpen it some more, let me draw on our tradition, specifically Lutheran. Let this second question be, "How might we use Christ and his benefits—so great they are, so abounding, so utterly inexhaustible? How shall we use them in each and every circumstance we find ourselves in, whether as fellow saints living and working and trusting together, or as the secret agents of new creation we become when God, exercising Type E power, wakes us up in the morning and shoves us out the door and into our daily routines?"

Christ and his benefits: how might we use them, how shall we spend them? (Not "must," but "shall.") We ask this question as an essential way of confessing that Jesus is our Lord. That's why it's also the focus of the second, prognostic leg of that Crossings method that some of you dug into today.

Of these two questions, 1) what must we do to get and keep, 2) how might we use Christ and spend his benefits, the second is by far the greater and more pressing. So says the Holy Spirit. How is it, then, that I've never heard it come up explicitly on the

floor of a synod assembly, or be raised as a topic for a congregational Bible study? It's the first, the what-to-do question, that gets all the attention. But that too is something to chew on later if anyone is so inclined.

## **XI. Spending Tips**

For now I draw to things to a close with a few semi-random thoughts about using Christ and his benefits. Each of them is cursory in the extreme, nothing more than the précis of an essay that hasn't been written yet and couldn't be delivered here in any case. I pass them along even so to incite your own better and deeper thinking:

1. On using Christ: again, it's murky, a dim seeing in the poor mirror. So it calls for imagination and a dollop of nerve, of the kind the Holy Spirit gives. Hardly ever, if at all, is there only one, correct way to go about it. Remember that when the Master buzzes off and doles out the talents to the slaves, he doesn't tell them how to use them, only *that* they use them; and the only thing that can land you in hot water with the Master is not using them at all, because you were afraid, or too damn lazy with a laziness that does damn because it blows Christ off and leaves us on our own to deal with God in Type E mode. This Sunday Paul will equate "using the Master's talents" with the word "love." That word doesn't come with an instruction manual.
2. We use Christ and his benefits when, like the Bethlehem shepherds, we return to the stink of our daily routines without fretting that the stink will stick to our clothes and hair and whatever, causing God to wrinkle God's nose at us all over again. The first and greatest gift of Christ is the promise that God is past wrinkling God's nose where you and I are concerned. Still less will God do

this when we sit with sinners as Christ keeps sitting with us.

3. Back to the “it’s murky” department. People using Christ will sometimes make choices and adopt procedures that leave other Christ-users appalled. For example, this from an article that appeared in Valparaiso University’s *The Cresset* in 1957, entitled “Legal Morality and the Two Kingdoms”: “There is the case of the Nebraska judge who in the morning granted a divorce to a husband and wife and in the evening, at a congregational meeting, had to condemn their divorce and, exercising the office of the keys, had to vote to bar them from the Lord’s Supper.” Notice, *had to bar them*. The Christ-user who wrote this, by the way, was one Robert W. Bertram in his late 50’s version, which I suspect was somewhat different from the Bertram of the late ‘90s.
4. Christ-users will not blanch at rejoicing when people who don’t know Christ behave better than they do. Nor will they flinch from admitting that this can and does happen. Righteousness of the kind that emerges in the old life, Type E powered, has never been an exclusively Christian property, nor is it now. Righteousness of the second kind, Type X powered, frees one to see this, and to honor it as one of God’s better passing gifts for life in this world.

Finally: Christ-users will practice, practice, practice at the great art of seeing Christ and honoring Christ in people they’re simultaneously critiquing. That’s what the Spirit keeps urging through St. Paul as he writes his letters. “If anyone is in Christ—new creation: look! Notice! The old has passed away, the new has come!” (2 Cor. 5:17). Let’s practice looking for this right here, in and with each other, as we move into the rest of our time together.

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# An Approach to “Discerning the Spirit” (Part Two of a Keynote Address)

Colleagues,

Last week you got the first part of my address to the Crossings conference last January. In the course of introducing the overall topic and the several speakers involved, I did a riff of sorts on the core issue—the conundrum, as I called it—that thinkers of a Lutheran confessional bent keep returning to. There is Gospel, and there is Law. To put that another way, there are two distinct approaches that God takes to God’s work in the world. One is anchored in the death and resurrection of the Son of God. The other is not. The latter is every person’s default experience of God’s action in their lives. The former is known and recognized only by those who take Jesus’ Easter to be a matter of fact. This confidence of theirs lands them in the odd position of encountering and responding to God in two quite different ways as they about their days.

