

Easter Unfolding. A Gift from Amy C. Schifrin. Part 1

Colleagues,

I started some weeks ago to pass along the superb presentations we heard at the Crossings Conference this past January. You've gotten two of them so far. When I looked again at the one you're receiving this week and next (again, in two parts), I was startled to see how well it serves as a reflection on the Gospel text we heard in church this past Sunday, Easter's Second. It was, you'll recall, that great Johannine report of Easter Evening. Suddenly there stands Jesus amid cowering disciples, declaring his peace, showing his wounds, and imparting the Holy Spirit. Keep this in mind as you read what follows—and notice how Amy Schifrin elucidates how this very work of Christ continues to unfold amid the bands of feckless disciples that we belong to and serve today.

Dr. Schifrin is the president of North American Lutheran Seminary, where she also serves as Associate Professor of Liturgy and Homiletics. Thanks be to God for her Easter witness.

Peace and Joy,

Jerry Burce

"Fill us with your Spirit to establish our faith in truth"[\[i\]](#)

Crossings International Conference on

Law, Gospel and the Holy Spirit

Dr. Amy C. Schifrin

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15 *If you love me, you will keep my commandments. 16 And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. 17 This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you. John 14:15-17*

6 *"This is the one who came by water and blood, Jesus Christ, not with the water only but with the water and the blood. And the Spirit is the one that testifies, for the Spirit is the truth. 7 There are three that testify: 8 the Spirit and the water and the blood, and these three agree. 1John 5:6-7*

*O Holy Spirit, enter in,
And in our hearts your work begin,
And make our hearts your dwelling.
Sun of the soul, O Light divine,
Around and in us brightly shine,
Your strength in us upwelling.
In your radiance
Life from heaven,
Now is given
Overflowing,
Gifts of gifts beyond all knowing.[\[ii\]](#)*

The task given for this lecture was discerning the Spirit in the double-life of the Congregation. *Gift of gifts beyond all knowing.* I read the title and I started to laugh, because in 30+years of serving as pastor in parish, campus and seminary communities, I believe that I have encountered not simply the double-life, but more than 50 shades of the good, the bad, and

the ugly. Double-life doesn't even touch it. I've even served multiple point parishes where one congregation was all sweetness and light (well, almost all) but their yoked partner truly resembled an evil twin. (This was most evident when one church council met on Tuesday evening and the other, on Wednesday.) Yet in every assembly, baptisms were performed, sins were confessed, Scripture was studied, preaching was heard, and an epicletic word was prayed at the Eucharist. Jesus kept putting his life into ours.

Congregational cultures are forged over time. Multiple generations are sometimes led by lay leaders or a succession of long-term pastors who may have ruled with an iron fist. Whether you're in a small town or a large city, your congregation has a culture, a way of doing things that carries remnant of its history and relationships (either by subconscious agreement or in conscious rebellion). 40 years in a wilderness seems like a mere breath compared to 80 years bent-over by hearing someone's misinterpretation of a law that neither you nor even Jesus could fulfill. Faith becomes the parched hunger of one on a desert march, the slow death between just enough hope, and a despair that is unacceptable to express in public. And now in more recent times, I have also encountered an anger born of fear that runs like an apocalyptic undercurrent, that somehow, someone, some force was going to take this congregational culture away, and in taking it away, the church would no longer exist. At the very bottom of that fear was threat of both collective and individual abandonment that would end with death having the final word, for abandonment is the foretaste of a life that is the dust of the grave.

There are a variety of reactions to such a deadly spiral in many parts of the American church context, some which de-center the apostolic witness in favor of 'enlightened,' non-hierarchical sociological principles of democracy, in which almost every

voice heard is equal (I say almost because it is a selective diversity); and the obverse reaction (a modern equivalent of Rome's bread and circuses) that projects the same fear onto those who are moving the culture of the political arena to a particular brand of "left," and in response provide a Sunday morning entertainment industry with enough fodder to numb the mind 24/7 through radio, cable, so-called "felt-need" bible studies, and the ever-ubiquitous internet. You can sing upbeat "Christian" songs 'til the cows come home, and then when your voice gives out you can just post your favorite slogans on Facebook to let your world know your brand of Christian identity.

While no congregation is immune to these forces, the church is still alive. In the warp and woof, the cultural and ecclesiastical yin and yang that pulls and tears a fabric to shreds, and in spite of all the ways that any expression of the church can go astray, there are yet faithful people hidden within the love that heals, carried in the Holy Breath of the One God who brings all things to life, witnessing to a mercy so great that stones are rolled away. Folks who really are holding on to life by a thread are held in that gorgeous embrace of prayer and love—those sighs too deep for words. And being upheld in ways which the world can neither measure nor contain, they discover whom God created them to be. *This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him.* I think back to my own life as a college student, when I had the self-esteem of a flea, yet the people in a little Lutheran campus congregation saw in me the person whom God intended for me to be, and treated me as such. Their quiet, actions, unnoticed by the world, were a catechesis of love, and lo, and behold, I came to life. I grew into the person whom God had created me to be through their love, and I began to speak, to bear witness to the incarnate God, who had been made present

to me in their voices and their hearts. Through the years folks have occasionally asked me to describe what grace is, and while the thickness of meaning has grown, my answer has never changed from those early days: Grace is breathing after death. Grace is breathing after death.

Such life in the Spirit is deeply hidden. It is impossibly hard for the world to see, because like a seed that falls into the ground, it is only known when it bears fruit. And given all the visible divisions, all the enmity between peoples within and without the church, from congregational squabbles to ecclesiastical sabotage, the world cannot see any unity, nor on its own is it capable of receiving a taste of the church's good fruit.

In the United States alone we are now culturally divided into 11 geographic/sociological regions from 'Yankeedom' to the Left Coast to the Tidewaters to the Midlands.[\[iii\]](#) People are desperate for an identity. Within each of these "existential" regions (regions with which people's identities are formed and normed) are economic variants, age variants, political variants, religious variants, educational variants, and cultural, historically ethnic, and racial variants. The continuum of rural, small town, suburban, an urban dwelling places means that children born the same day in two different places within the same country, and maybe even to parents within the same church body, may grow up to hate each other, or just as deadly, be apathetic towards one another, having no recognition that this is my neighbor.

What is so spectacular, however, is that underneath every fad and every division, every "ism" and every little tad of self-righteousness, every fear and every failure, every hushed duplicity and every false bravado, every wrong decision and every haughty glance, He who created us in his image and

likeness is still at work in us, breathing us into the future that he is binding and knitting together through our sacramental life. For while the Old Adam/Old Eve in each of us is still looking to go astray, He who is life itself is bringing goodness where we on our own could never even imagine it.

The church is hidden in, with, and under this mix of peoples who make up a nation and who, for all intensive purposes, have no unifying meta-narrative. As a nation we are a people without a sense that what is true for me is also true for you. The church herself, which has a meta-narrative, (God ruling by his Word) becomes increasingly hidden in this multivalent context, for the layers of human brokenness and division are like scales seared on our eyes, keeping us from seeing who we really are together as God's beloved creation. Until, like St. Paul, we are led by God's grace to a dirt-filled Damascus street where there a faithful, unassuming brother of the church prays, so that we may regain our true sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit. (Acts 9:17) Law, Gospel, and the Holy Spirit, this is the work of God when murderers (as we all are) die to ourselves and come to proclaim the sovereignty of Jesus, *He is the Son of God*. For until this world tastes death, it cannot hear such love.[\[iv\]](#)

Alexander Schmemmann, the great Orthodox theologian states it clearly,

The world rejected Christ by killing him, and by doing so rejected its own destiny and fulfillment. Therefore if the basis for all Christian worship is the Incarnation, its true content is always the Cross and the resurrection. Through these events the new life in Christ, the Incarnate Lord, is "hid with Christ in God," and made into a life "not of this world." The world which rejected Christ must itself die in man if it is to become again means of communion, a means of participation in the life which shone forth from the grave, in the kingdom which is not

"of this world," and which in terms of this world is still to come. [\[v\]](#)

As in the world before ultrasound, when we could not see the details of a child in the womb that was coming into this world, we receive our Lord in an incarnate promise: a promise that holds the power of life eternal, a promise that will crush the serpent's head, a promise that is hidden in the life of the baptized, a promise that the light will shatter the darkness, a promise that the leprosy that infects the human heart will be washed clean, until that great day comes when we sing with all the saints in glory, the resurrection song. And what is so stunning is that people who do evil to one another still are given this vision of the good, calling them to live in the light, to live as the light. *Let your light so shine before others that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven.*

This is the work of the Spirit, a ministry of reconciliation, where words of forgiveness break through that boulder stuck in our throats (that stone, too, needs to be rolled away), where we give not only the outgrown and outdated clothes to the Salvation Army, but we spend hours in what the world calls "leisure time" building furniture for the local homeless shelter or quilting for 1 of 19 million refugees. Where we step out beyond our fear to see someone of a different race or socio-economic class, or even a different religion, as a beloved child of God as we are. Law, Gospel, and the Holy Spirit: It's all at work here when we are faced with both our finitude and our complicity in another human beings pain and sorrow. And then...and then from our knees, we begin to love. Then we can participate in myriad expressions of service to the neighbor, joyfully—not because we have to, but because we want to. And where in our everyday vocational callings, that which world calls our "professions," we work in personal and collective ways to treat everyone, absolutely

everyone, with the dignity and respect befitting a child of God. Some of us may also do the most hidden work of renewing and creating systems that make life more joyous for people we will never meet. Your incarnate witness will serve as a word of law to those who don't care for their neighbor, and an embodied grace to those who receive it. Giving glory to our Father in heaven is always the work of the Spirit.

Such a life does not call attention to itself and has no need to mimic a world that needs to name its company on its polo shirts and its favorite quarterback on its jerseys. Such a life has no need to succumb to a tribalism that seeks to destroy our true identity, the identity given to us when the water was poured and the word spoken—*one Lord, one faith, one baptism—one God and Father of us all*. (Ephesians 4:5) For such a life does not easily fall prey for those devilish forces that divide brother from brother, sisters and mothers, fathers and cousins all.

—*to be continued*.

[i] Apostolic Tradition, Prayer of Hippolytus, Eucharistic Prayer IV, *Lutheran Book of Worship* (Ministers Desk Edition) (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1978), 226.

[ii] Text: Michael Schirmer; tr. Catherine Winkworth; Tune: Philipp Nicolai, *Lutheran Book of Worship* (Ministers Desk Edition) (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1978), Hymn 459, vs. 1.

[iii] <http://www.businessinsider.com/the-11-nations-of-the-united-states-2015-7>

[iv] “The point of [the law/gospel] distinction is once again the making public of the divine deed, making it hearable in a

world that will not hear it. The distinction is made so that a new kind of speaking might be heard in this world: gospel speaking...Proclamation, shaped by the theology of the cross, is governed by the distinction between law and gospel. This distinction comprehends the fact that publication of the electing deed cannot proceed directly to the world that crucified Jesus, but must bring it to an end." Gerhard Forde, "Called and Ordained," in Todd Nichol and Marc Kolden, eds., *Lutheran Perspectives on the Office of Ministry* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), 122, 128.

[v] Alexander Schmemmann, *For the Life of the World* (New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1973), 122.

A Scientist's Easter Witness

Colleagues,

This will be the shortest post ever. I wish this Easter week merely to pass along a brief essay that a Facebook friend inserted in the daily feed. It's by one [Ian Hutchison](#), a brother in Christ of whom I knew nothing until today. He teaches at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. He also brings energy and diligence to the ongoing conversation between faith and science, or so it appears from a brief glance online. Right now he wants the world to know that he's "celebrating the resurrection of Jesus." As are you. As am I. I direct you to his thoughts to help us celebrate together.

The essay is entitled "[Can a scientist believe in the resurrection? Three hypotheses](#)." When you reach the end, be sure

to scroll down to browse the comments. There's one by a Kenneth Bozeman about "the foolishness of God" that rang bells with me. The [Easter Sunday horror in Lahore](#) came to mind as the bells rang.

Indeed Christ is risen! Alleluia! See the holes in his hands, his feet, his side! Speaking of Lahore, let our Easter faith keep spilling out in determined and confident prayer to this Lord and Master of Things Impossible, who raises the dead, exorcises evil, forgives even heinous sin, and holds his own in a Love—the Father's heart—that nothing can deny. May his will be done, and quickly, in this bitter, angry world.

Peace and Joy,

Jerry Burce

Rob Saler on the Publicly Engaged Church, Part 2 (Rich Fare for Holy Week)

Colleagues,

Here is the second half of the essay you started reading last week. I don't need to underscore its timeliness for people who are about to meditate on the Passion of Christ, and preach it too, perhaps. You'll see that for yourself. Savor the gift. As for Rob Saler, through whom the Spirit is delivering the goods, thanks be to God.

Peace and Joy,

Jerry Burce

The Spirit and the Publicly Engaged Church (*continued*)

Robert C. Saler

The Optics of the Market and of the Cross

When I was a parish pastor in Gary, Indiana, which like most impoverished urban areas is heavily churched, I once received a phone call from a local newspaper asking me if our congregation wanted to place an ad in the paper's "Religion Classifieds" section (which already tells you something right there). Without my asking, he proceeded to tell me that many local churches found it helpful to get the word out about their service times, etc.

This is common practice, and I have no real problems with it. But then he proceeded to say the following, "After all, it never hurts to get a leg up on the competition."

Think of that imagery. Churches advertising so as to get a leg up on their "competition," i.e. other Christian churches. Trinity Lutheran vs. Christ the King Lutheran, advertising their wares in a manner structurally indistinguishable from Wal-Mart vs. Target.

My point is not to knock church advertising. My point is that I suspect many of us American Christians have internalized, wittingly or not, the notion that the church operates in what sociologists [have called](#) a "spiritual marketplace" in which our functional role is to provide a "product" in order to meet a given "demand." In my own work I've tended to argue that the

main issue with missional theology in the mainline churches have to do with a “if we build it, they will come” mentality; thus, what we should notice here is how neatly that mentality corresponds with capitulation to consumerism.

