

#756 Book review—BROKEN HALLELUJAHS by Christian Scharen

This week we bring you a book review by Ed Schroeder. Ed wrote it for submission to *Missiology*, the journal of the American Society of Missiology, and he passed it along for us to preprint in Thursday Theology. Enjoy!

Also, at the end of Ed's piece, please find an important reminder about the upcoming [Crossings Seminar](#), "Good News We Don't Want to Hear: Preaching to a Skeptical World," which is now only a month away, and which is free for all seminary students. Please [register](#), bring a friend, and spread the word!

Peace and Joy,
Carol Braun, for the editorial team

Broken Hallelujahs. Why Popular Music Matters to Those Seeking God.

By Christian Scharen

Grand Rapids, Michigan: Brazos Press

2011. 184 pp., paper, \$17.99

Popular culture as mission field—that's Scharen's agenda. "This book has two things at its heart. First, writing a solid biblical theology for engaging popular culture. Second, getting a sound method for engaging the voices of popular culture where God is already at work reconciling the lost, healing the broken and speaking the truth of life" (22f.).

So the dipsticks for evaluating the book are: How solid is that biblical theology? What is God actually doing “already at work” in pop culture? Is the biblical “reconciling, healing, truth” of God-in-Christ “already at work” in the voices of pop culture? And if not, or if not very patently, then just what is the work that God, “already at work,” is doing there?

Scharen begins with depth probes into a wide range of popular music, and into the lives of the folks creating that music—folk, rock, jazz, blues, hip-hop, postrock and postclassical. All of that (first four chapters) under the large umbrella of “God in Popular Culture.” That cultural tracking then gets “crossed” with an evangelical Anglican theology of culture stemming from C. S. Lewis. Second umbrella for the final three chapters: “Popular Culture in God.”

My surprise, as Scharen’s fellow Lutheran seminary prof, was that Luther himself gets only a one-liner mention (136) in the entire book. But then I looked at the first chapter again and was reminded how this book got started. Scharen was invited to speak at a “very” evangelical college on “Faith and ‘Secular’ [not Christian] Pop Music.” For these folks, C. S. Lewis was a known entity, and a “good guy,” while Luther was doubtless unknown territory. “This book is...a continuation and deepening of the conversation” that started that night at that college (17). Lewis is this book’s canon theologian.

Scharen “aims to reorient Christian imagination” (99), to replace the “constricted” imagination (often found among believers at the conservative end of the Christian spectrum—James Dobson, his example) that is so “certain” about the boundary line between sacred and secular, sinner and saint. “The question at the heart of this book is how to find—or better yet, how we are found by—a God of promise and mercy who offers all of us an imagination deep and substantial enough for the struggles

the world faces in our day” (17). He finds this God of promise and mercy “already present even in the darkest spaces of abandonment...the cries of suffering” coming to us in today’s pop culture.

“God’s already present” in pop culture is almost a mantra for Scharen. It pops up everywhere. Another example: “to articulate a theology of culture that calls us to trust God’s presence in the midst of a broken creation, listening to its cries, and ultimately dying for the sake of those cries, working reconciliation that offers a promised new day of shalom for all” (24).

Here’s where my (and Scharen’s too) Lutheran heritage asks: Yes, God is indeed present throughout creation, pop culture included. It’s always Creator-connected, whether the creatures in the culture (especially the human ones) admit that or not. But not all that God-connection is grace-and-mercy connectivity. The Creator is also the Critic, also uses the artifacts of creation to criticize, even criticize to death, the images of God who are assigned by the Creator to be creation’s caretakers. Pop culture is included in that sentence.

C. S. Lewis’s evangelical Anglicanism goes a different path here from evangelical Lutheranism. His theology of the cross, a term dear to Scharen throughout the book, moves toward being a theology of suffering and God’s presence therein. Not so, Luther’s version. Coping with God the critic is at the center of Luther’s cross-theology, but hard to find in Lewis’s. And equally faint in the theology of the cross at the core of *Broken Hallelujahs*.

