

#761 Reclaiming the Sain in Sain Sex

This week's offering is by Dr. Michael Hoy, pastor of First Evangelical Lutheran Church in Decatur, Illinois, and former editor of the Crossings newsletter. Mike is the steward of Bob Bertram's professional papers, and he edited Bertram's latest, posthumous and unfinished book, *The Divorce of Sex and Marriage: Sain Sex* [Chesterfield, MO: Crossings Community, 2012], which was reviewed in this space by Dr. Kathryn Kleinhans last month ([ThTheol 757](#)). Here Mike responds to Kit's review. Peace and Joy,

Carol Braun, for the editorial team

Reclaiming the Sain in Sain Sex

I have been asked by dear friend and Crossings ThTh co-editor Jerry Burce to respond to the review of Robert W. Bertram's, *The Divorce of Sex and Marriage: Sain Sex* by another dear friend, Kit Kleinhans ([ThTheol 757](#)).

I know that Bertram really felt this work was important—too important to let it go unpublished. As editor of all three of his unpublished books, I had to make some choices. While I knew this book was the one Bob most wanted finished because he could see a church tearing itself apart on the issue of human sexuality, I still felt compelled to save it for last precisely because it was the least finished. I wish I knew how to fill in all the blank pages that went unwritten before he died. I am grateful that Kleinhans understood this—that my work as this book's editor was a labor of love for a man whom we both admire.

Several years ago, I was invited to write an article on Bob Bertram's theology, published under the title, "The Soteriological Mission of Theology: Robert W. Bertram" [*dialog* 31:1 (1992): 48-53]. What I didn't know was that Bob was also invited to write a response to my article. He was, as Bob always seemed to be, ingratiatingly kind in his response, even as he was now being "publicly identified" with me in having to respond. It was an incredible compliment, even a flattering recommendation. I sense that he learned this kind of response from his Lord, who took in strays (in this case, me; but also Kit, and Bob, and a whole host of others), and then had the courage of presenting them to the Father as his best friends.

Still, Bob did have one minor, and I would say gentle, correction of my essay. And his correction rested on the key word that mattered the most—soteriology (the word about salvation): "As Hoy hints, one of the strategies of this counter-insurgency is to use traditional churchy terminology, even such otherworldly sleepers as 'salvation,' but to use them now in such a sneaky way as to smuggle back into those outworn terms their original earthy puns... Hoy blabs the Secret by talking about 'salvation *for* the world.' He might as well have spilled all the beans and admitted, as he does in the arcane circle of his parishioners, that it is a 'salvation *of* the world.'" It may seem a subtle distinction, but it is loaded with the nature of how it is that Jesus the Christ infiltrates the world with the goal of making it whole, redeemed, precious. I'm still seeking to get that message out to my "arcane circle of parishioners."

I hope Kleinhans will excuse this "anecdote," something which she finds too much a part of Bertram's book. Bob was always a good storyteller, though we ought not forget the Story he really was trying to tell. My purpose in telling the above anecdote is to set the tone for what I believe is the real intent of

Bertram's *Sain Sex*. He is bringing Jesus the Christ to bear on saving the world. But what is he seeing as that which is being saved here? Answer: SexMarriage, which is now so deeply divorced. As far as I know, that is not historically different even a decade after Bertram's final crossing.

Bertram perceived this, and moreover perceived that the church in its conversations on sexuality was missing this. Instead, the church was—and apparently still is—too preoccupied with homosexuality, although Bertram makes it clear that homosexuality is “not the issue... Marriage is” (33). How do we understand what marriage truly is, especially when we seem to have so many blinders on (or, as Bertram calls them, borrowing from Jesus' own teaching moment, our specks and logs)?

I will be the first to concur that Bertram's style of writing is unique to him, and often misleading to many. But it is essential to note that the largest section of his book, had he finished it, would have been Part Two, where he hoped to make a case for a theology of marriage. We have only the skeleton outline for that part.

His only finished section was the first part, the hermeneutics of repentance. And it is largely on this section that Kleinhans offers her three critical points in review. If I may summarize, they are as follows:

1. Bertram's assessment of same-sex unions is dated and conditioned by opinion polls and state laws which have since changed.
2. Bertram's use of an entire group of people (viz., gays and lesbians) as the foil for the “edification of others” is unethical.
3. Bertram relies on unsupported assumptions, particularly the assumption that “homosexualism” (homosexual sexual

practice) is sin and that there is only one valid means of intercourse (penis-in-vagina).