That’s one problem. But it’s a problem that we are not going to get our heads around until we realize how thoroughly consumerism comes with its own theology, its own psychology, its own ideas around what truth, beauty, and meaning constitute.

The Christian author Donald Miller, speaking at an ELCA Youth Gathering in 2006, once pointed out that conservative estimates are that the average American views hundreds, if not thousands, of advertisements every day (between Internet, TV, t-shirts, magazines, etc.). He then went on to describe—in terms that I continue to find quite compelling— that the main goal of advertising is to poke a tiny hole in our lives, a hole that can then be filled by the product on sale. If you put these two facts together, then the psychological picture that emerges is one in which most of us are walking around having thousands of tiny holes poked into our self-image, our sense of happiness, EVERY DAY.

And the effects of this are not benign. A stunning recent piece of art on the front of an avant-garde magazine focusing on women’s issues puts it bluntly. [The image is of a young woman](#) in heavy makeup, shaded in such a way as to simultaneously imply overuse of cosmetics and perhaps even physical or mental abuse, looking down, and the caption simply reads: “Call Us Ugly to Sell Us Shit.” The feeling of ugliness, the attack upon the peace that comes with one’s worth coming from something other than work and consumption, translates into further consumption.

We know what the concrete effects of this are. Eating disorders rampant among women AND men. Personal household debt through the

roof. And so on. But all of these material effects are tied up in the deeper material problem, and that is this: WE CANNOT BE SATISFIED. And what I mean by that is not that we personally are incapable of being satisfied, but rather that we are all caught in a matrix of forces that have a deep interest in ensuring that we WILL not be satisfied, because satisfaction is dangerous.

The word "satisfaction" comes from the Latin "satis facere," and it literally means to "make enough," that is, to be in a condition in which one feels that one has enough. What I am saying is that in the 21st century we North Americans, along with an increasing percentage of the rest of the planet, are caught amidst forces who would be deeply threatened were we all to collectively decide that we are "satisfied," that we have enough of a given product. If I'm satisfied with my blue jeans, I'm threatening the sale of Levi's. If I'm satisfied with my car, I'm of concern to Toyota. Indeed, the main indicator by which we measure the health of national economies in geopolitical terms is the "GDP," which measures GROWTH of economies as the primary indication that they are healthy.

This is not to say that Toyota, Diesel, the government, or anyone else is evil, though, because THEY TOO are caught up in the system of having to sell in order to survive, in order for people to feed their families. This is not "us" against "them." This is us against ourselves. And that's a spiritual problem.

One way we might conceptualize this is to think of the "optics" of the market. How does consumerism teach us to "see" the world?

Two theologians who have thought about these matters are Paul Griffiths (a Roman Catholic theologian who teaches at Duke University) and David Bentley Hart (an Eastern Orthodox theologian).

For Griffiths, the most corruptive aspect of the United States as such a “human city” is that it operates with a deficient notion of autonomy in which freedom is defined solely as the absence of dependence upon others. Moreover, perfect realization of this deficient autonomy finds actualization within a space whose logic feeds almost solely upon the construction of identity through unlimited consumption.

Ownership goes almost as deep [as commitment to autonomy]. Status is given principally by display of what is owned, and by capacity to increase what is owned and displayed. Among thoughts not thinkable is the idea that display can be excessive or that it is possible to own too much. The grammar of ownership has the syntax of consumption as a dominant element: the owner is someone who can buy; the act of buying, of purchasing, is the act by which owning is made real; and so the purchasing act is one that ought to be performed as frequently as possible. To limit it, ascetically to constrain it, is understood not only to be odd and peculiar and strange, but also antisocial, a virus within the body politic. Frequent purchase, the act of consumption, is what we are urged and exhorted to; and so ownership is front-loaded into purchase, and purchase front-loaded into consumption. We become, ideally, owners who will not be deterred by the fact that we already own something from repurchasing it. We define ourselves, and are defined by others, principally in terms of what we would like to purchase. And when our autonomy is threatened by violence from without, by the decay of the body, or by betrayal, we comfort ourselves by going shopping...We can (we do) collude, as good shoppers, in our own tranquilization and the evisceration of compassion, sensibility, and love. We can (we do) deprive ourselves of the joy in the material world available only to those who refuse ownership of it.[\[i\]](#)

Griffith's point is that, to the extent that a community such as

the church wishes to be the chief formative influence upon the sort of ends that believers choose, as well as the practices by which they reach these ends, it is (at least in the North American context, and increasingly the global one) in deadly competition with a force that has both the interest and the power to form both ends and practices within its domain. In other words, if the church has its own inherent logic, then so does the marketplace.

An equally vivid picture of the “marketplace” as a sort of overarching diagnosis of the Christian church’s “other” is found in David Bentley Hart’s *The Beauty of the Infinite*. According to Hart,

The market transcends ideologies; it is the post-Christian culture of communication, commerce, and values characteristic of modernity, the myth by which the economies, politics, and mores of the modern are shaped, the ideal space where desire is fashioned; it is the place that is every place, the distance of all things, no longer even the market square, which is a space of meetings, a communal space, but simply the arid, empty distance that consumes every other distance.[\[iii\]](#)

Like Griffiths, Hart credits this market “empty distance” as having enormous power to shape desire (and thus, by extension, desired ends); unlike Griffiths, however, he envisions the market not as a rival public to the church but rather as the paradigmatic anti-public, a “no-space” which can thus insinuate itself into every space. Hart is clear that his naming of this force as the “market” is not a direct referent to free-market capitalism *per se*; rather, he sees the market as a kind of mentality which can, if necessary, inculcate itself into a variety of economic arrangements.

Hart’s account also proposes a link between the autonomous

modern self who misconstrues freedom as pure autonomy to follow desire and the interested amenability of the marketplace to precisely such a formed personality. The hinge between the two is commodification, not simply of material products, but of those features of a person's identity (particularly those formed in communities outside the marketplace, e.g. religious faith) that are not immediately possessed of an exchange-value within the market:

The market, after all, which is the ground of the real in modernity, the ungrounded foundation where social reality occurs, makes room only for values that can be transvalued, that can be translated into the abstract valuations of univocal exchange. And in the market all desires must needs be conformed to commodifiable options. The freedom the market acknowledges and indeed imposes is a contentless freedom, a "spontaneous" energy of arbitrary choice; and insofar as this is the freedom that is necessary for the mechanisms of the market to function, every aspect of the person that would suppress or subvert this purely positive, purely "open" and voluntaristic freedom must be divided from the public identity of the individual, discriminated into a private sphere of closed interiority and peculiar devotion... persons (arising as they do from the often irreducible stresses of particular traditions, particular communities of speech and practice, even particular landscapes and vistas) must be reduced to economic selves, by way of a careful and even tender denudation and impoverishment; thereafter the "enrichment" of the person can only occur under the form of subjective choices made from a field of morally indifferent options, in a space bounded by a metaphysical or transcendental surveillance that views the person as utterly distinct from his or her aboriginal narratives, allowing these narratives the status perhaps of quant fictions but preventing them from entering

into the realm of the real on other terms (as, say, persuasions, forces of contention that cannot be reinscribed as part of the playful agon of the market).[\[iii\]](#)

This is heady language, but the point is relatively clear: when the marketplace shapes our identity, when all of the holes that advertising pokes into our identities come home to roost, then the effects are devastating both for our own identities and our communities. Think again of that image of the woman: commodification is abuse, but it is also the same sort of erasure, of eff-face-ment, that comes with both overuse of cosmetics and the facelessness conferred by abuse.

And I would suggest that, if we are to think about how mission interacts with the world's questions around truth, beauty, and meaning, we should take this aspect seriously. My point in all of this has been to suggest that we live in a culture where powerful forces (beyond any given individuals; think of the Bible's talk of "principalities and powers") are at work keeping people DEEPLY (one might even say "spiritually") dissatisfied so that the systems that profit from such dissatisfaction may flourish.

We may think eventually to try and change those systems; however, from a missional perspective, I would argue that all politics depend first upon worldview. So, theologically speaking, what is an alternate worldview to the one shaped solely by the marketplace?

In this setting I'll assume that you're all up on the Heidelberg Disputation, but let's just get the text fresh in our minds.

Theses 19-21 are, of course, the famous ones. Of particular interest here is Thesis 20 and its explanation:

20. He deserves to be called a theologian, however, who

comprehends the visible and manifest things of God seen through suffering and the cross.

The manifest and visible things of God are placed in opposition to the invisible, namely, his human nature, weakness, foolishness. The Apostle in 1 Cor. 1:25 calls them the weakness and folly of God. Because men misused the knowledge of God through works, God wished again to be recognized in suffering, and to condemn wisdom concerning invisible things by means of »wisdom concerning visible things, so that those who did not honor God as manifested in his works should honor him as he is hidden in his suffering (*absconditum in passionibus*). As the Apostle says in 1 Cor. 1:21, For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe. Now it is not sufficient for anyone, and it does him no good to recognize God in his glory and majesty, unless he recognizes him in the humility and shame of the cross. Thus God destroys the wisdom of the wise, as Isa. 45:15 says, Truly, thou art a God who hidest thyself.

And then Thesis 21 goes on to state, famously:

21. A theology of glory calls evil good and good evil. A theology of the cross calls the thing what it actually is.

This is clear: He who does not know Christ does not know God hidden in suffering. Therefore he prefers ,works to suffering, glory to the cross, strength to weakness, wisdom to folly, and, in general, good to evil.

Consider this last thesis in connection with what we have been discussing: a theologian of the cross calls a thing what it is. Why? For Luther, it is for this reason: WHEN GOD WAS MADE MOST MANIFEST IN THE LIFE, DEATH, AND RESURRECTION OF JESUS CHRIST,

THIS TOOK THE FORM OF THAT WHICH THE WORLD CALLED UGLY. Jesus was a peasant carpenter and itinerant teacher from a backwater town who briefly engaged large crowds for a month or so, eventually fell out of their favor, and was crucified as a criminal by the Roman empire (one of the most shameful deaths for a Jew). God's truth in Christ took the form of what the world found ugly and pathetic.

As Lutheran theologian Vítor Westhelle has argued, this heritage from Luther—training us to see the presence of God in that which the world despises, calls ugly, regards as worthless—may be one of the most stunningly relevant aspects of our tradition in a world in which what Luther might call a “theology of glory” (that is, assuming that truth is most present in that which is beautiful, powerful, well-praised, etc.) dominates the logic of the marketplace. If the marketplace gives us a kind of optics, a “way of seeing” that sees ugliness in order to keep us purchasing, then the “optics” of the cross trains us instead to see the world as God's good creation in which it is precisely the outcasts, the marginalized, and the “ugly” in which we might expect to see God's Spirit most at work (note that this applies to people, but perhaps increasingly also to creation itself as it suffers the effects of our constant need to consume unsustainably).

What does this have to say to the publicly engaged church? I think it's this: if God hides in suffering, in that which the world calls weak, then perhaps one of the most significant contributions that Lutheran Christianity might bring to our context's ongoing conversations about “truth, beauty, meaning, and justice” might be to think with others—Christian or not—as to how our minds have been trained to see beauty in those places advantageous to the marketplace, and to ask then how a different kind of optics, a different kind of “eyes” for the world, might disclose the presence of truth in that which cannot be easily

commodified and sold within what Hart calls the “agon” of the market. To the extent that we as a culture can gradually emerge from our addiction to the consumerism that is killing us, it will not only have material effects but also spiritual effects. And one of those spiritual effects is that the good news, the gospel of a God who hides in weakness and suffering in order to find us and the world that God loves precisely amidst that suffering, might become a story that resonates with the pathos of the world to an even greater extent. This is what I mean when I say that an incarnational logic of the cross, born from formation by the gospel and its gifts, results in a situation in which the properly formed theologian, the properly formed Christian, loves the world more than the world loves itself.

The church cannot call the world ugly to sell it shit, or even to sell it gospel. The church must call the world blessed to preach gospel to it.

Implications

But let me conclude by making a few suggestions for what the things I’ve been able to sketch only briefly.

I’ve suggested that Luther’s *Freedom of a Christian* teaches us that the gospel frees God’s people to engage the horizon of the neighbor’s need apart from the economies of self-justification. But I’ve also argued that this is not a one-off insight but requires ongoing and deep formation in the spiritual gifts and disciplines of the church. In incarnational fashion, the deeper we go into the things of Christ, the more “secular” (worldly) we become in that we engage more deeply the world qua world as the site of God’s love and of God’s redemption (this is what Bonhoeffer was getting at at the end of this life, I’m convinced—his saying that the Christian life needs to become more fully worldly is not a departure from the quasi-monastic

vision of Life Together, but the further extension and radicalizing of it. I can say more about that in the Q & A if you like).

And I've suggested that part of what is at stake (and in keeping with the optical themes of Fr. De Chergé's letter) is a kind of optics of the cross that resists the optics of the marketplace. But here again formation and spiritual discipline is key. It is not optional as to whether or not we are formed—whatever formation is not done by the church, the market will do for us. But rather than thinking of church formation as a bunkering down in a kind of alternative society, the fundamentally Lutheran theological insight is that going deeper into the particulars of the church and the thickness of Christian life is not a retreat from the world, but a deeper dive into it. As the church becomes more itself, it becomes more secular, because *thesaeculum* belongs to God by creation and to Christ by redemption.

As far as I can tell, Crossings does distinction between law and gospel pretty well. But my parting challenge: how can this group continue to think about the ways in which Lutheranism in its current manifestations empowers our people with the thickness of the Christian life, the material and spiritual disciplines that create a Fr. de Cherge (even if a Lutheran one), and—most of all—the realization that to go deeper into the love of Christ is to love the world as God loves it, which means more than it loves itself? I have been arguing that theology must give rise to formation, and a shadow supposition is that—as much as we theologians would love to think otherwise—such formation is not automatic from even the best theological formulations. It needs Spirit-led work. Are we up to the gift of that challenge?