In today’s segment of the paper I put this observation to work in some fresh thinking (for me) about the Holy Spirit. The aim was to address some persistent confusions in a way that others would find clear and helpful, to say nothing of faithful. You’ll see as you read that I invited folks at the conference to critique what they were hearing. I pass the same invitation along to all of you.

Peace and Joy,

## **The Spirit-given Challenge of the Double-Life** *(continued)*

### **V. The Holy Spirit, Poorly Discerned**

“Now we see as in a mirror, dimly.” —1 Cor. 13:12

As most of you know, Paul’s comment about the mirror is a piece of his counsel to a congregation that’s choking with dismay over a host of arguments. The one he’s speaking to directly in chapter 13 has to do with the Holy Spirit, understood as the immediate presence and power of God, a power that enables a person or persons to do things that otherwise cannot be done.

I repeat this: “Holy Spirit” equals “the immediate presence and power of God enabling a person or persons to do things that otherwise cannot be done.” I toss this out for our purposes here as an initial working definition. Had I the time, I’d go into it at length, but I don’t, so I won’t. We can talk about it later if you’d like.

In any case, the question at Corinth: who has the Spirit, and who does not? Of the haves, who has more, who has less, and how do you assess this? And finally, what about the deadbeat “have-nots”? Once you’ve figured out who they are, how do you deal with them?

Really, has there ever been a moment in the life of the Church when this argument wasn’t raging—somewhere, in some form? Since I don’t imagine that my own baptized lifetime is a weird aberration from every other Christian lifetime, my answer is no. Who has the Spirit? Or to cloak the question in other terms, who’s the real Christian, the serious Christian, the better, the wiser, the more faithful Christian, the true believer, the



orthodox believer, the ortho-practical believer whose Spirit-given faith is proved in Spirit-given works—she gives a hand for the poor, you see, as the deadbeats do not. Unlike them, she digs for root causes.

“We take the Bible seriously as the infallible, Spirit-breathed Word of God—you rascals don’t.” This too is a form of the Corinthian argument. When I was a first-year student at Concordia Seminary across the river, it tore my school apart. As for its several eruptions in the brief history of the ELCA, I’d rather not go there this evening—again, time forbids it, and for that my stomach is really quite grateful; though let me point out even so how each and every wrangle of the past 28 years has been punctuated—in some cases dominated—by loud and strident talk of the Spirit, the *Holy Spirit*, who either encourages representational quotas or abhors them, who either sees suddenly fit to authorize gay marriage or continues as ever to empower gay celibacy, not that he/she/it has ever made like the hand at Belshazzar’s feast, inscribing his/her/its definitive opinion *for right now* on the screens at a churchwide assembly; though even then we’d haggle about it. We’d do that in part because it’s so, so hard to trust each other, especially when it comes to matters of “the Spirit.” “Which spirit is at work here?” we have to ask. We ask it because we all sense how the spirits at work in the world are legion, and how all but the One are *un-*holy, some vividly so; and how every sinner’s mind and heart is riddled with them.

So the quarrels go on, and the factions multiply. Welcome to the history of the church—most all of which, by the way, will strike most baptized folk as more or less irrelevant as they step into their days. Their question, if they even think to ask it any more, is whether this Spirit they hear about—this presence and power of God enabling *them* to do what can’t be done—has any role to play at all in their daily routines. Most, I’m guessing, are

guessing not.

## VI. God's Power in Two Forms (Type E, Type X)

Though even as I say this, I need to clarify, or, as we Lutherans keep saying, to distinguish; to spot another two-ness in the ways of God with humankind, and point it out. Are people in the pews clamoring for signs of the power of God at work in their lives? Of course they are; though what they ache for—some so urgently that they'll muster cohorts of prayer warriors to beg for it—is a specific form of God's power, the one that works *on* me as *object*, and does so *especially* in the details of everyday life. So, for example, it kills the cancer. It averts the car wreck. It lands the promotion. It punches the numbers for the winning lottery ticket if I'm crass enough to play the lottery. Perhaps it breaks my addiction to playing the numbers. For purposes here, let's call this Power, Type E, where "E" stands for "everyday."

