

#754 An Observation on Bertram's First Question

Colleagues,

In this week's Thursday Theology (arriving a few days late, thanks to the pleasant diversions of the Thanksgiving holiday), my fellow editor Jerry Burce follows up on [ThTheol #752](#), in which Ed Schroeder reflected on the Crossings Six-Step Method. Starting with Mark's story of the widow's mite, Jerry focuses on the first of Bob Bertram's six questions for analyzing a biblical text: "Who in the text has a/the problem?" By considering the relationship between the reader and the text, Jerry develops his own interesting variant on Bob's original question.

Peace and Joy,
Carol Braun, for the editorial team

An Observation on Bertram's First Question for Any Text or Sermon

1. For the background to the following, see the posting of two weeks ago, [ThTheol #752](#).
2. While you're at it, refresh yourself on [Mark's version of the widow's mite](#). Then read a [sermon on this text](#) that Bob Bertram preached to a seminary audience in the 1980's. (My thanks to Chris Repp for bringing this to my attention—and yours?—in a recent [Sabbatheology](#) post.)
3. Tongue in cheek: if you read or re-read all of the above you'll have already gotten as much sustenance as a follower of Thursday Theology can reasonably expect from a

single week's serving. What comes next may seem superfluous, like the dessert the waiter tries to push on you even though you're already stuffed with soup, salad, and entrée and would just as soon quit. Still, here goes.

4. I've been writing text studies for Crossings for about ten years, using the six-step analytical schema that Ed Schroeder rehearsed for us in the aforementioned ThTheol post. I know the drill inside out. I was refreshed even so by Ed's fresh description of it, in which he focused on the questions Bob Bertram asked as he devised the method and then put it to work. Shortly after ingesting this I heard from someone else who found it helpful too.
5. In thinking since about Bob's six questions, I catch myself echoing Orwell's pigs in *Animal Farm*. "All questions are equal, but some are more equal than others." To my mind the More Equal question is Bob's first. That's because it functions without fuss or ado to put the reader of Scripture on the right track, the one that allows Scripture to do what God gave it to do, i.e. to herd her into the arms of God's Christ and the benefits, both to her and to others, that emerge from that embrace. Not that the subsequent questions aren't essential in getting her there. But unless the first question is asked, she won't think to explore the others. She might even make the common error of supposing that ancient texts are irrelevant to a contemporary sophisticate like herself.
6. The beauty of Bob's first question in such a case is that it invites a modicum of curiosity. Most of us like puzzles, even ancient ones. We're also nosy. So how better to ensnare some engagement with the text, or with a preacher's droning about the text, than by asking as Bob does, "Who has the problem here?"
7. Will it surprise this reader to discover that *she* has a problem there? For her sake, one hopes so.

8. That said, Bob's question, certainly in Ed's sharper rendering of it, seems expressly designed to postpone that discovery. Recall how the question was cast: not merely "who has the problem," but "who *in the text* has a/the problem." Why the modifying phrase? I hazard the guess that Bob-and-Ed inserted it with a second type of sophisticate in mind. Where the first glories in her disdain, the second exults in his piety. Where the first fancies herself beyond the reach of a hoary text, the second imagines himself in wholehearted submission to it; and in his self-regard he'll even disregard its ancient character, construing it instead as God's direct address to him, and a wholly welcome address at that.
9. For such a reader the sharpened question serves to pull his nose out of his own navel, forcing him to pay attention instead to the operation of God's Word in the lives and hearts of other human beings, specifically the ancient ones who inhabit the text he's reading. Will this happen? Again one hopes so, for his sake. Perhaps the outcome will be a truer encounter of the Word of God at work in him. Perhaps he'll even get beyond his bemusement at the sight of Moses, Isaiah, the Bethlehem shepherds, and Simon the fisherman writhing on their bellies when God talks directly to them for the first time. And if, for the first time, he starts to fear God himself, blessed be he. Who knows? He might for once find Christ of real use.
10. Back to the sharpened question, "Who *in the text* has a/the problem?" Were Bob with us still I would want by way of follow-up to ask him a counter-question. I'd even pose it using his own diction. "Who-all is in the text?" That's what I would ask.
11. Who-all indeed? When, for example, one reads that text in Mark about the widow, who-all is standing there, and of them who has a problem? I posed that question recently to

a thoughtful Bible class, and in response got as complete a list as I've heard. "The widow," said one. Obvious, yes. "Strutting scribes." That's obvious too. "The disciples have a problem." Not quite so obvious, perhaps, but even so, someone had spotted how they ooh and ah over big donations and are blind to the widow's total giving. Then came the kicker: "Jesus has a problem." Call that the home-run answer, all bases cleared. Or are they?

12. After all, is it not the case that this and every other text is somehow occupied not only by the original cast but by the uncountable multitude of every person who has ever read and reacted to it, or ever will? To be sure, you don't see them. They stand or sit in the unlit shadows, as audiences do. But sometimes you can hear them. Now they clap, now they hiss, now and then they groan or cry. Rarely do they laugh. Someday I'll want to ask the Playwright if that bemused him. We do know that the Playwright keeps notes on audience reaction. He says so.
13. But if the Playwright is keeping notes, doesn't that oblige us to do the same?
14. For now I want simply to observe that tracking the reactions of hearers and readers is of the essence in getting to the heart of Bob's first question. One might do that by posing a sub-question, subsequent to the initial asking. I'd put it this way: "Now that you're 'in the text,' what problems are you having?"
15. "Tracking," by the way, is a piece of Crossings jargon, as anyone who has sat through a session on Crossings methodology will testify. This too is one of Bob's terms, or so I believe. Meticulous and orderly thinker that he was, he worked hard to segment it as Stage Two in an engagement with a biblical text, the thing one got to when one had worked through a Grounding, where Grounding means picking one of the obvious players in the text and asking

the six analytical questions of that person. Then and only then does one turn to members of the audience and draw them into the conversation.

16. But that, it seems to me, is somewhat too neat for real life, or more precisely, for the way the Word of God, cast in those ancient texts, goes to work on real human beings. I'd argue instead that the text read, heard, or otherwise observed, produces an instant reaction in whoever witnesses it and adds that reaction immediately to the data the interpreter is dealing with.
17. Or to put that another way, it's not possible to read the text without finding myself somehow "in the text," the Lord of the text looking on as he does in that story of the widow.
18. Isn't that, moreover, what the text's Lord is riveted on in his own real-time observation of a real-time engagement with this or any text? Isn't my reaction, or yours for that matter, the problem he's chiefly interested in as the hearing unfolds? Isn't that the immediate issue he wants the death of Christ to cure and resolve?
19. For what it's worth, no one I know of has ever understood this better than Bob himself. Look again at that sermon I pointed you to in par. 2 above. Notice in particular how the people he's preaching to are enmeshed as deeply in the text—and as problematically—as people can be. Then notice how it's for them in particular that Christ gave his life.
20. Christ gave that life, of course, also for the proud readers, whatever form their pride may take, she fancying herself immune to the Word, he pretending to obey the Word, no questions asked. Do I assume as a user of Scripture that any text, properly read or preached, will somehow serve that saving objective through its specific operation on them, Step One involving a first poke that punctures pride, or at least annoys it? If so, my own

first asking of any text will supplement Bob's with a pointed variant: "What's *my* problem in this text? What's yours?"

Jerome Burce
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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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