[i] Ibid. 227-8. Cf. Griffiths, "Reading as a Spiritual Discipline," in *The Scope of Our Art: The Vocation of the*

Theological Teacher, ed. L. Gregory Jones and Stephanie Paulsell (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002), esp. 34ff. [Back](#)

[ii] David Bentley Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite: The Aesthetics of Christian Truth*(Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003), 431. [Back](#)

[iii] Ibid., 432.[Back](#)

A Most Timely Essay on “The Spirit and the Publicly Engaged Church”

Colleagues,

For proof that the spirits abroad in the world are legion, one needs only to listen for five minutes to the current campaign for U.S. president. An astonishing business it’s proving to be—astonishing in St. Mark’s sense of something that befuddles and dismays. As it happens, the further we get into it, the more impressed I become with the timeliness and relevance of the papers we heard at the Crossings conference in January. I underscore that this timeliness was by no means intentional. When Steve Turnbull put together his thoughts on what a real mensch looks like through the eyes of St. John (see the last two posts), he could not have guessed that a presidential candidate would soon be doing on a public debate stage as boys will do in a locker room, measuring mensch-ness by the size of their penises. Today’s writer is Robert C. Saler, Executive Director of the Center for Pastoral Excellence at

ChristianTheological Seminary, Indianapolis. He'll reflect on what the church starts to look like in the public arena when the Holy Sprit rolls up the Spirit's sleeves and gets to work. Rob is ever so canny and culturally attuned, as you're sure to see. Still, I can't suppose that even he, when sitting down to write this, would have imagined the photo I saw some days ago. It was taken at a rally for The Donald. The crowd presses in. The faces are eager and joyous. A few feet from the stage a woman lofts her sign: "Thank you, Lord Jesus, for President Trump."

One of these days I need to pound out some thoughts about that sign. They're currently in gestation. They'll differ somewhat from the protests that the esteemed and evangelical likes of [Max Lucado](#) are finally inserting in the public conversation. See too the self-identified evangelical [Peter Wehner](#), who writes opinion pieces for the New York Times. Such protests are important, not to say essential; though if they carry no more weight with Trump fans than Mitt Romney's has, I won't be surprised. Driving that lack of surprise is the sign in the photo, and a suspicion about it that's niggling at me. I'm guessing that, like Caiaphas's famous pronouncement about Jesus ([John 11:49-52](#)), it's weirdly truthful in a bitter, ironic way.

But all this is by the by. What matters immediately is to deliver Rob's work to you, which, as with Turnbull's, I'll do in two pieces. In another unexpected serendipity, Part One dovetails perfectly with Steve's closing reflections of last week. Steve mused, you'll recall, about "Christian discipleship to Jesus as the Spirit-driven process of rehumanization." Rob launches with a stunning example of how rehumanized disciples can look and sound. The contrast with would-be Christians at a Trump rally could not be starker.

For some of you, a caveat: Rob writes as an academic theologian for other academictheologians. If you're not

familiar with the specialized language, you'll find the slogging hard in places. Slog on anyway. The payoff is worth it, especially next week. Meanwhile, I've taken the editor's liberty of inserting a few stepping stones, links for the most part, to help you along.

Peace and Joy,

Jerry Burce

The Spirit and the Publicly Engaged Church

Robert C. Saler

Sixth International Crossings Conference

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What it Looks Like When it Goes Right

On May 24, 1996, a group of Islamic terrorists announced that they had “slit the throats” of seven French Trappist monks whom they had kidnapped from the monastery of Tibherine in Algeria and held as hostages for two months. Prior to the kidnapping, the superior of the monastery, Father Christian de Chergé, had left with his family this testament “to be opened in the event of my death.”

If it should happen one day—and it could be today—that I become a victim of the terrorism which now seems ready to encompass all the foreigners living in Algeria, I would like my community, my Church, my family, to remember that my life was given to God and to this country. I ask them to accept that the One Master of all life was not a stranger to this

brutal departure. I ask them to pray for me: for how could I be found worthy of such an offering? I ask them to be able to associate such a death with the many other deaths that were just as violent, but forgotten through indifference and anonymity.

My life has no more value than any other. Nor any less value. In any case, it has not the innocence of childhood. I have lived long enough to know that I share in the evil which seems, alas, to prevail in the world, even in that which would strike me blindly. I should like, when the time comes, to have a clear space which would allow me to beg forgiveness of God and of all my fellow human beings, and at the same time to forgive with all my heart the one who would strike me down.

I could not desire such a death. It seems to me important to state this. I do not see, in fact, how I could rejoice if this people I love were to be accused indiscriminately of my murder. It would be to pay too dearly for what will, perhaps, be called "the grace of martyrdom," to owe it to an Algerian, whoever he may be, especially if he says he is acting in fidelity to what he believes to be Islam. I know the scorn with which Algerians as a whole can be regarded. I know also the caricature of Islam which a certain kind of Islamism encourages. It is too easy to give oneself a good conscience by identifying this religious way with the fundamentalist ideologies of the extremists. For me, Algeria and Islam are something different; they are a body and a soul. I have proclaimed this often enough, I believe, in the sure knowledge of what I have received in Algeria, in the respect of believing Muslims—finding there so often that true strand of the Gospel I learned at my mother's knee, my very first Church.

My death, clearly, will appear to justify those who hastily

judged me naive or idealistic: "Let him tell us now what he thinks of it!" But these people must realize that my most avid curiosity will then be satisfied. This is what I shall be able to do, if God wills—immerse my gaze in that of the Father, to contemplate with him his children of Islam just as he sees them, all shining with the glory of Christ, the fruit of his Passion, filled with the Gift of the Spirit, whose secret joy will always be to establish communion and to refashion the likeness, delighting in the differences.

For this life given up, totally mine and totally theirs, I thank God who seems to have wished it entirely for the sake of that joy in everything and in spite of everything. In this "thank you," which is said for everything in my life from now on, I certainly include you, friends of yesterday and today, and you my friends of this place, along with my mother and father, my brothers and sisters and their families—the hundredfold granted as was promised!

And you also, the friend of my final moment, who would not be aware of what you were doing. Yes, for you also I wish this "thank you"—and this *adieu*—to commend you to the God whose face I see in yours.

And may we find each other, happy "good thieves," in Paradise, if it pleases God, the Father of us both. Amen. [\[i\]](#)

A good question for when Christians gather—including we Lutherans who operate in some ways in as much of an ecclesial remove from our Trappist brothers as the Trappists did from the Islamic Algerian villagers—might be framed as follows: what sort of life must be lived in order to produce such a remarkable document? Which raises the accompanying question: what must it mean for a Christian to have one's life become such a masterwork of faith?

I should say that, as implied by my framing the question this way, I regard Fr. de Chergé's statement as a near-perfect instance of how the Christian worldview, in genuinely incarnational rhetorical fashion (as Eric Auerbach noticed decades ago), blends the most eschatologically sublime understanding of the beatified vision characteristic of Christian hopes for heaven (*theoria* in the original sense) with an earthy, humane awareness of human fallibility and epistemological humility. In other words, it is a slam dunk, an act of Christian virtuosity that I would assert is indicative not only of individual charisma, but of successful Christian formation. This is what it looks like when it all goes right, and it is both gratifying and humbling.

If the topic of this talk is a Publicly Engaged Church, then a Trappist monastery in a remote Algerian village might seem a strange place to start. Luther's critique of monasticism, of course, was predicated on what became his disdain for the problematic material AND theological economies which would regard a life of monastic separation from the world as the pinnacle of Christian living.

But the case of the monks of Tibherine, the case is more complex. As depicted movingly in the 2010 film *Of Gods and Men*, which tells the story of the monks, a major reason why they stayed was because the monks' medical training was the only means for the Algerian peasants in the nearby village to receive medical care. The village was their public; that is made clear by the film. What is also made clear by the film, though, is a kind of shadow curriculum regarding the day-to-day activities of the monks. The film is two hours long, but only about 30 minutes of that run time is given over to the plot by which the monks are threatened, decide to stay, and are eventually captured—in other words, only about $\frac{1}{4}$ of the movie is “plot” per se. The rest of the film (in a manner akin to another excellent recent

film about monastic life, *Into Great Silence*) is an extended lingering on the part of the camera over the daily lives and routines of the monks—washing dishes, laboring in gardens, praying, writing, etc. In a manner quite different from the standardized (and relatively didactic) tropes by which the average Hollywood film approaches “characterization,” in both films the interplay of monastic anonymity and almost uncomfortable perspectival intimacy allows for viewers to encounter a somewhat disorienting but ultimately rich combination of ritual space and deep humanity.

There is much that could be said about the effect of such lingering, but for our Lutheran purposes, we can return to the tension around monasticism that is our inheritance and broaden the question a bit more: what are the modes by which the Spirit forms us now, in the 21st century, such that we can engage the public and its diversity (including diversity that includes genuine otherness, and indeed otherness that wants to kill us) in ways that are true to the gospel, proper to the Lutheran understanding of the primacy of the spirit’s work in creating holiness, and honoring of the tension between the historical sources that inform us and the contemporary worldviews that shape us in contested but indisputable ways? I want to be clear that when I talk about “honoring diversity,” I do not mean that in a fuzzy, PC way, or even in the butterfly-collecting mode of trumpeting diversity (“some of this, some of that”) that is so easy for our institutions to adopt. I mean instead the raw, gritty, human work of existing in a world of violence in ways that honor the Prince of Peace and the gospel’s hold upon us.

Beyond the Dichotomy

It is natural that these goals as stated would be framed both in

terms of [pneumatology](#) and in terms of public church. As the work of Cheryl Peterson and others has shown, it no longer makes any sense to discuss ecclesiology without pneumatology. The two most significant forces within global Christianity—Roman Catholicism and global Pentecostalism—both have diverse construals of the work of the Spirit in shoring up the authority of the church at the heart of their [ecclesiologies](#). In Roman Catholicism, it is precisely pneumatology that undergirds the claim that the magisterium of the Catholic church, while not infallible in most instances, is nonetheless safeguarded from damnable error by the Holy Spirit's preservation of the *ecclesia docens* ["the teaching church"]. And in global Pentecostalism (under whose rubric, from a sociological standpoint, I would even include such ostensibly Lutheran churches as Mekane Yesus in Ethiopia), it is precisely the odd combination of unpredictability and routinization that attends encounters with the Holy Spirit on the part of adherents that forms the uniquely adaptable communities by which Pentecostalism has thrived. Point being, this conference has it exactly right to presume (and assert) that there is no functional ecclesiology that does not at least imply a pneumatology, to the point that it's good to be explicit about the connections every once in a while.

But meanwhile, if in this lecture I'm yielding to the temptation to highlight a literal monastery and its engagement with its surroundings as a model for a public church, then know that I absolutely mean for that image to strike you as odd, and I'll be trading on that oddness for the rest of this talk. I don't mean for us to backtrack from Luther's fundamental insight that the monastic communities of his time had largely become caught up in spiritual and material economies that were theologically tendentious and politically exploitative. Less is it a kind of apologia for New Monasticism or even the sort of ecclesial sectarianism that one finds in such theological movements

as [Hauerwasian](#) ethics, [MacIntyrean](#) “New Benedict” options, or Radical Orthodoxy (and yes, I’m aware that adherents of all these movements would deny that they are sectarian in precisely that sense, and yes, I am here registering my skepticism about that denial. But that’s a matter for another time).

However, I do want in this talk to revisit the question of ecclesiology and pneumatology from the uniquely Lutheran perspective represented at conferences like this one, and in so doing I want to lay my cards on the table, acknowledging how very, very easy it is to fall into the trap of thinking that public engagement is some kind of either/or between the church digging into its own unique identity or the church conforming itself to the standards of relevance set by its cultural surroundings. So easy, in fact, that I have often let my own work on ecclesiology and pneumatology fall into this false dichotomy. In my recent book (which was actually finished in 2011, but it came out last year [\[ii\]](#)), I traded heavily on a distinction between what I called polis ecclesiology (i.e. the sort of Hauerwasian, MacIntyrean, community-centered model whereby the church is understood as a distinct public with its own authoritative and epistemological structures) and an ecclesiology of the church as diffusively spatialized event whereby the goal of theology and public engagement would be to discern where God’s spirit is engaged in truth-telling within the world.

While I would be happy to have you still buy my book, and while I stand by that description of the dichotomy as one into which most contemporary construals of the relationship between ecclesiology and pneumatology do fall (particularly under the conditions of a divided church in which authority structures among churches remain contested), I will confess to everyone in this august setting that I am now at the point where I am no longer satisfied with allowing that dichotomy to stand as a

normative (rather than a descriptive) account of the Spirit's formation of the church.

And the major reason for my growing discomfort (besides the fact, as my friend and mentor Paul Hinlicky has finally convinced me, that it represents a kind of ecumenical dead-end, albeit a newer and more interesting deadlock than the one currently facing the ecumenical movement) is that I think when we tackle what the Lutheran tradition has to say about life in the Spirit and the ecclesiological implications of that formation, then far more interesting possibilities emerge. Those immersed in Lutheran theology ought to be used to the idea that following Luther into the depths of the incarnational logic inaugurated by the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ presents opportunities to overcome rigorous binaries between the life of the church and the life of the world. After all, for Luther the church as God's beloved community is, in Romans 8 style, the harbinger of God's redemption of all creation, all that God has made. Meanwhile, in Luther's radicalization of the [Tome of Leo's *communicatio idiomatum*](#) (shown most directly in the shockingly carnal, or rather in-carnal, implications of the third mode of Christ's presence as outlined in the 1528 treatise *Confession Concerning the Lord's Supper*), it becomes clear to us that in this "heavenly mode" of Christ's presence with God, Christ not only transcends creation as God does (think John 1) but is also as deeply embedded in creation as is God's sustaining providence (think Augustine, for whom God is closer to us than we are to ourselves).