Now this is *not* the power that the rubric "Holy Spirit" covers—or so I suggest, and with all my heart I invite you to test this with me later. Spirit-power works, not *on* me as object, but *through* me as agent. Again, it enables me to do what otherwise I could not do, with others as the beneficiaries of the doing that gets done. So in Luke's Gospel, for example, it empowers me to bear a child in my virginity, or to sing a Nunc Dimittis in my senescence, or to scatter nasty spirits, or to look you in the eye and forgive your sins with a straight face. It even stoops so low and small as to twist my criminal head in Jesus' direction and give me just enough breath to croak out, "Lord, remember me..."—and this, mind you, to the future comfort and edification of millions upon millions of other criminal sinners, the present assembly included.

Which brings us, of course, to the main point, the most

important one of all: Spirit-power is inextricably intertwined in the apostolic witness with God's great doing for us all in Jesus Christ. So to keep *this* clear, and again for present purposes, let's call this God's Power Type X, where X signifies Christ and the cross we killed him on.

Type X power is *not* the power that the Lutheran people I know best are hankering and pining for right now as their days dribble by, at least not that I can tell. It's not the power they're praying for as they head to work or school on Monday morning, if indeed they're praying at all. You lay folk should know that there's not a preacher in this room who won't blanch when she confronts the text we're given to read this coming summer, 10<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost, Luke 11: "If," says Jesus, "you...who are evil know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit"—implication: *the* best gift ever—"to those who ask him!" Well, sure; and even now I see it, all those eyes staring blankly at me as people wonder how they could even start to want what Jesus touts here; and really, it's my job as preacher to get them thirsting for it? *Kyrie eleison*—or so I mutter as I plan a quick vacation and line up the sub.

All of which is simply to observe that we Lutherans are strangely lousy on this topic of the Spirit. To use a term that will surface again and again in our time together, we struggle to *discern* it. That's assuming, again, that we even to think to look for it; though when we do, as in seminaries or grave assemblies, how quick we are to rip ourselves to shreds, Corinthian style. People tend to do that when they're stumbling through a haze of thick confusion. Ergo this conference.

## **VII. Discerning the Spirit: The Essential *Satis Est***

Strangely lousy, I say; weirdly confused. Of all Christians,

Lutherans have the least excuse to be murky and confused about the Holy Spirit, aka, God's Power Type X. After all, we've got St. Paul in our corner, don't we? And with him, of course, comes Luther, Melanchthon tagging along.

We have some seminarians with us. Have you heard yet about the *satis est*? That's the label for one of the great assertions of the Augsburg Confession, so often ignored, also by Lutherans. Article VII: "It is enough—in Latin *satis est*—for the true unity of the church to agree concerning the teaching of the gospel and the administration of the sacraments."

Behind this, I submit, lies the original *satis est*, the one we got to hear this past Sunday as Paul took up the Spirit-specific questions that were seething at Corinth.

"No one speaking by the Spirit of God ever says 'Let Jesus be cursed!' and no one can say 'Jesus is Lord' except by the Holy Spirit." That, says Paul, is the baseline test for God's Type X power, present and in action.

Really? But it sounds so simple, so trifling, so unworthy of divine majesty, so easy to do: three little words, anyone can say them, can't they? Answer: no, they can't. My old teacher, Ed Schroeder, has a great story about this. He got it from his colleague, Robert Bertram, the co-founder with him of this little Crossings outfit. Perhaps he'll tell it later, or if not, go ask him. Or even better, you can run your own test on the way home. Walk around the rest stop or the airport lounge, and ask everyone you meet to say it: "Jesus is Lord." Guess what: it will not happen, and I will cheerfully lay a bet on that. A big bet. Not that I have to worry at all about losing the bet. Even now you're all cringing as all Lutherans always do at the thought of even attempting the experiment as proposed. It means sticking out your Christian neck.