That theme, “God already present” as critic, surely needs attention, when you’re discussing popular culture as mission field. It calls for even further reorientation of imagination.

Dare I say: more biblically reoriented?

Yes, God is already at work in every culture before the explicit Gospel gets there. But the “grace of our Lord Jesus Christ” is not identical with the “grace” whereby God continues creating and nourishing the creation and its cultures. And when God’s presence becomes God’s critical presence, that’s not grace of any sort—and Christ’s grace for sure not.

Isn’t this a more “solid biblical theology”? It’s not just to be found in Luther’s private imagination. It’s in the imagination of the writers of the NT. There the “image” is called the “wrath of God,” a term used both by St. Paul (many places) and even St. John (3:36) for God the Critic, for what’s also going on with “God already present” in the world.

Doesn’t this primal biblical theology caveat the author when he calls us to “trust God’s presence in the midst of a broken creation”? Yes, God is present in creation’s brokenness—giving us our comeuppance. Trust that? The mission-Gospel calls the broken ones to trust an alternate message, one that trumps the message arising from that broken creation. Namely, trust God’s promise and presence in Christ, and do so in the very face of that other message with its signals of God the Critic—also “present” in folk, rock, jazz, blues, hip-hop, postrock and postclassical.

That part of his own heritage would help Scharen expose this “other,” even “alien” (as Luther called it) work of God also “present” as he tracks “God in Popular Culture.” Subsequently, God the Critic in pop culture then calls for an even larger “Good News,” a more fulsome theology of the cross, in order to get “Popular Culture in(to) God’s” Christic work of Un-broken Hallelujahs.

Maybe that’s Scharen’s next book.

Edward Schroeder (St. Louis, MO) was a “convert” to missiology late in his 50 years as prof of systematic theology in Lutheran schools. Now in his antiquity, pop culture still largely eludes him.

Reminder from Cathy Lessmann: The [Crossings Seminar](#), **Good News We Don't Want to Hear: Preaching to a Skeptical World**, is a month away! [Register now](#) and invite someone to come with you.

This is a seminar as opposed to a conference. With the main goal of utilizing law-gospel theology, this seminar intends to teach, practice, and utilize the Crossings six-step method for reading the Word and the world. It will be led by Sabbatheology (text-study) writers plus Ed Schroeder (the original Sabbatheology writer). Additional presentations include “Using the Crossings Law-Gospel approach in Sermon Writing,” “How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Matrix,” “It Can't be THAT Bad! Why God's Deadly Diagnosis of our Human Condition Matters,” “Crossing the Gospel of Luke: Crucial Clues for Preachers and Hearers,” plus a roundtable on “How to Tell the Difference between a Bad Sermon and a Good One.” We will also watch the movie Carnage and use it to illustrate crossing Word and world.

Request: Please help us get the word out. Most specifically, it would be helpful if you could send out an announcement via your local synod listserv. Below is a reminder that Steve Kuhl, our president, sent to lay ministers in his synod. You could tweak what he has below and use it.

Thanks, and Peace to You,
Cathy Lessmann

Dear Partners in the Gospel,

Below is an announcement about the upcoming Crossings Seminar on

January 20-22 (Sunday through Tuesday). It is designed to help clergy and laity practice the art of interpreting Scripture and reflecting on daily life through the lens of Luther's Law-Gospel outlook by way of a unique six-part method of reflection developed by Crossings.

The Seminar begins with dinner on Sunday at 6 p.m. and ends at 1 p.m. on Tuesday. **Scholarships available for Seminary Students (including interns) and first call pastors and for anyone on the basis of need. "Ask and you shall receive!"**

Learn more by clicking on the URL below. If you have questions you may also contact me by email sckuhlATstritchDOTedu or by phone 414-410-4631 (office).

Advent blessings,
Steve Kuhl
President, The Crossings Community

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Preaching to a Skeptical World**

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