Loving the World More than It Loves Itself

This brings me to the main thesis of my paper, and it is twofold.

If we are to understand the role of the Spirit in forming the church as a publicly engaged body, then we should draw that picture within the parameters of the following two insights from the Lutheran tradition:

1). God's people are called to love the world precisely AS the world to a greater degree than the world loves itself.

2). Cultivating such love, paradoxically but inexorably, requires deep immersion in the particular gifts of the church—the word preached, the body and blood received, ongoing and rigorous catechesis in theology (both doctrinal and speculative), art, aesthetics, spiritual disciplines, and so on.

In other words, I'm suggesting that the example of the brothers of Tibherine, precisely in its glorious strangeness, is iconic for a precisely Lutheran construal of the Spirit's formation of a publicly engaged church. It is precisely the act of going more deeply into the gifts of the church in a manner that is formative of baptismal subjectivity (to use a phrase employed by Hinlicky and others) that allows the church to be incarnationally engaged in the world.

I hope that you're skeptical about that, because I have about half an hour left to try and convince you that it is at least possible. To do that I will draw on Luther in dialogue with some other thinkers that I find helpful for this.

The Horizon of Need and the Thickness of the Christian Life

The argument of Luther's famed 1520 treatise *On the Freedom of a Christian* has at its core a thesis that Luther knew would be counterintuitive both by the [synergistic soteriological](#) standards of his day and, more

penetratingly, by the standards of what Luther took to be the epistemological “default setting” of the Old Adam when it considers the role of human effort both in salvation and in worldly ethics. Simply put, Luther’s target is the notion that only a synergistic model of salvation—one in which human agency responds to God’s initial donation of grace by doing those good works which are within them (*facere quod in se est*) to the benefit, not only of their own standing vis-à-vis God’s judgment, but also to the neighbor—can produce ethical action. Pious doubt about one’s salvation, so the argument goes, translates to pious action manifested most naturally in works of charity on behalf of one’s neighbor. The parallels to calls for a soteriology that replaces monergistic assurance with synergistic risk contingent on human agency in service to ethical care for the earth are fairly direct in this case.

What was behind Luther’s rejection of this soteriology? At stake was not simply Luther’s theological breakthrough vis-à-vis justification of the individual by grace through faith apart from works, but also his ethics. For Luther, far from it being the case that one needs a cooperative model of salvation in order to give sufficient theological grounding and impetus for charitable works on behalf of the neighbor, the exact opposite is in fact the case: ONLY under conditions of justification by grace through faith apart from works (that is, only under conditions whereby we do not NEED to do good works for our neighbor to be justified by God) are we free to do good works that are truly FOR the neighbor and not for ourselves.

The logic should be familiar to Lutherans: if I must somehow do good works—however praiseworthy and even necessary for the neighbor’s well-being—in order to merit justification, then those works are inescapably bound up in an economy of merit and reward that is not only existentially intolerable (how can I possibly know when I have done enough, and how can I possibly

remain in any sort of pious doubt about that when the stakes are so high?) but also fully lacking in genuine *caritas*. The motive of care in such cases can never purely be the desired good of the neighbor. The horizon of need being addressed is not the neighbor's, but mine; or, at least, when push comes to shove, if the two horizons contradict each other at all, mine must needs win out over the neighbor's. The high school senior who realizes that she needs more "community service" lines on her college application and thus walks down to the soup kitchen may well do some proximate good for the homeless there, but the dominant horizon of need is hers and not the suffering neighbors ostensibly being served.

However, to the extent that the Word is received that we are justified by grace through faith entirely apart from our own works, then the soteriological and ethical framework is secured by which the horizon of the neighbor's need can take precedence over my own and thus shape the framework of the ethical response. As Luther puts it, the Christian:

"needs none of these things for his righteousness and salvation. Therefore he should be guided in all his works by this thought and contemplate this one thing alone, that he may serve and benefit others in all that he does, considering nothing except the need and the advantage of his neighbor. Accordingly the Apostle commands us to work with our hands so that we may give to the needy, although he might have said that we should work to support ourselves. He says, however, "that he may be able to give to those in need" [Eph. 4:28]. This is what makes caring for the body a Christian work, that through its health and comfort we may be able to work, to acquire, and lay by funds with which to aid those who are in need, that in this way the strong member may serve the weaker, and we may be sons of God, each caring for and working for the other, bearing one another's burdens and so fulfilling the law of Christ [Gal. 6:2]. This is

a truly Christian life. Here faith is truly active through love [Gal 5:6], that is, it finds expression in works of the freest service, cheerfully and lovingly done, with which a man willingly serves another without hope of reward; and for himself is satisfied with the fullness and wealth of his faith.[\[iii\]](#)

When we are freed of the existential burden of a soteriology that requires our good works for righteousness, we are entered into a more kenotic ethical economy whereby the horizon of the neighbor's need overtakes the need for us to preserve our own righteousness. It is liberating to do something purely for its own delight and goodness, without having to expect that one will gain something by it. What's more, when our focus is reoriented away from our own need and toward the horizon of the neighbor, that which we do inevitably becomes more helpful and more just simply by the changed motivation and "economy" of activity.

So what emerges here, to repeat, is a situation in which, perhaps to a scandalous degree, Luther is understanding the public vocation of the Christian (and, by extension, the church) as kenotically emptying out its own "Old Adam" perceptions of how to be theologically righteous (i.e. sufficiently pure, religious, "churchy," etc.) in order to address the horizon of need of the neighbor—with all the messiness, "secularity," and gritty immersion into the blood, sweat, and tears of our world that that implies. Such a kenotic engagement IS the work of the Spirit in our world, and ecclesiology should take its cue from that.

Now, I'm fully aware that, on the surface, that could be heard as fairly standard, even cliché' stuff—such as in the ill-fated 1968 World Council of Churches slogan, "the world sets the agenda for the church." But when placed within the context of Luther's writings as a whole, something far more interesting emerges. Indeed, even within *Freedom of a Christian*, it is

clear—the ONLY way that the sinful Christian can be freed to engage the neighbor within the messy horizon of the neighbor's need (think Algerian monks giving medical care to Muslim villagers as other Muslims threaten to kill them) is for the Christian to engage in substantive, ritualized, and ongoing immersion into the thickness of the church's own unique practices—again, hearing the gospel that we are freed from the demands of law and the demands of self-justification, receiving God's own self at the Eucharist, and—and here is the challenge even to gatherings such as this one where proper distinction between law and gospel is at the heart of your work—ongoing spiritual formation that allows this gospel to discipline for Christians the formation that we receive elsewhere (particularly from the forces of neoliberal capitalism).

A word about that.... *(to be continued)*

Endnotes—

[i] <http://www.firstthings.com/article/1996/08/006-last-testament>

[ii] Robert Saler, *Between Magisterium and Marketplace: A Constructive Account of Theology and the Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2014).

[iii] Luther, *On the Freedom of a Christian*, LW 31:365.

Steve Turnbull on “The New Humanity,” Part 2.

Colleagues,

Today we pass along the second half of the paper Steve Turnbull delivered at the Crossings conference in January. Again you’ll find observations that are sure to prove helpful when Holy Week gets here. I’m thanking Steve right now for focusing my attention on “governance” as a central issue, if not *the* central issue, in all four Passion accounts. I also hear him edging toward a persuasive argument that it’s the dominant theme of New Testament gospel taken as a whole. Talk about timely! Given the jaw-dropping dismay that’s attending the current contest for U.S. President, I can imagine lots of people being better primed than usual this year for the good news that Jesus reigns. With that in mind, a word of special thanks to Steve for his concluding thoughts on how to slip that news across these days.

Peace and Joy,

Jerry Burce

Nicodemus and the New Humanity (*continued*)

When Jesus claims the title and vocation of the Danielic Son of Man, we see that He is the one in whom humanity is restored. But it is another topic in the Gospels that tells us how this rehumanizing reign comes to us. For this we must hear the

announcement that the Reign of God has come among us. In the words of the Synoptists, we must hear the Gospel.

Now, I know that mixing Kingdom and Gospel can make some Lutherans nervous. We've seen it done poorly. But this need not be so. In fact, Gospel has been a Kingdom word from the very beginning. And everyone who heard the Gospel from Jesus or from his scattered apostles knew this.

The Jews among them who knew their Scriptures would have learned it from Isaiah. Here it is in Isaiah 40, "You who bring *good news* to Zion, go up on a high mountain. You who bring *good news* to Jerusalem, lift up your voice with a shout, lift it up, do not be afraid; say to the towns of Judah, "Here is your God!" See, the Sovereign Lord comes with power, and he rules with a mighty arm." Or again, Isaiah 52.7, "How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of those who bring *good news*, who proclaim peace, who bring good tidings, who proclaim salvation, who say to Zion, 'Your God reigns!'" For Isaiah, the Gospel was the good news of the restoration of the reign of Yahweh.

But the Gentiles who heard the Gospel would have known this too. For the *euangelion* could be roughly translated as something like "good news about the king." Allow me to spin a little story, something to help us imagine how this term was used in Jesus' world.

Imagine an average Joe who lived in the 1st Christian century, long before anybody thought to call it that. Let's say his name was Alexander. Alexander was a humble guy. He farmed the land that had been in his family since before anyone could remember. And it was good land too, a little hilly, he noticed more and more as he got older and his knees began to remind him of how hard he was working. But he grew figs and olives on that land, which his family ate with special pleasure. They

believed they were the best figs and olives grown anywhere nearby. And Alexander sold and bartered his crop at the market. In exchange for his produce he brought home milk to drink and cloth that his wife Livia made into clothes and blankets. They never had too much, but they only rarely had too little. They lived their life quietly and didn't want trouble.

But their lives were not without scars. When Alexander and Livia were younger, they had known mostly peace. But the minor kings of local tribes had grown bolder in recent years. The peacekeeping powers of Rome were preoccupied with their own affairs. The assassination of Julius Caesar brought chaos to the realm. His adopted son Octavian, the heir to the throne had been betrayed by his friend and ally Marc Antony, and Octavian and Antony were spending all their energies – and the resources of the Republic – trying to outmaneuver one another seize control for themselves. Luxuries like providing security for farmers on the borderlands weren't getting much attention.

It was because of this Alexander and Livia had lost their oldest son two years ago. He was 14. He'd have been 16 now. He had the body of a man but the head of boy, brimming with courage, still lacking in wisdom. When some lieutenants of a nearby tribal king were threatening to steal the produce from Alexander's fields, the boy threatened them right back. "You touch this field and you might not live to regret it." The fight that resulted from those words caused enough pain and injury to the men that they decided to pick on easier targets next time, but the boy paid for that reputation with his life. And Alexander cursed the olives that had been traded for the life of son, and he'd trade them back in a minute if he could. But, of course, he couldn't.

And in addition to his grief, now Alexander lived with a

constant low grade fear. When would the next threats come? Today, next week, next month? What about his other kids? His wife? Would he lose them *and* his livelihood next time? And, although he couldn't prove it, he was sure that people were damaging his crops at night while he slept. Life was a struggle every day now.

And then one day Alexander got news that changed all of that. He was sitting down to eat with his family when a young man came running by the house. Out of breath from having done this all day, half panting with no energy for polish or explanation, he blurts out that Octavian had finally secured the front. His rivalry with Antony had actually settled down last fall when Antony died in Egypt. And since that time, Octavian had returned to Rome and solidified his power. The armies were under his unified command, and the Senate was giving him more and more authority. Soon they would even begin to call him "Caesar Augustus."

The local chieftains and the bands of raiders would have to learn their place as security returned to the region. Alexander noted silently to himself that the recent decrease in threatening activity must have been no coincidence. There was a new sheriff in town, and the criminals had known it even before he did.

There was still some mopping up to do in that area, but this was beginning to feel like a whole new day, like the long night of waiting was over. And Alexander's life began to improve dramatically. The crops on the edges of the field were mysteriously staying much healthier. So his family ate better and took better crops to market. The scars of his loss remained, but his heart began to lighten considerably. The constant fear for the safety of his family began to recede, and soon he would wake up without a pit in his stomach for the

first time in two years.

Alexander had been the victim of strong and wicked powers for a long time. He was no match for them, and they were stealing his life right out from underneath him. But now a stronger and better power had risen. Augustus would have his own detractors, of course, but for Alexander he was a savior. And his arrival to power was a whole new day for Alexander and for his world. And the people of Alexander's world had a word for that news, for the report that was brought to them by the young man running from town to town with the report of good king Octavian. They called it *good news*. They called it the gospel. And the herald who brought it was a *euangelistes*, an evangelist.

An ancient Greek stone carving from about that time celebrates the salvation of the world accomplished by Caesar Augustus. The inscription in a town called Priene says, "The birthday of the god Augustus was the beginning of the *good news* for the world, which came through him." They revered Augustus as a god, and sometimes as the son of God because he was the adopted son of Julius Caesar. Similar "gospels" or pronouncements of "good news" are recorded by other ancient sources. At the end of a bloody war, the good news of victory and peace would be carried by sailors to distant lands. When the emperor Vespasian's reign was secured, very close to the time of Mark's writing, a "gospel" message was delivered to him while he was in Alexandria in Egypt, reporting that his opponents had finally succumbed. The historian Josephus writes, "On reaching Alexandria, Vespasian was greeted by the *good news* from Rome...The whole empire being now secured and the Roman state now saved beyond expectation."

So it should come as no surprise that Jesus' gospel was a word about Kingship. The Kingdom of God is here. Not the Kingdom of

Augustus or Vespasian, or Jupiter or Zeus, or wealth or violence, or me. And a gospel declaration of *anyone's* kingship puts its hearer in a position of no neutrality. You bow the knee and rejoice at the saving reign of the king or you are in rebellion. And what do we say when we receive and acknowledge the kingship of Jesus? We say "Jesus is Lord," *kurios Ieysous*. We confess in faith the very first Christian creed. Before there was Nicea or Chalcedon, there was this New Testament confession, "Jesus is Lord." Which no one can say, except by the power of the Holy Spirit, Paul says in 1 Corinthians 12. Or as Paul explained in Romans 10, "If you declare with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, then you shall be saved."