Still, among our own it sounds so easy, too easy: “Jesus is Lord.” No, we say to each other, it isn’t enough, *satis non est*. There has got to be more, so much, much more, to this faith and life that God the Holy Spirit uses Type X power to generate; and before you know it we’ve invented more, we’ve piled it on. Jesus-is-Lord plus. Plus Easter celebrated according to the correct calendar—that was way back when. Plus ministry organized in the right, the proper manner—a huge thing that’s been for Lutherans in America. Jesus-is-Lord *plus* all doctrines correctly parsed and sufficiently choked down, Jesus-is-Lord *plus* all proper behavior that properly reflects a sanctified life, as we like to put it, and now let’s go to war over which behaviors these are. Can you drink a glass of beer or not? Can a Christian vote Republican—or is that Democrat?

All of which reflects a couple of huge and stupid mistakes that all Christians should be mightily ashamed of, though Lutherans in particular.

Mistake number one: the moment I add “plus” to “Jesus-is-Lord” I’ve invented an oxymoron, insulting Jesus in the process. Jesus is *not* Lord if a simple confidence in him is not enough to be get us counted among the saints. At best he’s Lord-lite, sharing his throne with whatever else we’ve ginned up and added on to anchor and define our Christian identity. That includes, by the way, those extra things we dig up from the Bible. Circumcision, say. Never getting a divorce, an add-on that some people here are old enough to remember vividly.

Mistake number two: to add a plus of any kind to “Jesus is Lord” is to show how clueless I am about the very thing I’ve just confessed. “All things are yours, whether Paul, Apollos, Cephas, life, death, the present, the future, all are yours, and you are Christ’s, and Christ is God’s.” That’s Paul in chapter 3 of 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians spelling out what the Lordship of Jesus signifies

for those folks at a point when they're still behaving very badly. Or again to the Ephesians, chapter 2: "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...and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus"—made us, raised us, seated us, past tense, done deal. Or now Peter chiming in, 1<sup>st</sup> letter, chapter 2: "you *are* a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, proclaiming the mighty acts of him who called you of darkness," this as opposed to ginning up of heap of extras to prove that you belong.

Yes, and all this is wrapped up and encompassed in that tawdry little three word package, Jesus is Lord—but then we're Lutherans, aren't we? And isn't Luther the thinker who, more than any other, has followed Paul in recognizing how God delights in hiding his best stuff in the least appealing places—a manger, yes, encircled by stinking shepherds; or far, far worse, that awful, terrible cross, surrounded by sinners? And to that there's something I can add, or you?

But to spot this stuff; to credit this stuff, to sing with joy on its account; to turn around and *use* this stuff—that takes power, incredible power, God's power Type X, the first and greatest gift that the Holy Spirit gives. Without it, we are sunk.

*—to be continued.*

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# The Confounding Gospel (Part One of a Keynote Address)

Colleagues,

My turn.

Yes, doubtless you're weary of hearing about the Crossings conference in Belleville last January, and of course the papers delivered there are available for perusing on the [Crossings website](#). But why would you think to go looking for them? And why, when what we heard was such good stuff, should I deprive you of the chance to hear it too?

So bear with me, especially now, when I dare to start passing along my own work for the conference. Good stuff? I won't presume to call it that, or to rank it with the five other papers I've sent you so far. Still, I'd like to think that some of you might find in it a certain freshness of approach to a few key ideas that conscientious Lutherans take for granted, and yet struggle to convey in ways their friends and neighbors can grab hold of.

My job at the conference was to get things launched with a keynote address. The overall topic for our time together was "Discerning the Spirit in the Double Life of the Christian." I know, who but Lutherans thinking way too hard would concoct something so convoluted? Still, there it was, and there was I, tasked with whetting appetites for a day and a half of digging into it. So I started with a preview of the hours to come and the people we'd be hearing from. Then I swiveled and stuck my own spade into the matters before us. The Holy Spirit. The twice-born person. The challenge of "living the Gospel." I put this last phrase in quotes, because we often talk that way. I

wish we didn't. However sweet and earnest it sounds, it's opaque, a sort of verbal frosting spread over the half-baked cake of our confusions.

Here, then, is my stab at penetrating a few of those confusions. I'll deliver it in three parts, each running to about 2,000 words. As I opined some weeks ago, that's enough for one post.

