

#752 Six questions for any text or sermon

Colleagues,

The item we send you today popped into our inboxes some weeks ago not as a submission to Thursday Theology, but rather as a contribution to a lively discussion that some members of the Crossings Board were busy with. It came from Ed Schroeder. The discussion had somehow gotten Ed to think back to long ago conversations between him and Bob Bertram that led to the so-called Six-Step Crossings Method for analyzing a biblical text. So he jotted down some thoughts and sent them along. It seemed to us that many others would find them useful too, so here they are in a mildly edited version, square brackets indicating a couple of places where the editing was more than mild. We found particular value in Ed's focus on the questions to ask when tackling a text or responding to a sermon. That's why we took the liberty of highlighting them in this present version.

By the way, this comes to you on the 52nd week after Ed stepped down as chief writer and sole editor of Thursday Theology. It's been a year, in other words. What better way than this of bringing that year to a close.

Peace and Joy,

Jerry Burce, for the editorial team

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1. The Crossings six-step sequence is not a proposal for a sermon outline, although it could also be used for that.
 2. It is a proposal for studying a Biblical text in a way that will get the text's own message about a Problem, and

about a Solution to that problem. Bob's old mantra: "The Bible is Problem-solving literature."

3. Best said, it is a proposal for what questions to ask of a Biblical text—and eventually of a sermon grounded in that text.
4. So first off the question: **Who in the text has a/the problem?** If there are several problem-people in the text, and different problems with the different people, then do this: pick one and stick with him/her/them as you ask the subsequent questions. Don't "invent" problem-people who aren't the text's own problem person(s).
5. What's the problem at first sight of the problem-person(s)? Don't invent a problem that the text does not support. Stick to the text. Most often such a problem is some action/behavior problem, somebody doing the wrong thing. Bob's preferred caption for this was PRELIMINARY DIAGNOSIS.
6. Which raises the next question: **is it worse than that?** Therefore, Bob's question and caption "What's the ADVANCED DIAGNOSIS?" And here an explicit Lutheran angle comes to the fore. You expect—you "know"—that grounding bad behavior and action—bad thoughts, words, deeds—will be bad faith. Or no faith at all. Or faith in some false/phony god. So you look into the text to find where "verbs of the heart" show up—what people fear, or love, or trust, where folks are hanging their hearts on a false god. So that's what you look for as you check the text again. Sometimes it's "right there" in the given text. Sometimes you have, as Bob liked to say, "to run to the neighbor to get the needed cup of flour for your recipe." Here it means going to the surrounding context of the text where such signals of "bad" fear, love, trust show up. In Bob's first-ever published (I think) Crossings text study, of [Luke's Christmas story](#), he found five of the key terms

for the six-steps right in language of Luke 2, but to get to the sixth term, the #3 diagnosis, he ran all the way to Luke 15. So for step two you seek the text's own terms, images, word-pictures for bad faith, love, hope, the wrong (even deadly) things to hang your heart on.

7. Which then comes to push the next diagnostic question. **And is it even worse than that?** Even worse than fearing/loving/trusting a false god? Isn't that already the FINAL DIAGNOSIS (Bob's term)? Not if you're working with Lutheran lenses. You then ask: What is TRUE God doing here—not to remedy the malady—but already operational in the mess that's being exposed in the diagnosis. **“What's the God-problem?”**—to use the phrase coined by Irmgard Koch (the only person who took every one of our twenty-one semester-long courses during the eras when we did such things!) What's the deepest problem that the problem-person(s) in the text are facing because TRUE GOD is operating in the picture—operating ON THEM—even as they hang their hearts on whatever false god(s) they are clinging to? This was a sticky-wicket as the Augsburg Confessing Lutherans arm wrestled with the Roman theologians way back then. Equally as sticky on the diagnostic side as “faith ALONE, trusting Christ's promise” was on the prognostic/Good News side. And no surprise—they go together. Siamese twins.

I remember a twentieth-century repeat of that 1530 hassle. It happened in 1958 at Valparaiso University. I was the new kid on the block, had been there only one year. Bertram was our theology-department chair. Somehow he finessed it and we began a dialogue series with the theology faculty at Notre Dame. This was long before Vatican II. We had home and home meetings. The first gathering was on baptism at their place. The second was on sin at our place. For that one both department chairs

presented the papers, Bob Pelton, chair of the ND theology dept. and Bob Bertram of VU. Pelton presents first. Bertram follows. First response comes from Pelton to Bertram: "It can't really be THAT BAD, can it, Bob?" Bob had articulated the Augsburg Confession/Apology Article 2 on Sin. He had presented D-3 (diagnosis level three, the God-problem). Bertram's response to Pelton: "Well, Bob, it must have been pretty bad if it took the death and resurrection of the second person of the Trinity to fix it, right?"