And when the Spirit delivers this life-giving gospel to us, by whatever herald the Spirit chooses, and we are emboldened to bow the knee and confess that Jesus is God's living Lord of heaven and earth, then we are rehumanized. We give up our dehumanizing rebellion, our complicity in the sinful project of running God's world wrong, and our collusion with Satan's attempted coup, in which we were guilty pawns. And finally we begin to fulfill our human vocation to reflect and enact the rightful reign of God over his world.

And, moreover, we will know *how* to reflect it. Because we will have seen it in the truly human one. We will reflect cruciformity. We will reflect the reign of God in sacrificial love of neighbor, like Jesus. We will know how to do it, and we will be able to do it. Not because we've found the strength or the power inside us somewhere. But because the power of the Holy Spirit found us and gave us life and conformed us to the image of the son, that he might be the firstborn of many brothers and sisters, all of whom reflect the image of our heavenly father, chips off the old divine block.

And that is what Jesus told Nicodemus already in John 3. Y'all humans have loved the dark, and you're less human because of it. Y'all've been born into one kind of life, but it has become a human life only in the most pessimistic sense of that term. If y'all are going to see the Kingdom of God, you're going to need to be given new birth and new life. You will need rehumanization. The water of a hot shower will probably not do it. You must be born of water...and the Spirit.

Appendix

I think there are some practical benefits that accrue when we recentralize the Lordship of Jesus in the Gospel and recognize the Spirit's rehumanization project in making us his disciples. Here's a few suggestions for our collective consideration:

1. I think this has the potential to reintegrate our practices of evangelism and discipleship. These have gotten separated. We have separate committees for evangelism and discipleship. We have separate churches...evangelism churches that reach the lost and grow in numbers and discipleship churches that focus on doctrine, prayer, and "spiritual maturity." And too often we think about separate phases of ministry, one where you receive the Savior and another one where you obey the Lord, one where you receive eternal life and one where you clean up this life. The trick with the Lutheran habit of "distinguishing" things is that we sometimes fall into the bad habit of separating them entirely from one another when they still belong together. Instead of all this separating, we may declare to all people the Gospel that Jesus is Lord and invite them to trust it. In fact, we will find that Jesus is Savior precisely because he is Lord. Satan has tried to run a dehumanizing, life-stealing, death-dealing Kingdom. But Jesus has come to

bring the Kingdom of God that is humanizing and life-giving, and even we rebels are invited to lay down our arms and receive new citizenship. And, in response to that Gospel, one of the “yes’s” we say to the Lord Jesus will be the first one, but the rest of our lives will be the same response to the same Spirit of Jesus, making the same cheerful reply, with Thomas. “Yes, my Lord and my God.”

2. Second, in doing so, I think we can better fulfill that great Lutheran dipstick, *was Christum treibt*, what drives Christ. Right now too much of what we call evangelism is about what drives me. “Yes, I’d love to go to heaven when I die. What do I need to do to make that happen for me?” And too much of what we call discipleship is also about me or about the law. “These are tips for a better, more fulfilling life for you or this is what you must do now if you really mean it.” Instead, we can make them both about the Spirit driving Christ, actualizing the truth, goodness, and beauty of Jesus in us and our world.
3. Third, I think this understanding of Christian discipleship to Jesus as the Spirit-driven process of rehumanization might open up new doors for evangelistic conversation. Too many of us are handcuffed in our evangelistic imagination. We only know how to share the benefits of Christ with someone who is trapped by their own guilt or tortured in their conscience or in whom we can manage to conjure up that feeling. What if you could talk to people who have an imagination, however incomplete or distorted it might be, for a better, more humane world, people in whom that original human vocation to steward the world well is sputtering and coughing and stumbling in hungry frustration. Could we engage them in conversation about the truly human one, who is full of grace for the failures and shame they do experience and full of the Spirit’s power for the enactment of the calling they

properly feel but are impotent to fulfill.

4. And, I think, this vision for Christian discipleship as a process of rehumanization can enrich our teaching on vocation. Too many Christians still struggle to answer the question “How do I connect my faith with the stuff I do every day?” If being a disciple of Jesus is being made fully human, then our vocation is to reflect the reign of God when we promote humane workplaces, humane learning, humane relationships, et cetera. We will contribute to the running of the world as if God were the one in charge. (This is entirely consistent with traditional Lutheran two kingdoms theology, but it saves us from the temptation to which we sometimes succumb to think of the Kingdom on the Left as a God-free zone or a theology-free zone.) As one of my tablemates at this conference said last night, “Sometimes in our jobs we have to fire people. There must be a difference in how we do that as Christians, right?” There’s no difference in how God expects us to do it, but we’ll do it with the knowledge and power that comes from the humanizing Spirit of God. And perhaps that too can be a witness, that other *anthrohoi*, not yet newly born, will recognize a better way of being human. Perhaps they’ll see Jesus in his followers and ask us what they asked him, “Why do you do this?” And God grant that our testimony may reach them as Gospel and lead them too to the new birth.

Steve Turnbull

6th International Crossings Conference

January 26, 2016

Steve Turnbull on “The New Humanity.” A Must-Read for Holy Week. Part 1.

Colleagues,

I sat, I listened, I learned. That was a month ago, when Exegete Steve Turnbull took the podium at January’s Crossings conference. Our overarching topic was “Law, Gospel, and Holy Spirit,” with a particular focus on the “double life” of the baptized. Steve’s assignment was to get things rolling with an exploration of John 3, where these things come to the fore in Jesus’ conversation with Nicodemus. What emerged was an angle on John’s Gospel that I, for one, hadn’t spotted before. I shouldn’t be surprised if that’s also true for many of you. So with that in mind, I count it a joy to pass Steve’s paper along. You’ll get it in two pieces, one today, another next week. Now is the time to read closely and drink deeply, especially if you’re planning either to listen or preach at a forthcoming Good Friday service where John’s Passion gets read. Steve is about to crack open the most dramatic moment in that entire account, using the Nicodemus interchange as the springboard that vaults him there. Then, in a deft segue, he’ll help you see at last why the apocalyptic vision of Daniel 7 plays a central role in the trial accounts of the synoptic passions, a useful thing to know on Palm Sunday when Luke’s account is scheduled for reading.

Next week he’ll show us how this shaped the telling of the Gospel in the first century Mediterranean world, and addresses the agony of a world in conflict today. I’ll bet I’m not the only preacher who will borrow from Steve this year.

Steve is a graduate of Luther Seminary and Duke Divinity School,

where he earned a PhD in New Testament studies. He serves chiefly these days as senior pastor at First Lutheran Church in White Bear Lake, Minnesota. He's also a son of the congregation I serve in Greater Cleveland, so I pass his work along not only with joy, but with a twinge of pride as well.

A quick note: in getting Steve's work ready to send via email, I was obliged to transliterate a few Greek words and phrases. Those of you unfamiliar with the Greek alphabet should know that it includes not five vowels, as in Latin or English, but seven: *alpha* (a, as in "ah"); *epsilon* (short e, as in "egg"); *eta* (long e, as in "they"); *iota* (short i, as in "it"); *omicron* (short o, as in "on"); *upsilon* (u, as in nothing we say in English; approximated, perhaps, by trying to collapse the double e of "feet" into the double o of "food"—a French u, as one website [both describes and sounds it out](#)); and finally *omega* (long o, as in "go" or "oh". A challenge in transliteration (swapping English letters for Greek) is to differentiate *epsilon* from *eta*, and *omicron* from *omega*. I'll do it here by using the forms above: e and o for the short vowels, "ey" and "oh" for the long ones.

Peace and Joy,

Jerry Burce

Nicodemus and the New Humanity

Steve Turnbull

6th International Crossings Conference

January 26, 2016

I think it might be helpful to begin this reflection on the role

of the Holy Spirit in giving us life with a personal anecdote. You know that saying about how there are two kinds of people in the world? Those who believe there are only two kinds of people in the world and those who don't. Well, I've noticed there are two kinds of people in the world when it comes to a morning shower. There are those who get up, get clean, get dry, get dressed, and get on with the day. And then there are those who slide into a cascade of water set to just the right temperature to transmit a gentle warmth to their still slumbering skin and who enjoy every long minute of their water tank draining, time consuming, daily morning ritual. (Can you guess which one I am?) Years ago I had a friend named Joe. He was of the latter variety. He told me one day, "Steve, some people think that their master bathroom includes a shower stall. To me, it's not so much a shower as it is a rehumanization chamber." It's been almost 20 years since I heard that description, and if the good Lord gives me 40 more, I don't think I'll forget it. This is the topic we're going to explore today: the life-giving work of the Spirit as a process of rehumanization.

Have you ever noticed how ambivalent we are about the word "human"? We are conflicted about how to use that word. Our common usage betrays our mixed feeling about what it means to be human. On the one hand, to err is human. (Some of you will think I have erred just now in my pronunciation.) Either way, don't blame me. I'm only...human. This kind of usage reflects our pessimistic view of humanness. Being human is basically what's wrong with us. Other times we can talk about someone as being truly "humane," and we mean it as a high compliment. Or we study the "humanities" because they enrich our selves our our society. Or I wonder if we mean something like this when we say that someone is a real "Mensch." Being human, from this perspective, is not what's wrong with us. It's what we aspire to. I hope to show you today that both of these views are Biblical. What is

needed is to inquire about the relationship between them. Or, more to the point of this gathering, to ask, "How does the Holy Spirit create the humanity God wants from the humanity we are."

And it is my assignment, joyfully received, to take my starting point from the story of Jesus' encounter with Nicodemus in John 3.

1 Now there was a Pharisee, a man named Nicodemus who was a member of the Jewish ruling council. 2 He came to Jesus at night and said, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the signs you are doing if God were not with him."

3 Jesus replied, "Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again."

4 "How can someone be born when they are old?" Nicodemus asked. "Surely they cannot enter a second time into their mother's womb to be born!"

5 Jesus answered, "Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit. 6 Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. 7 You should not be surprised at my saying, 'You must be born again.' 8 The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit."

9 "How can this be?" Nicodemus asked.

10 "You are Israel's teacher," said Jesus, "and do you not understand these things? 11 Very truly I tell you, we speak of what we know, and we testify to what we have seen, but still you people do not accept our testimony. 12 I have spoken to you of earthly things and you do not believe; how then will

you believe if I speak of heavenly things? 13 No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven—the Son of Man. 14 Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, 15 that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him.”

16 For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. 17 For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. 18 Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because they have not believed in the name of God’s one and only Son. 19 This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but people loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. 20 Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that their deeds will be exposed. 21 But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what they have done has been done in the sight of God.

If you have studied this story before, you may know that John presents this exchange to us as more than a private conversation. Nicodemus stands for more than himself. When Jesus speaks in direct address to Nicodemus, he moves from the second person singular pronoun to the plural. To Jesus, Nicodemus isn’t just a “you;” he’s a “y’all,” a representative figure.

At the opening of the story Nicodemus, along with all that he stands for, approaches Jesus in the darkness of night. Details like this are rarely coincidental in John. All the more so when, in the closing verses of this episode, Jesus teaches Nicodemus, and the Nicodemus in all of us, about darkness and the coming of the light. The light has come into the world, Jesus said, but people have loved the darkness rather than the light. This is

one of those scenes in John that indexes back to John's brilliant prologue, specifically to John 1:9. John wrote in his prologue that Jesus is the true light, which gives light to all people, and he has come into the world, but the world did not receive him.

This word "people" that appears in both passages is a word that we need to explore. We find "the true light which gives light to all *people*" in John 1:9, but Jesus tells us that '*people* loved the darkness rather than the light" in John 3:19. The word translated here as "people" is a word familiar to Greek readers and perhaps also to many who read the New Testament in English. The word is *anthroghpos*, from which we get words like anthropology. It is the word for human beings or for humanity. Not "man" in the gendered sense of the term, that's *aneyr*; not woman, that's *guney*; but "human."

By the end of this episode, humans don't look very good. They love the darkness rather than the light because their deeds are evil. The pessimistic side of our perspective appears justified. And we were set up for this pessimism already at the start of the scene. The very first words of this scene in Greek are *Hey de anthroghpos ek tohn Pharisaiohn*, "there was a human, from among the Pharisees." In a lesser piece of literature than John, or read out of context, this might seem insignificant. The word *anthroghpos* can be used neutrally, without much theological freight. But if we can manage not to be too distracted by the large, pesky number 3 interrupting John's text and tricking us into thinking of this as a cold start to a new chapter, we might also notice that in the last verses of what we now call John 2, Jesus would not entrust himself to the humans who had gathered at the Passover because he knew all things. John 2:24 says, "He did not need any testimony about humans for he knew what was in each human." And then *the very next words*, later designated as John 3:1, say "There was a human, from among

the Pharisees, Nicodemus by name, a ruler of the Judeans.” It’s practically the title of this story. This is a story about humanity. And so far, it’s mostly a tragedy.

But all is not lost. Although Nicodemus cannot comprehend how, Jesus suggests that those born once as *anthrohpoi*, humans, can be born again, from above, by the Spirit. Jesus describes for Nicodemus et al. a new birth, which, as births usually do, issues forth in new life—a new life given by the Spirit. And now we are back at the topic that gathers us here. How shall we understand this Spirit-born life? And in John’s context, I think we are urged to ask, “What sort of life does the Spirit give to our darkened humanity?”