Peace and Joy,  
Jerry Burce

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## **The Spirit-given Challenge of the Double-Life**

Keynote Address for the Sixth International Crossings Conference  
at Belleville, Illinois, on 25 January 2016

by Jerome Burce

### **I. Gospel**

First: my own word of warm welcome to this Sixth International Conference of the Crossings Community, where we'll continue an exploration that began in 2007, at our first conference, when the topic was the Gospel itself—Honest-to-God Gospel, as we billed it that year. Honest-to-God as opposed to dishonest-to-God. Gospel so good, so strong so fresh—good news so deeply anchored in the apostolic witness to the impossible astonishment of God Almighty draped for our sake today in the crucified flesh of Jesus of Nazareth—that even the silliest of sinners, yours truly, for example, is suddenly free to laugh at himself, or to deplore himself, and even so to trust this God with a glad and cheerful heart in life and in death; and yes, he does this now without pretense—without succumbing, that is, to the sinner's standard folly of hanging one's hopes on the supposition, both



arrogant and baseless, that God is really not so good and fierce and righteous and demanding as God claims to be. "He's sure to let me slide," the stupid sinner keeps saying, "if indeed he's even there to worry about at all."

Honest-to-God Gospel is the death of such drivels, thank God—God who replaces the compulsion to spout it with the joy some shepherds celebrated one night in Bethlehem as they headed back to their fields, no longer fretting as they long had over the fact that they stank to high heaven the way shepherds are wont to do. Once there, of course, they knuckled down to the rest of the night's work and tended their smelly sheep, this being the first and best of ways to keep glorifying and praising God for the sweet aroma of that baby in the manger they had just been drenched in. Above them the skies still echoed absurdly with the sound of God's delight in them, and in us all—or so we dared in Christ to assume this past Christmas Eve.

## **II. Explorations Thus Far**

I hope you'll pardon me for the length and thickness of this opening salvo. For those of you new to Crossings, it's essential that I underscore what this little band of misfits is all about. Our passion is the Gospel, nothing less, nothing other. Our mission—self-appointed, some might say—is to think about the Gospel, and argue for the Gospel in the life of the Church, for the sake of the world, and especially for the consolation and encouragement of down-to-earth Christian people as they go about their days. That's why, among much else, we organize these conferences, inviting old friends and new ones alike to share our joy, and even better to increase it as they bring their gifts of faith and thought to bear on the conversation. Thank God for them; thank God tonight for each of you.

So looking back, in 2008 we explored the importance, for the

sake of God's Gospel and the people it's meant for, of maintaining a sharp distinction between it and God's Law, that other great Word with its own set of tasks. Here, of course, we followed Luther and his colleagues, who all too rarely get the hearing they deserve these days.

In 2010 we tracked the implications of this Law/Gospel distinction for the mission of the Church. We did the same in 2012 around the hot-button topic of Christian discipleship. Two years ago, in 2014, we discussed the pluralistic assumptions of contemporary Western culture, and the challenges these pose both to the church's mission and to our calling as baptized people to keep trusting our Lord Jesus Christ day after day, this being what discipleship is finally all about.

I mention in passing that the key presentations at all these conferences are available on the Crossings website. Most all of them are well worth your time, and many offer insights that you won't find elsewhere. I encourage you to check them out, or to read them again, as the case may be.

### **III. The Topic This Year**

Meanwhile, and all too suddenly, it's 2016. Again we come together with God's Gospel as our focus and our passion, and again we aim to build on work we've done already. Again our playground, so to speak—the factory floor, if you prefer things serious—is a conundrum, one that the Gospel itself creates; and the overriding question for our work together between now and Wednesday noon is how to use the Gospel to address the very mess it thrusts us into every day of our lives.

Here's the conundrum: where anything properly called Christian is concerned, there isn't one, there are two. Not that all Christians recognize this, but we-all are Lutheran Christians,

and so we do, this being the best gift we can offer to the conversation of the wider church.

So, for example, there isn't one creation we're all enmeshed in, there are two creations, the second launched on Easter Sunday, "when it was still dark," as St. John says in the first verse of chapter 20, where the allusion to Genesis 1 is beyond reasonable dispute.

There isn't one Word from God that defines, launches, shapes, and governs these two creations and requires our attention, there are two such Words from God, each asserting and exercising its distinct jurisdiction, each running its own kingdom, to use the older language that no one understands anymore. In any case, here is Law. There is Gospel, as many of us heard again last night, from Marcus Felde—two words, not one.