Notice how all of these criticisms focus precisely on what Bertram called the “speck” of homosexuality in the speck-to-log analysis. Kleinhans attempts to say here that Bertram really had no right to use homosexuality even as the speck. Why? Because (in keeping with her three points) 1) a negative evaluation of same-sex behavior per se is no longer publicly valid; 2) the very nature of the analysis is unethical; and 3) it rests on a false assumption.

Now let us ask the more immediate question. Why did Bertram use this—homosexual sexual practice—as the speck? Why, as Kleinhans suggests, pick on this? Let’s take a fuller look at her three points.

1) Yes, things have changed since Bertram’s late 1990s/early 2000s assessment of them, though I find it questionable whether her own data suggests a majority turn-around. Nonetheless, it is indeed possible that trends are pointing toward a public assessment that differs from what Bertram contends. Okay. As Bertram suggests, there was also a time when divorce was the critical “speck.” That, too, has changed. Still, notice here (and again later) that when she seeks to entertain how Bertram might react (“I knew Bob Bertram well enough to know...”), she suspects a criticism. Here she suspects that Bertram would contend any arguments for same-sex marriage focus on an understanding of marriage as “public commitment.” Notice, though, that Kleinhans not only affirms that this may be the case (and shame on the heterosexual community for doing the same) but she also offers us no alternative understanding of same-sex marriage that is theologically valid. What, then, is the theologically valid argument for same-sex marriage? That would, more likely, be Bertram’s question to her.

2) If Bertram has a liberationist appreciation of gays and lesbians, he sure has a funny way of showing it. Criticisms of gays and lesbians, particularly in their sexual practice, seem unfair and unjust. Heterosexual couples are judged by their idolatry, while same-sex couples are judged by their practice. "Homosexualism" itself is a loaded, prejudicial term. These points I take to be at the heart of Kleinhans's criticism here. It is a stinging judgment, and one which Bertram, I am sure, would himself take seriously. Yes, how unfair, indeed! Yet the prejudicial, unjust criticisms are not really unique to Bertram. He is reflecting a culture that has itself missed the mark in its assessment of sin. Yet the greater sin—this, I believe, lies at the heart of Bertram's hermeneutics of repentance, as Fred Niedner marvelously lifted up in his Foreword—is the damned sense of *any of us* assuming we are right while others are wrong. Bertram wants in particular to focus that light on the damning (and damned) judges—the heterosexual "marriageolaters" (certainly, though not exclusively, those often right-wing homophobes who argue for marriage as between a man and a woman, but really, like all of us, have no clue what marriage is). But to characterize a group of people as foils for the edification of others? I don't think so. It was never my experience of Bob that he would seek to do that; in fact, he did just the opposite, seeking to defend those most persecuted. What "edification" does Kleinhans see when the real emphasis is the *condemnation* of unfair, unjust judges, including (Bertram would gulp) "myself"? Is it time for a sain-ing?

3) Is "homosexualism" a sin? Are there not ways of intercourse other than the "penis-in-vagina" version that are equally valid and that also create unions? According to Kleinhans, Bertram makes assumptions about the answers to these questions.

Does he? They are assumptions, to be sure. But are they Bertram's? Or are they the assumptions of the very culture of

damned “marriageolaters” (The Husband, in Bertram’s story, being a case in point) that he is critiquing? Maybe, also, including himself as one.

Let’s note, first of all, that Kleinhans herself does not offer her own theological assessment on the first point, that “homosexuality” is sin, aside from her understandable distaste for the word.

But as to whether or not such practice creates unions, I think Bertram would say it does. For Bertram, *all* sexual practice is unitive. That does not, however, make all sexual practice *marriage*. The unitive power of sexual practice invites, but also indicts, a whole host of sexual activity, including the practice of “penis-in-vagina.” But even that last practice alone does not constitute marriage. When Kleinhans judged Bertram for denying marriage to a woman married to an impotent war veteran, had she missed Bertram’s story of a loving marriage from *Elegy for Iris*?

If you’re looking for any prognosis from Kleinhans to respond to her diagnosis, you will not find it. In essence, it is only a half-Crossings matrix, and really not as theological as I would have hoped. Her best indicators toward a prognosis come in her first three paragraphs. Here she grasps how it is that all of us come to the table of our Lord Jesus the Christ, where his body is again ours, and ours (such as it is) his. He, too, thankfully, never shied away from any of us.

I think Bertram grasped that, also. Why else the suggestion of *hilaritas* in “Whose All?!” , with which this book concludes. And I think that Kit may also come to see that she “knew Bertram well enough” to know that this gospel (not criticisms—those are only penultimate) is really what he was all about, also in *Sain Sex*.