To answer that question, let’s fast forward to John’s final and climactic use of that same term, *anthrohpōs*, in John 19. Jesus is on trial before Pilate. It seems to be his great defeat, the story of his failure for pretensions to Kingship. In fact, the language of Kingdom, ubiquitous in the other gospels, appears in John in only two stories, the story of Nicodemus (3:3), and the story of Jesus’ trial before Pilate. In this scene, John tells the story of Jesus’ gruesome, ironic coronation. Pilate’s goons twist together a crown of thorns and work it down onto Jesus head. They find some purple cloth and drape his would-be kingly shoulders with this would-be royal garb. And just in case anybody missed the point they were none too delicately trying to make, they mock him, “Hail, king of the Jews.” Later they would crucify him under a placard advertising this same charge, Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews.

After this royal mocking Pilate brings Jesus out to the crowd. There has been no time for Jesus to change costumes in the intervening two verses, but John refuses to let even his dullest readers miss the point. Pilate brings Jesus out to the crowd “wearing the crown of thorns and the purple robe,” and

presenting the soon-to-be crucified king he says, *Idou ho anthrohpōs*. "Behold, the human" (19:5).

To earthly eyes, this scene would be a no more hopeful picture of humanity than the one painted 16 chapters earlier. Worse, actually. For now the light has shined in the darkness, and the darkness has overcome it. But read in resurrection retrospect, as John intends his gospel to be read, a whole new picture emerges, one visible only to the eyes of faith, and offering those eyes of faith a picture they would not, could not, certainly did not imagine on their own. Here, John tells us, we may behold true humanity. Here we see the truly human one, faithful to God as Israel and Adam were meant to be but never were. Faithful up to and through the point of death. Here now stands the world's first and only truly-human being. Here now is that human being receiving his coronation as the world's true Lord and King.

Humanity and kingship. Humanity and reign. What John has joined together, we would be wise not to rend asunder.

But this is not just an idiosyncrasy of John. The synoptic evangelists do it too. And they add some color to the picture. There are two different, prominent themes in the Synoptics that teach us about the cruciform Lordship of Jesus and the gift of rehumanization. First, there are the Son of Man sayings. John said that Jesus was the true *anqrwpōs*. Both John and the synoptic gospels include Jesus self-designation as the *huios tou anthrohpou*, which we have traditionally rendered as "the son of man," an inevitably imperfect translation for a language in flux. Some have tried again to render it "the mortal one" or "the human being." What's important in translation is that we see through to the word *anthrohpōs* and that we see that Jesus has adopted this phrase from the prophet Daniel.

Daniel's Son of Man appears in a dream described in Daniel 7. In his dream Daniel sees 4 terrible beasts arise to reign and wreak havoc upon the earth. Then Daniel sees another character, a *huios tou anthrohpou* in the Septuagint that most New Testament writers seem to have read and in the language they reflected, a "son of man" in most of our English translations. This son of man is transported upon the clouds into the presence of God, the Ancient of Days, and God confers upon him authority, glory, and sovereign power. It will be his vocation to establish an everlasting Kingdom and to subdue the destructive reign of the beasts.

A few verses later, Daniel is given the interpretation of this dream. Daniel 7:17-18 says, "The four great beasts are four kings that will rise from the earth. But the holy people of the Most High will receive the kingdom and will possess it forever—yes, forever and ever.'" According to the provided interpretation, the Son of Man represents the people of the Most High. They are the ones who are destined to receive the Kingdom and possess it eternally, and to do it as humans.

This vision is an anti-creation and re-creation narrative, highlighting the role of the human one. In contrast to God's Edenic purposes, at the start of this vision it is not human beings who are given dominion over the beasts or who fill the earth and subdue it, but it is the beasts who exercise dominion over the humans and all the earth. This is bad. This may be why the first beast especially is anthropomorphized. The lion with the wings of an eagle is said to stand up on two feet and take the mind of a human. Creation is become chaos because the Kingdom of our Lord has become the kingdom of this world. This is a narrative of dehumanization. But God reestablishes the good of creation as he reestablishes the primordial vocation of his humans, to serve as his vice-regents and to reflect His image as they exercise his dominion over creation, to subdue the beasts,

that chaos will be *kosmos* again. First, Daniel sees, they must suffer, but then they will be vindicated to permanent, benevolent, delegated reign. This second stage of the narrative is a narrative of rehumanization.

This is the destiny that Jesus claims as his when he calls himself the Son of Man. He is the representative who fulfills the vocation of Israel, whose role it was to fulfill the vocation of humanity in the first place. And Jesus seems to use this title in full awareness of the narrative of Daniel's dream. Thus the Son of Man must suffer many things and be killed, and on the third day rise to reign at the right hand of God. These ideas may come to us by the pen of Mark, but we are also right back where we began in John's thought. "Behold, the man," who wears a crown on his head above his purple bedecked shoulders. The one who suffers and dies, later to be vindicated and take up his reign, is the truly human one, God's true *anthropos*, the one in whom the kingdom of this world is become the Kingdom of our Lord and of His Christ.

To be continued...

Two Covenants, not One. A Book Review

Colleagues,

If you wonder why the pace of these posts is being suddenly stepped up, it's because there's suddenly a heap of material to

pass along. Expect to see a temporary return to the old weekly schedule, at least through Lent.

Our offering this week is a three-month old review by Ed Schroeder of a recent book by Michael J. Gorman, the Raymond E. Brown Professor of Biblical Studies and Theology at [St. Mary's Seminary and University](#) in Baltimore. The book is entitled [*The Death of the Messiah and the Birth of the New Covenant*](#). Ed is less than thrilled with it, as you're about to see.

Among you are many who will tangle with [Genesis 15](#) this Sunday, the Second in Lent, whether as listeners or preachers. Of texts that define "covenant" in Christian thought, none are more essential, not least for its eerie illustration of an ancient covenant-"cutting" ritual and the breathtaking twist it applies to that. The hours between now and Sunday are few and getting fewer. I encourage you even so to take some time with Ed's review before you wade in.

Peace and Joy,
Jerry Burce

**THE DEATH OF THE MESSIAH AND THE BIRTH OF THE NEW COVENANT: A
(Not So) New Model of the Atonement**

By Michael J. Gorman

Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers (Cascade Books)

278 pages. Paper. \$33.00

Reviewed by Edward H. Schroeder

An un-funny thing happened on the way to Reformation Day this

year, October 31 in the Lutheran liturgical calendar.

In the same week that I heard the Reformation Day pericopes proclaimed in the liturgy—Jeremiah 31, Romans 3, John 8—I also read Professor Gorman's book. They didn't match. Not fun. But they were supposed to match. His book is all about the birth of the NEW covenant. So are these three texts.

Here's the heart of the mismatch:

In Gorman's 237 pages of text the cantus firmus is: the new covenant and the old one are fundamentally the same. Over and over again we hear the equation: "the NEW covenant renews the OLD one" (p.28, 39, et passim).

The three Reformation Sunday texts say the New Covenant is BRAND NEW. Not a re-run of the old one. In fact, it's clean contrary to the old one.

FIRST OFF, [Jeremiah 31:31-34](#), the Promise of the Coming Birth of the New Covenant.

Jeremiah says that the radical newness of God's new covenant is that sinners get forgiven. It's "not like the covenant that I made with them when I took them ...out of the land of Egypt (v. 32)."

The fundamental "not like" is that in the Egypt-exodus-Sinai covenant, there is no forgiveness of sins. It is not to be found in the specs of the "old covenant that they broke"—broke by non-performance of their part of the contract. Read Exodus 20 or Deut. 5 again to see what the specs were of the Sinai contract. There is no forgiveness there at all. It's "perform, or else!"

What happens to sinners in the SINAI contract is clean contrary to Jeremiah's specs about the NEW one. In the Sinai contract iniquities get "visited," not forgiven. That visit is pay-off,

getting your just deserts. And what is the just deserts payoff? The wages of sin is death. Forgiveness, no. Death sentence, yes.

A sidebar: Here's what Blessed Fred Danker, New Testament Greek superstar, and NT theologian superstar too, frequently did when we students challenged his interpretation of a Biblical text. He'd read it out loud again in Greek, put that Greek into English (which translation none of us would ever challenge, for he was "BDAG Fred"—superstar editor of the standard New Testament Greek lexicon—then close his NT and the discussion with these words "That's what the text SAYS!" I will quote him hereafter via acronym: TWTTS. Again, "That's What The Text Says!")

So here too, "That's what the Jeremiah text says."

NEXT [Romans 3:19-28](#), the Good News that came with the Birth of the New Covenant.

"But now, apart from the law (!)" is God's new deal, Christ's redemption, his cross, faith trusting that redeemer. What did the law-covenant do? "Through the law comes the knowledge of sin (v 20)." Au contraire the New Covenant. Through it comes a new sort of righteousness, sinners "justified by his grace as a gift (v. 24)." If that's not BRAND new, not only "apart" (different) from Sinai, but contra-Sinai, what is? TWTTS.

FINALLY, [John 8:31-36](#), the One who delivered at the Birth of the New Covenant.

Here is the clincher. Already in the first chapter, the prologue, John lays out the either/or. Law came through Moses, grace and truth through Jesus Christ (John 1:17). Jesus does not RENEW Moses; he REPLACES him with something new, a new deal/covenant. Moses gets antiquated, not updated, when Jesus comes along. That's a major motif throughout John's entire

Gospel. Here too in John 8: The old covenant, so says Jesus, to which his critics are clinging, doesn't/can't rescue anyone from being a "slave" to sin (v. 34). Moses leaves sinners in bondage to their affliction. But hear now the newness of the "grace and truth" covenant: "If the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed" (v. 36). TWTTS.

That's the gist of the mis-match. One voice says "new renews old." Both old and new are fundamentally good news. The other voice says "new replaces old," with the sub-text: "And aren't you glad!" That's why it's good news. Slaves move into freedom.

+ + +

A bit of back-story:

I expected Gorman and these Reformation Day texts to match ever since I saw the title in the blurb that publisher Wipf and Stock posted to me.

"Death of the Messiah" must be theology of the cross, I thought. "Birth of the New Covenant" must be what's New about the New covenant, signed, sealed and delivered in Christ's crucifixion. That newness is the forgiveness of sins that is at the core of this NEW divine-human contract which was patently NOT there in the OLD Sinai contract. Sinners forgiven in the Sinai contract? Uh-uh. Sinners get "visited." That visit is not pleasant. In that visit iniquities get "remembered." Ouch! Even worse, they get recompensed. And not only with you, but to the third and fourth generation—your kids, your kids' kids, their kids, their kids! It is NOT pleasant. No wonder the first ever response to that covenant in Exodus 20 was "Moses, get him to shut up! If he doesn't, we're dead meat!" (Exodus 20:19, RSV, as in Revised Schroeder Version).

That's what I expected, hoped for. So I ordered the book. It's gotta be good. The author is a major-leaguer among NT professors

today, holding the Raymond Brown chair (!) at a major Roman Catholic university. It sounds like he's going to be talking "Lutheran." Googling his name, I learned that he is a Methodist—yes, at a Roman Catholic school! Well, then, I surmised, possibly even a crypto-Lutheran after the fashion of Ur-methodist John Wesley. I recalled Wesley's famous line that upon reading Luther's introduction to the epistle of Romans "my heart was strangely warmed."

It was not to be. Gorman's presentation is a "second opinion" to Luther's "Aha!" about God's two different, very different, covenants. "The NEW covenant renews the OLD one."

If that axiom is true, then any theology of the cross marshaled to support it is likely to be a second opinion to Luther's *theologia crucis* too.

Who might have led Gorman down this path, I wondered. Not Wesley. Then I noticed this: the only big-name systematic theologian who gets cited in the book is Karl Barth. Three times. Hmmm. Where did Gorman do his doctorate? I googled. All his graduate work was done at Princeton Theological Seminary, where Barth reigned during the 20th century. (And maybe even now. I don't know. I'm out of nearly all the loops in these days of my antiquity.)

My surmising that possible configuration doesn't prove anything, of course, but it is interesting. Barth's major criticism of Luther is that Luther was wrong in distinguishing the Sinai covenant of God's Law from God's Gospel covenant in Christ. Barth counters Luther with his famous mantra: "That God speaks to us at all is already grace."

Luther's Aha! came when he saw that God's law and God's gospel are different speeches. Very different. Even different "grammars," as he argues in his Galatians commentary. (See more

below.) Grace appears only in the second speech, the Jesus speech, as John's gospel specifies that speech's contents. The other speech is something else: law.

Luther himself said that the difference about those two speeches came as an Aha! to him, that it was his Reformation breakthrough. Here's my summary of one of his statements to that effect: "I used to see no fundamental difference between Moses and Christ. Both were the same. Moses was just farther back in history, Christ closer. Moses was not yet the full story, Christ was the full story. Then as I was reading Romans 1 again one day, the 'difference' (*discrimen*, in Latin) jumped off the page before my eyes. There are two very different kinds of righteousness in the Moses and Christ covenants. When I saw the *discrimen*, that God's law is one thing, God's gospel something else, *Da riss Ich herdurch*—that was a breakthrough for me."

Gorman's 237 pages argue the case that they are both the same, "the new covenant renews the old one." Renews it so that it will (finally) "work," which the old one patently did not. What's new about it is "the death of the Messiah" at the center of the renewal. But Christ's cross does not bring anything BRAND new to the specs of the old contract. No substantive NEW deal. The cross is "revelation" (a term used umpteen times) of what God was up to all the time—including what God was up to in the old contract. What's different here with the radical "going to the cross" is that God is making his old covenant so perfectly clear that we just can't miss its message, the same old message, if we but open our ears and open our eyes. Ay, there's the rub.

Actually that is not the main "case" Gorman is arguing in this book. It's his constant presupposition. He doesn't actually "argue" for it. He seems to think "everybody knows" that covenant is a term used univocally throughout the Bible. All God-and-people covenants are of the same basic contract, an

agreement wherein God specs out his part and God specs out our part as well. And the specs of the Moses-contract and the Jesus-contract are the same. What's called "new covenant" in NT texts is old covenant renewed, even when Jesus himself speaks of his "new covenant."