Because of that there isn't one way of being righteous, there are two ways of being righteous. So says Paul in Romans 3, and he says it emphatically, with a big fat "but" interposed between the two—in Greek, *alla*—so that we see each as an alternative to the other, not a supplement, an add-on for the other, as people keep wanting even so to treat them—thank you, John Calvin.

Again, there isn't one birth, but two births, not one me, one you, but two me's, two you's. I assume that Dr. Turnbull—Steve, as he'll want us to call him—will lay this out for us tomorrow, as he walks us through the consternation of Nicodemus, the first person in an endless stream of people who have found this idea befuddling, John 3.

So also in first-century Corinth there isn't one church to describe, but two churches, the one a rowdy pack of confused and quarrelsome people, the other a sacrosanct temple of God, 1 Corinthians 3. That this applies to churches today is something we'll also hear about tomorrow, or so I surmise, as we welcome

first Dr. Schiffrin and then Pastor Takamura to the podium.

And no, we're not done with this: because, as we saw in 2010, God charges baptized people not with one mission, but two missions; and when they get up in the morning and make the sign of the cross, they're reminded that their multiple callings—the fancy word here is “vocation”—are not of one sort, but two sorts. The first is immediately and often sharply defined by the agents of God you're working for—your boss, your spouse, your kids, your customers, the clown ahead of you on the freeway who keeps tapping his brakes in the blithe expectation that you're paying attention and won't rear-end him. Alongside that is vocation of the other sort, this one defined ever so vaguely by the Son of God when he tells you to let the light of your confidence in Him shine brightly, so that others, seeing its consequences, will get excited about God too. But whatever does this mean in practice today, when in fact you're out there on the freeway, for example, or up to your eyeballs in the demands and duties of the several jobs you wake up to every morning? Drs. Braaten and Baumgaertner will help us think about this vocational juggling act beginning tomorrow evening, spilling into Wednesday; and also on Wednesday—whatever you do, do *not* miss Wednesday—we'll think more closely about how to keep the act going when the rules of the turf you're juggling on make it plain that excitement about God of any kind isn't wanted here at all. Dr. Saler in particular will be our mentor when we get to that point.

#### **IV. The Need for Conversation**

Now let me suggest that all these speakers are going to be exploring the phenomenon that St. Paul will touch on in this coming Sunday's second lesson, Revised Common Lectionary: “Now we see, as in a copper mirror, dimly” (1 Cor. 13:12).

Or consider the photo that appeared last month in *The New York Times*, of a man all but lost in the brutal smog that had settled stubbornly on Beijing for a stretch of days. This strikes me too as a useful metaphor for the problem we're all here to think and talk about these next many hours.

I underscore the "all" in that last sentence. Yes, the caliber of the people we get to hear from is such that I, for one, would be more than happy to sit here mute tomorrow, merely soaking in the verbal bath of whatever they'll happen to gush with. Yet such is the problem, so grimy the smog, so tarnished the mirror, that soaking doesn't do these days. It never has. We need to scrub, each of us, God's two-edged Word serving as cleanser, and some back-and-forth conversation as the brush. The aim is for each of us to go home with a hard-earned thought or two as a gift for the people the Holy Spirit insists on sending us to. They're busy scrubbing as well, though often badly. Instead of polishing the mirror, they scratch it. Instead of thinning the haze, they thicken it. For their sake, please plan on asking, talking, poking, prodding, until you've grabbed hold of that useful thought—the sudden insight, perhaps—anchored in Christ crucified and nothing less, that you can pass along with confidence. And while you're at it, let the confidence include the bold thought that what you got here, you got from God. If others find that arrogant and unseemly, so be it.

Remember, after all, that St. Paul spent an entire apostolic career impressing others as arrogant and unseemly. That's what happens when you're so gripped in the Gospel that you run around insisting on all this infernal two-ness that characterizes our Christian experience; though if Paul himself were here and into English word play, he'd insist, I'm sure, that we call it a *supernal* two-ness. It's not, after all, as if he made it up, or got it from the devil; though lots of folks along the way have thought so.

Paul *spent* a career. Pay attention to the verb here. It's about to anchor one side of another two-ness that far too few of us baptized types have thought to pay attention to, even those of us in Lutheran dress. Or so I'm going to argue; and in that argument will be the main contribution I hope to make this very evening to the conversation we'll all be having.

—*to be continued*