

79 is a Prime Number. Some Ramblings on Passing that Prime.

Colleagues,

Rambling

1. 79 is a prime number. Last week I passed that prime. Was it my last prime? The next prime number is 83. Bob Bertram, my theological mentor for 60 years, died just days before reaching 83. Many of my seminary classmates, significant others all of them—Walt Rast, Andy Weyermann, Walt Bouman—never got close to my prime number. Is this one my last prime? Am I past my prime? When do you know that you've passed your prime? Elert once said (don't remember the context, possibly in his ethics book): "Not easy to tell. It's like driving in the mountains. You don't notice the moment when you've actually reached the crest. Afterwards—as you look into the rearview mirror you notice—sure enough it was higher back there."
2. Speaking of Elert, another major mentor, guess what I got for my birthday last Friday? Besides the "Harry and David" box of fancy pears and other tokens of love and affection, Bruce Martin, second generation Crossings "kid," blessed me with fancy-dancy state-of-the art preservation of an Elert original manuscript that's been in my files since 1953. It's an essay Elert wrote for THE SEMINARIAN, the student theological journal of Concordia Seminary (St. Louis), which Dick Baepler and I then translated and published in the Reformation Day issue that year, our last year at the seminary. Way back at the (almost) beginning

of these Thursday posts, ThTh #28, it went out to the listserve. Here's where to find it:<https://crossings.org/thursday/1998/thur1210.shtml> What makes this preservation super-special is that Elert's cover letter to me is dated on my natal day Nov. 6, 1953. I hope to display this treasure at the January Crossings conference. But no sticky fingers, please. I transacted with Bruce to get that job done. So it wasn't a complete surprise. But it did arrive on Nov. 6. And, as if that weren't enough, Bruce put even more frosting on the cake—really a whole second cake—and tucked into the package an authentic—also super-preserved and elegantly-displayed—original page from a Biblia Latina of 1531 (when Luther was a mere 48). And guess what text is on that ancient page! It's 2 Corinthians chapters 5,6,7, with those Sweet Swap verses right at the top! What a guy! [Bruce is a regular in the text studies Crossings offers, most recently just two weeks ago. For more info on Bruce's niche-ministry in preserving ancient Bibles, check out this URL <http://www.historicbibles.com> Yes, this is a plug for a patron.]

3. When did I pass my prime, look into the mirror and notice that the crest was higher behind me? That thought was pressed upon me not long ago in our own Bethel Lutheran congregation here in St. Louis. We've got half a dozen retired pastors at Bethel. That is a mixed blessing, I'm sure, to our own pastors Bill Yancey and Rebecca Boardman, as well as to the stream of interns that come our way year after year. At our ELCA Central States synod gathering this summer a number of us—retirees and current incumbents—were publicly recognized for pastoral “survival,” aka anniversary of ordination. One only 5 years, one all the way up to 60. I was in the middle at 40. For the Bethel Adult Forum we've been asked to take a Sunday and “tell us

about your ministry.” It’s a mountaintop every Sunday. Possibly even mine—for me for sure—a couple of weeks ago.

4. Where was that mountaintop? Where the crest? I couldn’t tell. I’ve been blessed with so many. It’s a sierra chain of peaks. And if I hadn’t looked back, I might never have known.

A. The childhood (already a peak? Well maybe) growing up in a Germanic Schroeder clan of farmers. Grandpa and Grandma immigrants with minimal formal education, but smart, smart, smart and committed Lutherans. Parochial grade school, super-good for the reading, writing, and arithmetic, for memorizing the catechism, Bible verses and hymns. Also super-good(?) in inculcating Missouri Synod biblicist faith.

B. After rural high school (where I was a track star! Well, sortuv. I was #1 in the mile Run for Rock Island county rural highschoools in 1947) came Valparaiso University. Here the biblicism was undermined by super teachers, J. Pelikan, R. Luecke, R. Bertram. But not completely. My senior paper in religion in the “president’s class” offered the full proof that God would never ever consent to women pastors. OK, so I left Valpo schizophrenic.

C. Concordia Seminary where Doc Caemmerer taught me the Gospel. And lots of other stuff—as much of it from the great guys (yes, all guys) in the huge student body of 700 or so, as from some profs who had discovered non-biblicist Lutheran theology.

D. One year in Germany before seminary graduation where Leonhard Goppelt taught us where to find the gospel in the NT and Werner Elert taught us how to use Lutheran lenses to read that Gospel aright. And then after seminary graduation (1955) back to Germany,

just married to Marie who had gotten a Fulbright overseas scholarship upon her graduation from Washington U. in St. Louis. Eventual doctorate at Hamburg University with Helmuth Thielicke as my Doktorvater.