"The covenant-keeping that the New Covenant will effect can be summarized in two phrases: love of God and love of neighbor." Wait a minute. Isn't that as old as Moses? If that's it, then nothing new came in Jesus. Then follows this sentence. "Since the love of God (i.e., human love FOR God) in the Bible means both loyalty/obedience and intimacy/communion, we may use the word 'faithfulness' to connote these senses in one word."

Question: if the NT term "faith" is to be understood as my faithfulness, as Gorman renders it throughout his book, as my fulfilling the first commandment, namely, my faithfulness/loyalty/obedience to God, then how does one avoid this conclusion: in Romans 3, the second lesson for Reformation Day, justification by faith means justification by my faithfulness. If that's not Pelagianism, which Gorman abjures explicitly, then what is it? Semi-Pelagianism? John Wesley abjured that just as Luther did—and even more, as Jesus did.

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Gorman's primary agenda in this book is another topic, signaled in the sub-title: "A (not so) New Model of the Atonement." It is folks scrapping about atonement theories whom he wants to engage. His proposal is: nobody pays much attention these days—nor in the past—to the term "covenant" as an atonement model in all the literature. Strange, for it's all over the place. Let me show you (he says). And this is the best one, an umbrella term that can include many of the other proposed ones floating around these days. It's comprehensive, as

the others are not. And it's even better than that, not simply focusing on the "mechanics" of what happened on Good Friday/Easter, but on the "results" of Good Friday/Easter, what "Christ's death effected." To wit—

"the new covenant, meaning specifically the creation of a covenant community of forgiven and reconciled disciples, inhabited and empowered by the Spirit to embody a new-covenant spirituality of cruciform loyalty to God and love for others, thereby peaceably participating in the life of God and in God's forgiving, reconciling, and covenanting mission to the world.

"I am proposing that this kind of holistic, communal, participatory, missional model of the atonement—incorporating various metaphors for its 'mechanics'—reflects the heart and soul of the New Testament and is precisely what the church needs to appropriate, articulate, and actualize today. At the same time, it is imperative that we be clear that participation in Christ (or in his death) is not a vague, purely 'spiritual' term. New-covenantal, participatory love for God and neighbor manifests itself in concrete practices . . . practices of new-covenant faithfulness, love, and peace found in the teaching and example of Jesus and Paul, as well as other New Testament witnesses. That is, we explore more fully the meaning of the Messiah's death and his people's participation in it."

Concerning atonement models, the author's own main agenda, I think he has a point. New Covenant is a NT metaphor, largely unused in the history of theology, for the atonement. But there are many such metaphors. From my reading over the years I've found at least two dozen different images/metaphors/pictures for what happened on GoodFriday/Easter, and regarding not only the mechanics, but the consequences. That means a couple dozen atonement "models," atonement "theories." The list available on request. (Note this: "theoria" is the Greek word for a picture, something seen. It's not an idea. It's a visual.)

I have no complaint about working out the parameters of “new covenant” as atonement model. What vexes me is the “nothing really new” in Gorman’s new covenant, and his drumbeat that new covenant is (just) the renewal of the old. This emaciates the deep substance of both covenants, emaciating the grim reality of a sinner’s contract with God, if Moses is the only way that God ever covenanted with humankind. Here iniquities are visited. “The soul that sinneth it shall die.”

Which thereby emaciates the new one too. There is no substantive need for something radically new, a brand new contract, replacing (yes, contradicting) the old one. As in “Young man, you’ll be glad to hear this: Your sins are forgiven.”

I had a first un-fun within 30 seconds after the book came to my hands. I looked at the back of the book, the index of names, the bibliography. Was Delbert Hillers there? No. Why Hillers? He and I were fellow seminarians ages ago. But his Covenant-expertise lies elsewhere, in graduate school at John Hopkins under W.F. Albright. He was eventually Albright’s’ successor. And he wrote THE BOOK on covenant.

Here are words from his obit published in the Baltimore Sun:

“Delbert Roy Hillers, 66, Professor Johns Hopkins University, scholar of Near East, Old Testament studies. Died September 27, 1999.

One of his most important books, published in 1969 and still used in college classrooms, was ‘Covenant: The History of a Biblical Idea.’

‘It is a key source that people still turn to,’ noted Barry Gittlin, professor of biblical and archaeological studies at Baltimore Hebrew University.

Baltimore Hebrew U, Johns Hopkins U, Gorman’s St. Mary’s

University—all three of them are in Baltimore, Maryland. Hmmm.

OK, so Gorman didn't use it. Possibly he never heard of it. After all, no one can read every book, even if it's all linked to Baltimore. Maybe, I hoped, he'd discovered on his own what Hillers unfolds there. That there are two very different covenant-types already in the OT itself—long before Jesus shows up. Already there God is reported to have offered two sorts of contracts, very different from each other. One is "Sinai and Shechem" as Hillers labels it. The other is "David, Noah, Abraham." The big difference is in the actual particulars, the "specs", as we'd say today, of these two covenant types. The very nature of the agreement in one is very different from the agreement in the other, different at the very core.

The covenant cut at Sinai and Shechem, Hillers says, is a classic Hittite suzerainty-treaty-format contract. The overlord spells out what he will do; the overlord prescribes what the underling will do. Here's the grammar of the connection between the two parties: "If you keep your part of the contract, underling, then I'll keep mine." It's "If YOU . . . then I" "Keep fulfilling the condition required, and I'll keep fulfilling my obligation. Fail to fulfill the required condition, I'll visit you. You will wish I hadn't."

The "David, Noah, Abraham" covenant is fundamentally different. One humongous difference is that there are NO conditions specified for the underling. Yahweh takes the initiative—I will do this and this— and lays down NO conditions, obligations, requirements for the underling. (Sadly, Gorman constantly uses "requirements" and obligations" as specs for the new covenant in Christ, which is "David, Noah, Abraham" fulfilled!) Even more mind-blowing, Hillers—following his teacher Danker's TWTS mantra—shows us that it is Yahweh, the suzerain—not the underling—who takes on the obligations [*Editor: thus the import*

of that ritual enactment in Gen. 15]. So what's the word for the underling, his part of the contract? "Just trust me." Not a requirement, a condition, to keep Yahweh from "visiting," but a consequence. "I'm offering (key verb: offer) you goodies. Free! For the goodies to get to you, trust me and the goodies DO get to you." The grammar is not "If you . . . then I" Rather it's "Since/Because I . . . therefore you" "SINCE I'm offering you this *sola gratia* ("by grace alone") contract, THEREFORE trust me to make it your own."

And the forgiveness of sins angle is made explicit in the specs when God offers that contract to David. See [2 Samuel 7:8-16](#) for details. The text says specifically: "yes, you David and your descendants will be commandment-breakers in terms of the Moses contract, but I will NEVER take my steadfast love away from you" (vv. 14-15). There will be NO "visiting the iniquities."

I'll conclude here using Gorman's own axiom for vetting his statements. "Atonement models [are admissible] only if they can be clearly found in New Testament texts" (226). Why didn't he use that axiom for all his covenant talk? That sentence comes right after this one: "The death of Christ should not be seen as the expression of divine anger or even wrath." Yet that very wrath is clearly found in NT texts: "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" (Mk. 15:34). TWTTS.

Over and over again we read that the substance of the covenant—new or old—is the double imperative: Love God; love your neighbor. The terms "vertical and horizontal"—to God, to neighbor—pepper every chapter. This double-love commandment is only about our part of the contract; what we are "required, obligated" to do to make the covenant work. But we hear little discussion of what God is doing in that "vertical," possibly because of the implicit Barth-premise that goes un-evaluated,

namely, that if God speaks to us at all, it's always grace. But is that clearly found in NT texts? Is God never the critic, never pays out sin's wages?

Hard to find in Gorman's detailed scanning of Scripture is that God ever speaks serious criticism, definitely nothing as serious as the lethal "visiting" in the Sinai contract. Yet TWTTS.

Clearly found in Paul's opening chapter of Romans is "the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against ungodliness and wickedness." TWTTS.

And, that there is a big shift in the "vertical dimension" coming from God's side when Christ appears on the scene, that never surfaces in these pages. We never hear, as in the Reformation Day text from Romans, that the "righteousness of God through faith is 'apart' from the law's sort of righteousness" (Rom. 3:21-22). Yet TWTTS.

But if you see no conflict in the covenant's "vertical" dimension, no clash between God's visiting sinners and forgiving them, then the vertical presents little to wrestle with. But isn't this tug-of-war within these two covenants, with their opposite fates for sinners, precisely the stage on which the death of the Messiah occurs?

The death of the Messiah is the *mirabile duellum* hyped in the ancient Easter antiphon. "It was a *strange and dreadful fight*, when Life and Death contended. The victory remained with Life. The reign of death was ended." That is the "brand new" of the new covenant. It had never happened before. It most definitely is *not* renewing something that had been present earlier.

Calvary is a "vertical, God and people, " event. So said Jesus: "Father, forgive them." "Today, you will be with me in

paradise.” “My God, my God, why?” “It is finished.”

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I’ll cease and desist in reporting my Un-fun with a final reference to what Gorman offers us in his treatment of covenant in the epistle to the Galatians. Right off the bat, it’s discouraging. Only two pages to cover the covenant theology in the entire epistle! And he never touches chapter 4 in those two pages. Why chapter 4?

Galatians 4 is Paul’s Ur-ur-theology of covenant. How so? Because the Galatian congregation—Paul’s own planting, patently Jewish folks who now call Jesus their Lord—has gone to work to merge Moses and Jesus into one covenant. TWTTS. Paul’s language gets harsh. “Foolish, bewitched Galatians.” “You are deserting THE gospel, turning to a different gospel, an OTHER Gospel . . . other than the one that we proclaimed. Anathema for such other-gospel proclaimers!”

The Galatians other-gospelers are going for the jugular. “If their Moses-and-Jesus merger is true, then Christ died in vain.” TWTTS, Gal. 2:21.

How does Paul ground such a radical claim? It’s all about covenants. Two of them. Galatians 4 spells out the details, says that God has been operating with two covenants from way back when, already in the OT. Long before Christ ever appeared there have been two very different covenants on the scene.

“Now this is an allegory: these women are two covenants.” TWTTS, says Paul (4:24ff.). Two covenants with Abraham’s two sons from two different mothers, Hagar and Sarah. One covenant is slavery, the other is freedom. Hagar is the Sinai-law covenant. There humans wind up in slavery. Sarah is a promise covenant. Its last word is freedom. One is flesh, one is Spirit. Each one labeled “covenant.” Both are already on the scene among God’s ancient

people. They are polar opposites. To merge slavery and freedom into one entity is nonsense. Even worse, says Paul, it's anathema, a damnable thing. TWTTS, cf.1:9.

Gorman's only mention of Gal. 4:24 appears as a footnote on page 62. "See Gal.3:17, 4:24 and their contexts." And that is a footnote to this sentence above: "Paul seems quite occupied with the covenant made with Abraham." Occupied indeed! The two contrasting covenants of 4:24 are the linchpin of the entire epistle.

If the Galatians haven't caught that point yet, Paul puts it into nickel words as he concludes the chapter with this: "Freedom is Christ's agenda with us, our liberation from the law covenant. So stand firm, therefore, in that freedom. Don't go back under the law's yoke of slavery." TWTTS, 4:28-31.

Gorman surely knows this "clearly found" text in Galatians. He's written several books on the epistles of Paul. Does he ignore it here simply because it contradicts his own mono-covenant theology, where the law's "Love God, love neighbor" is the end of the line? This is hard to comprehend.

One more thing: Christ's "new commandment."

Gorman presents the "new commandment" as the same old, same old. Love God; love neighbor. Newness is in the new way to make it (finally) work, to wit, the Death of the Messiah. It sounds crass to say this, but Christ dies so that we can (finally) fulfill our part of the Moses covenant. Christ does not replace, abrogate, Moses. Rather he makes it possible for Moses to have the last word.

Our sortie into Galatians shows Paul saying No.

For the NEW commandment is really new. Really different. Already

signaled in the Greek adjective that accompanies the commandment. “Kainee” (of new quality) is the adjective used, not “nea” (new, as in “most recent”). Brand New. TWTS.

These items are novel in what new-commandment texts say:

1. Grammatically the new commandment is always an imperative in the second person plural whenever it shows up. Never “you” singular, as in the decalogue. Always “All y’all.” It is mutual back and forth. It is not unidirectional as Sinai’s grammar is: “You (singular) love God, love neighbor.” Instead, it’s “Y’all, play ping-pong agape.”

2. It’s always “in-house,” addressed to the brothers and sisters, not to the outsiders.

3. “As Christ loved us” is the new criterion for love, not “as yourself.”

4. This “ping-pong agape” commandment is always derivative. First, Christ loved us (manifold goodies offered)—an indicative sentence. Therefore, you recipients, practice ping-pong agape. This is an imperative sentence of consequence, formulated in the grammar of a grace-imperative: “Since Christ . . . , therefore you” This is brand new grammar when compared to Moses’ grammar with its “if you . . . , then God”

+ + +

I ask myself: Why do I get so riled up about this? Is it octogenarian grumpiness? Dementia onset? A continuing life-long curmudgeon complex? Probably all the above.

But it’s also this: One-covenant theology is so regnant among Christians these days. Even though I’m out of most of the theologians’ loops where I was once at home, I hear/read it everywhere. Messengers are re-making the message, contra the

axiom, one of Bob Bertram's favorites: "The message makes the messenger."

The framework of today's widespread "re-made" message, the message I hear so often, comes off like this:

1. Moses and Jesus sing the same song. It's all about God's grace. That God speaks to us at all is already good news. Critic? Shmitic! When Jesus arrives to sing that song, he tops the charts. His singing makes it possible for us sinners to sing it too.

2. The song's final verse is "Be faithful to God's one and only Mosaic covenant: love God, love people. That will turn the messed-up world into the Kingdom of God."

3. How to make that actually happen? Latch onto Jesus. He's the way for you too to fulfill the law of loving God, loving neighbor. Replicate his life, work, words in your life, work, words—even all the way to your cross—and it will come to pass. Yes, it entails obligation, requirement, but you can do it.