8. Which is, of course, "necessitating Christ," the crucified/risen Messiah. It is the FINAL DIAGNOSIS that necessitates Christ, i.e. that makes Christ necessary if that diagnosis is to be remedied. So the mantra "necessitate Christ" is actually a piece of the diagnosis-side of the operation. As in, "this medical diagnosis of your strep-throat NECESSITATES such-and-so medication."
9. The Augsburg term for the Christ-component on the Prognosis side is "USING Christ," not wasting Christ, not bypassing Christ as you begin to articulate the GOOD NEWS. So having "necessitated Christ" in the FINAL DIAGNOSIS, there comes the task of concretely putting the crucified/risen one into the mix at this very point. Not just MENTIONING the crucified/risen Christ (as though that were what's supposed to be necessary), but asking the next question directly and first of all of the text: **How does this text bring Christ over into the FINAL DIAGNOSIS scene to heal the patient now diagnosed so "finally"?**
10. This becomes the first prognosis step in the sequence. [And it should (in keeping with the medical metaphor) actually be called NEW PROGNOSIS. Since from the FINAL DIAGNOSIS just articulated, clinically speaking, there is already an implicit, sometimes explicit prognosis. Namely,

what's going to happen to this patient? Answer: dead, dead, dead.] In any given Biblical text the "Using Christ" may not be very explicit, so you may have to "run to the neighbor..."—even to the overall theology of the biblical book where the text comes from. Many a text that pops up for Sunday reading, even from the NT, doesn't have "explicit Gospel" in it. That prompted Melanchthon's mantra at Augsburg: in such cases, "add the promise." For the promise is the overall Good News message of the scriptures. And remember; nowhere did Jesus (or Luther) ever say: "Just preach the text." The assignment was/is: "Proclaim the Good News." Even if your particular text is skimpy on good news. Even if you don't even have a text right at the moment.

11. When you have the "use Christ" first-prognosis item specced out, you then ask: **Is the News even BETTER than that?** That's Step 5 in our pattern, Bertram's ADVANCED PROGNOSIS. And step five is always a "good news" alternative to the bad fear, love or trust of step 2 as we ran the diagnosis X-ray. So step 5 is asking for the text's own articulation of what happens WHEN the patient-with-the-problem, having heard the step-four good news, starts trusting it. Step 5 asks for the text's own terms/images/word pictures for FAITH, [where faith entails a] change in "person" that comes from actually "hearing the healing" (another Bertram phrase).
12. [Then comes step 6, which asks] **how such a "healed person" lives and acts as she returns to that world** where we started way back when we began the diagnosis.

Summa: The Crossings project is a proposal for how to interrogate a biblical text so that the full bad news and the full good news get brought to light in that text.

And it is also a proposal for interrogating a sermon based on

that text with the same questions addressed to the sermon as it proposes to replicate with its audience what happened diagnostically/prognostically in the biblical text you started with.

Nobody says “you gotta” study a text this way, or preach a sermon with these specs in mind. [But we commend it as the best way we know of getting to the heart of what God is doing to us through texts as we encounter them.]

Edward H. Schroeder
St. Louis, Missouri

Post Scripts:

1. Three times in my working years I was asked to teach students how to preach, once in Addis Ababa, twice stateside. What’s above is what I told ’em. It’s also the sieve through which I passed the homilies they presented.
2. Historical roots for the younger folks: Concordia Seminary’s Richard R. Caemmerer taught three generations of students a three-step method for analyzing a text and identifying key preaching ideas: malady, goal, and then means, as in means-by-which to get from the malady to the goal. “Explicit gospel” was Caemmerer’s synonym for the third item. His student Bertram expanded on this, with malady specced out into three phases—bad actions, bad faith, baaaad God-connection.

Caemmerer’s “explicit gospel,” the means-by-which = Bertram’s Step #4.

And Caemmerer’s “two possible goals” for any sermon (a faith goal or a love goal) was modified by Bob as the double goal of EVERY sermon. So Bertram’s Steps 5 and 6 were Caemmerer’s two possible different goals for any one sermon re-packaged as the

two goals of every sermon: faith (#5) and love (#6). –EHS

The Divorce of Sex and Marriage: Sain Sex, a new book by Robert Bertram, is now available for a \$10 donation to Crossings. Please include \$3 for shipping and handling, and send your request to clessmannATcharterDOTnet.

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