5. Interlude. Those are points of prominence that shaped my life and still do. Each human life has such a series, maybe even a sierra. But the mountaintops on my sierra chain come after all that. There are five that I see when I look into the mirror.

- Teaching at Valpo 1957-71,
- The Wars of Missouri and Seminex 1971-83,
- Crossings 1983-93,
- Global Mission Volunteer service 1994-2004,
- In, with, under the most recent peak, internet theologizing with 596 editions of ThTh and a passel of Sabbatheology postings before that going back 14 years.

Herewith a smidgin about each of those.

6. Teaching at Valparaiso University enwebbed me with Bob Bertram again, he now the newly designated head of the theology department, and Bob Schultz (recently bedoctored from Erlangen) on the other side of the bookcases in the faculty office we shared. The three of us became the committee to fashion and test-before-inflicting the new curriculum that trademarked Valpo for nigh onto a decade. It was the primordial soup in the evolution of Crossings. We called it New Testament Readings. We used the pericopes from the Sunday liturgy and built out from there in two directions. One into the centuries of Christian theology, all of it finally variations on the interpretation of those Biblical texts. The other into the life and culture of our students with a focus on their life and work after

they got their diplomas. Sure there was hassle on many fronts. Even so, it was Camelot! It was Brigadoon! But it didn't last. I once bemoaned that demise to Prof. Goppelt back in Germany. His counsel: "Herr Schroeder, no mountaintop events ever last. If you've had 6 or 7 years, you've been blessed beyond measure. Rejoice for what you've been given."

7. Seminex. The complete who-would-have-guessed-it of Seminex coming out of the Wars of Missouri amazes me still. I've bubbled enough (more than enough) in these ThTh posts about that. Sure there was hassle on many fronts. Even so, it was Camelot! It was Brigadoon! But it didn't last. I remembered Goppelt's counsel.
8. Then Crossings. It is still lasting. Are there exceptions to Goppelt's axiom? Big changes, of course, from the first decade when Bob and I did all the workshops, all the semester-long courses. Now in the hands of the takeover generation, much of it transpires via Internet which didn't exist when it got started. But it's great fun and if I didn't have these ThTh options for venting, I'd probably not have made it to this 79-prime. And the just plain joy of the folks gathering at the Crossings conferences with #3 coming up in two months.
9. Global Mission Volunteer stuff. Marie and I have been all over the world. Seventy countries by last count. Folks sometimes ask us: Where in the world would you wish to settle down (?) if you ever moved from the USA? Our constant answer: "Can't say. What makes all those mission venues so dear is not the exotic surroundings, but the people, the faith-siblings we now have in all those places. Best way we've found so far to stay connected with them is to stay home and check our email." Our email address book now has a thousand listings. Melded into these journeys into all continents except Antarctica is my late-

in-life waking up to missiology. Learning the linkage between promissio, confessio, missio—God’s promise, our confessing it, our promoting it—and the fun (yes, fun—also with hassles) that that has been. If you want to witness a smidgin of that “live,” come to the January conference and engage Roman Catholic frontline missiologist Bill Burrows in shop-talk about mission and promise. He’s in favor of it. There are many other highpoints in that conference program. E.g., Fred Danker (of last week’s ThTh post) being interviewed by yours truly on Mission Theology in the Gospel of Luke. It promises to be a collection of peaks on its own. Stuff you’ll never get anywhere else. And you could be there.

10. Finally back to Thursday Theology, the present peak, and its nearly 12-year run—where you readers are the grounds for rejoicing. Is the crest on this one already behind me too? Can’t tell. Can’t find the proper mirror yet to check. So I don’t. The Crossings website logs say “not yet.” Number of daily hits at the website (over 2K now) are increasing. What the weekly posts are you know. What you may not know is that ThTh entails not only the weekly concocting, but the conversation generated by the steady feedback flow that happens from one Thursday to the next. In individual cases that back-and-forth persists for weeks and even longer. To call it theological mentoring in cyberspace may be a bit exaggerated, but that’s what it seems to be. Such “intrusions” into my intended daily schedule remind me of Henri Nouwen’s bon mot: “I used to complain to God about all the interruptions that kept me from my daily work. Then one day it came to me: these interruptions ARE my daily work.” But at prime 79 I’m not as speedy as I was that day in 1947 when I did the mile run, not only on the track, but also in the head.

Summa. It’s been a marvelous ride on that sierra for this padre.

When should I bring ThTh to closure? At number 600—just four weeks away? Next year on Nov. 6—at full four score—if I’m still alive, still sentient? When the Crossings board relieves me of my duties? When God does? I think about that, but not very much—yet.

“Prime” is also a verb in English. So at prime 79 this seems plausible: so long as God keeps priming the pump, I’ll stay at the pump handle.

Peace and Joy!
Ed Schroeder