Isn't that what Paul tells the Galatians is an "other" gospel, a gospel that is finally law-covenant-renewed? There is nothing new at all with its drumbeat-repeated verb "require." Whereas the Gospel's own cardinal verb is "offer." Yes, it's already on the scene among God's ancient chosen people, e.g., in Jeremiah 31 (and David, Noah, Abraham) with God's promise to offer forgiveness of sins, a brand new deal for sinners. What then came "new" with Jesus was that this new covenant gets fulfilled. It's signed, sealed, delivered in "the death of the Messiah." Or in his own words, ala Luke, "the cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood." Or in John's report of Jesus' own words from the cross: "It is finished." The new covenant is a done deal.

Jesus' verb-of-choice was "offer." He offers sinners a new contract with God. God's resurrecting him at Easter is God's stamp of approval on the offer. Isn't That What The Text Says—all the way from Matthew to Revelation? I think so.

Edward H. Schroeder

The Octave of Reformation Day 2015.

A Gift for Lent from Jill Peláez Baumgaertner, Poet and Theologian

Colleagues,

I spent some time yesterday smudging foreheads with ashy crosses. Were someone to ask why I did that, I'd want suddenly to hand them the poem you're about to read, withholding further comment until they'd spent some time digesting it. Then, I think, we'd talk for a while about *imago dei*, the image of God (see Gen. 1:27, Heb. 1:3), and how the cross of Christ brings this to light, and how that little Ash Wednesday gesture makes this very point in a terse and simultaneous telling of God's law on the one hand, God's gospel on the other.

Compact, succinct, yet somehow full and rich and comprehensive: there's a magic of sorts in the way Jill Baumgaertner tells law and gospel. She read this poem to us at the Crossings conference two weeks ago (see ThTheol 870). We sat there rapt. As she explained, the Zola of the title is her granddaughter; though in

the mystery of poetics, she's also the young man on whose coffin I'll be tracing another cross this Saturday. He too is "...the dream of God, / himself, his image." (God grant the words to underscore this when it's time to do the preaching.)

I wrote last week about Jill's vocation as professor and dean at Wheaton College. I add this week that she's a long-time member of Grace Lutheran Church, River Forest, Illinois, where her pastors have been glad to call regularly on her gifts both as teacher and preacher. I'm not at all surprised that they'd do this. Nor will you be when you're done reading.

Peace and Joy,
Jerry Burce

Zola, *Imago Dei*, on her First Birthday

The dust swirls, did it unfurl
this girl, God's deep yearning
for her, once clay,
now *imago dei*?

Reach back to Adam,
in Eden's first mud and mire,
shaped whole but not entire,
given blood and bone
but made alone
with all his intricacies of marrow
and joint, a narrow
cage around his heart,
dreaming Eve and then upending
Eden with sin's smart?

The image, we all know, was smudged.
Was it play? Adam would say,
"Let's put it this way:
I am Eve's father
and her brother and her mate,
the result of God's hunger to create,
a mélange of rib and earth and breath
at first no death, just promises kept.
God's own. His face was mine.
Mine, his. Mine, hers. Hers, his.
But we ate. And then we wept."

So into this stunned world, Zola
burst, at first indignant
at the dazzling light
after the dark tones
of her mother's heartbeat.
Tiny knob of nose, grey eyes,
a fierce grip, this bright sprite,
her face her father's.
They form each other's image.
He says, "Let's put it this way.
I am her father. For life.
This was not play. I,
a donor egg, and IVF,
then Heidi's belly stretched
beyond belief. But there she was,
the relief of birth, of breath.
Her face was mine. Mine, hers."

This spring, amidst Lent's
dirty snow, the cross's
promise still ahead,
the buds in trees still
tightly wrapped, the year's

potential yet untapped,
the branches filigreed
against the sky, baroque
their arms and fingers
pronged and split,
like roots inverted,
Zola's birthday. She is one.

In her purity of gaze,
delight of play,
her belly laughs
at small dogs' pranks,
she is God's hunger
and his plan, her mother's
longing, her father's yen.
Yet she will know
sin's twilight and its night,
and through it all
though sometimes dim
the gospel light.
We pray she reaches
for this unbroken gleam,
this holy bauble,
as she does her father's arms,
her mother's face,
and safe from harm
there find at least the trace
of Eden, wiping the film
from the dark glass,
to see Christ's face,
enigma, ambiguity,
until he is revealed,
the cross, his grace—
the mirror, resilvered

by his glory,
he alone
making God known.

And Zola, once abstracted
in a Petri dish,
becomes herself,
born flawed,
but still the dream of God,
himself, his image.

Jill Peláez Baumgaertner

A note: this poem will appear in a book forthcoming from InterVarsity Press, [The Image of God in an Image Driven Age: Explorations in Theological Anthropology](#).

Last Week's Sixth Crossings Conference. A Quick Review

Colleagues,

It's been a week and a day since I got home from the Great Feast at Belleville, Illinois, otherwise known as the latest Crossings conference. We'd held six of these so far. This was among the best. The main event that kicked off on Tuesday morning featured six riveting presentations, one after the other, by speakers who, with one exception, were new to Crossings. Among the six were affiliations with four Lutheran church bodies. I trust this

was noticed. It pray it reminded all present of the Holy Spirit's blithe and wondrous disregard for the lines we draw among ourselves when this same Spirit doles out gifts of clarity and insight about the Gospel, and a passion for getting it told.

Here's a quick sketch of who the speakers were and the topics they discussed. I offer it as mere appetizer for a Lesser Feast of future posts that will feature outtakes from their presentations, with links to the Crossings website where the complete texts will soon be available, or so I hope.

1. Stephan Turnbull led things off on Tuesday morning with a stunning analysis of Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus in John 3. Among much else I came away with a new appreciation for the pivotal role that the word *anthropos*—"human being"—plays in John's Christology, or, more pointedly, in the Good News anchored in Christ Crucified that John passes along. May it be that we'll have this ready for you to peruse well before Holy Week barrels in at the end of next month. Preachers and listeners alike will be glad to grasp what's at stake when Pilate intones, "Look! The *anthropos*!" as he trots Jesus in gruesome king's costume before the crowd ([John 19:5](#)). You'll also see why all four evangelists assign a pivotal role to [Daniel 7:13-14](#) in making sense of who Jesus is, and what he dies to accomplish. Steve serves chiefly as senior pastor of First Lutheran Church ([LCMC](#)) in the St. Paul suburb of White Bear Lake, Minnesota. Thanks to his New Testament Ph.D. he also does some seminary-level teaching on the side, mostly in the Twin Cities.
2. On Steve's heels came [Amy Schifrin](#), president of the recently established [North American Lutheran Seminary](#), where she also serves as Associate Professor of Liturgy and Homiletics. Calling on her deep experience as a pastor in several settings, some troubled, she explored the fear

and anger that can surface in the life (and death) of congregations—this as prelude to a rich discussion of the means and ways by which the Holy Spirit keeps calling the dead to life again. Among my frantic notes is a scribble about “Jesus putting his life into ours” through the regular practices of the Christian community. Think here of baptism, confession, the constant hearing of the Word, a steady connection with Christ through the Eucharist. Two treats in particular stand out in my recollection. One was the way she framed her presentation with the three stanzas of the classic hymn, “O Holy Spirit, Enter In” (*Lutheran Book of Worship*, #459), reminding us of the power and importance of song in shaping the faith and confessing the Gospel. The other was her masterful analysis of the Eucharistic Prayer of Hippolytus (Option Four in the LBW altar book). Look for that when her paper gets posted, and be prodded, as I was, not only to attend with great care to the riches of our liturgical tradition, but also to use them in the ongoing catechesis of the faithful.

3. Toppo Takamura spoke next. A pastor of the [Japan Evangelical Lutheran Church](#), he is presently completing doctoral studies at the Lutheran Theological Seminary at Philadelphia where, if I recall correctly, he’s working with Timothy Wengert on Lutheran confessional theology. His topic at the conference was the challenge of legalism in the Japanese church. Not that the same challenge isn’t present wherever Christians gather—Crossings could go out of business tomorrow were this not so; but the form it takes in Japan bears a stamp unique to that country, with its deep cultural and religious traditions as expressed in Shinto. At the risk of being rude, I point you to the home page of the JELC’s English website (see the link above) for a hint of what Pr. Takamura was talking about. Absent are key words like “gospel” and “Christ.” He will want our

prayers, I think, when he's done with his studies and heads home to tackle what he faces there. For the tools he'll use, wait for his paper.

4. Arndt Braaten was the last of Tuesday's presenters The son of missionaries to Madagascar, he presently lives and works in the vicinity of Duluth, Minnesota, where he practices family medicine, and also uses the gifts of an M.Div. degree and ordination to serve a small LCMC congregation. (If you missed the explanatory link to "LCMC," check above, under Turnbull.) Dr. Braaten told us about his effort of the past few years to persuade administrators of the Catholic hospital he's affiliated with to let him incorporate attention to matters of faith as an explicit component of his work there as a physician and healer. The response so far has been a polite yawn, to which he refuses to yield. His reasons for that comprised the substance of his paper, which featured an interplay between theological and medical thinking that I, for one, have not encountered elsewhere. Almost all of you, I'm guessing, will have friends or acquaintances who go to church on Sunday and practice medicine on Monday, and wonder about the overlap, if any, between the two. You'll want to share this paper with them when it reaches you.
5. [Jill Baumgaertner](#) got things started on Wednesday morning with an exploration of ways in which law and gospel can emerge as topics for conversation in the college classroom. She would know, having served at Wheaton College for over 35 years as an English professor and these days as Dean of Humanities and Theological Studies. Her academic specialty is the work of John Donne. Her publications include two volumes of her own poetry and a study of Flannery O'Connor. She shared one of her poems with us, composed for the first birthday of a granddaughter. The gifts displayed there were stunning.

Not least was her ability as a theologian of the cross to make the essential “crossing” between Scripture and a toddler’s life today, with Christ and his benefits front and center. If I can secure permission to pass that poem along, I will. For now I confine observations to her important reminder of something that ought to be obvious, however often it gets missed, namely that the issues God addresses through law and gospel are in constant play when human beings start thinking and writing about their lives in the world. Those blessed with the Word of Christ to share need to keep their eyes wide open for this.

6. As if we weren’t already stuffed to overflowing, there came at last [Rob Saler](#), whose final presentation was not so much dessert as another main course. Rob is a product of Valparaiso University and the Lutheran School of Theology in Chicago, where he earned a PhD in systematic theology. He serves these days as Executive Director of the Lilly Endowment’s clergy renewal programs, operating from a base at Christian Theological Seminary in Indianapolis. Rob’s assigned topic was “The Publically Engaged Church.” He addressed it as the scholar he is, pushing all in the room to keep pace with him. My scribbles include a comment early on that could well serve as a theme statement: “God’s people are called to love the world even better than the world loves itself.” As it happens, the world doesn’t love itself so well, a point Rob illustrated in a discussion of how the marketplace works, its success depending on the use of endless advertisement to “poke holes in our lives,” forbidding us to be satisfied with who we are and what we have. Against that stands the promise of the God who hides in suffering, and sets us free through justifying faith in Christ to let our neighbors’ need draw us away from own, and thereby to love them as no one else will, or can. My overriding take-

away: it is beyond question that the world needs what the Gospel gives. Thanks much to Rob for giving us another angle, both fresh and refreshing, on why and how this is so. Again, look for more—so very much more—when the paper gets posted.

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So much for a summary that doesn't do justice—not even close—to all that we were fed.

Wholly unmentioned thus far is the host of other gifts we attendees enjoyed. There was an evening and a day of pre-conference work, featuring presentations mostly by Crossings regulars—Marcus Felde on Law and Gospel; Gary Teske (an irregular) on traditional spiritual conceptions in the highlands of Papua New Guinea; Ed Schroeder on his days in Erlangen as a student of Werner Elert; Steven Kuhl on Pentecostalism; Martin Lohrmann on issues of the Holy Spirit in the Reformation era; and the undersigned with a keynoting setup for the conference proper. Much of this will be also be available for your perusal soon, or so I trust. Steve Albertin and Chris Repp ran the standard Monday tutorial on the Crossings method of analyzing Scriptural texts. Our text study editor, Lori Cornell, made the long trip from Washington State to preach at the Tuesday night Eucharist. Cathy Lessmann did her usual magnificent job of making sure all things ran smoothly.

Some have gone home from previous conferences feeling as if the event had served chiefly as a Seminex reunion. There was less of that this year, if any at all. That's an important step forward, I think. If Crossings isn't serving the church in place today, we might as well pack it in. Hence the joy in hearing from so many main-event speakers whose roots were not in Seminex or

related LCMS controversies of yore. There was joy too in seeing other fresh faces, not least the three seminarians that Martin Lohrmann brought along from Wartburg, where he teaches these day. David Paap became a new friend. He's a retired pastor in the St. Louis area. He recently composed a hymn in response to the tumult that erupted in Ferguson, Missouri. We sang it, were moved, and were bound together in holy prayer for a world beset with fear. Amid all this, we thanked God for lots of old friends who have been there before, who came again—two of them, Martin Yee and Richard Chiu, all the way from Singapore—and whose company in this venture is a gift from the Lord.

So too with all of you who read this today.

Peace and Joy,

Jerry Burce

Crossings: for Bruce Modahl on his retirement

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Crossings

for Bruce Modahl on his retirement

Both irises, each fingerprint, our own.
Each strand of DNA, ourself, whose bones
descend from Adam's dust, whose breath is God's.
And we are called by name,
each hair imprinted and the tiny bones
inside our ears.

We have a place ordained and gospel-light
to show our way, crossing our life
with his, each cell so clearly stamped "his own,"
and through him we are lords of all,
yet servants, too, Christ-kissed.

[Crossings \(PDF\)](#)