

#790 1) A Christ-confessing Mystery. 2) A Brief Christ-confessing “Aha!”

Colleagues,

Ed Schroeder is back this week with a couple of gifts. The main one is a book review that leaves him uncharacteristically scratching his head over a confessional conundrum: how, where Christ is concerned, can one profoundly “get it” and just as profoundly “not get it” at one and the same time? You’ll notice that he leaves the question hanging. If you’d care to mull it over with him in an open forum of sorts, send us a note with your reflections.

The second gift emerged from Ed’s perusal, earlier this week, of Ron Starenko’s first-rate Sabbaththeology analysis of this coming Sunday’s Gospel, the Parable of the Rich Fool. You’ll want to [check that out](#) yourself if you haven’t seen it yet. Then (and only then) take a look at the cherry Ed adds to Ron’s well-iced cake. You’ll find it appended to the book review. If you’re preaching this Sunday, you won’t want to miss it.

On another note, colleague Carol Braun is briefly in town (Cleveland, Ohio) for the funeral of her grandmother, Edna Braun. Edna fell asleep in the Lord as she slept this past Sunday night. At the funeral home this afternoon I learned that she started almost every day of her 95 old-creation years with Luther’s morning prayer, followed, per Luther’s counsel, with the Ten Commandments, the Creed, and the Our Father. Then, for good measure, she’d recite the books of the Bible. “I know my own,” says the Shepherd, “and my own know me” (John 10:14). Indeed they do. Thanks be to God for the witness—quiet, life-

long, imperceptibly effective—of one who knew him very well.

Peace and Joy,

Jerry Burce, for the editorial team

Bruno Corduan, **Truth, Grace, and Security.**

Eugene, Oregon: Resource Publications [Wipf & Stock] 2012, 209 pages. Paper.

This is a tough book for a Lutheran to review. Luther (and Bonhoeffer too) get quoted now and then in support of the author's theology. Yet he also tells us,

"Neither baptism nor communion are sacraments in the sense that they cause anything to happen. They are symbols of the believer's union with God." (149)

"Once we have personally accepted [Jesus'] redemptive act through repentance and conversion, we are children of the living God.... As a response for the acceptance of God's act of mercy and our new birth, we allowed ourselves to be baptized." (182)

"In baptism you declare that the bond that you have formed with God by your repentance is sealed, and you confess in the presence of God and the world:

1. I am now a part of Jesus...
2. I have been crucified with Jesus...
3. I have been buried with Christ...
4. I have been resurrected with Jesus....

None of these items is accomplished by the waters of baptism. But the baptism shows that our faith manifests itself in obedience, and we demonstrate this new obedience by baptism." (146f.)

So he is a Baptist, not a Lutheran. OK, there are a variety of gifts.

And as he tells us his life story in the book's first half—a nail-biter narrative of a Bible-believing, Jesus-surrendered, chutzpah-endowed teenager in Hitler's Germany—we learn that Baptist pastor is where he finally winds up late in life. But only after a wild ride, not only during the Nazi era as an adolescent, but also as a grown-up in Germany after the war in the Foreign Office. Also a bit of a ride across the faith-spectrum. For it was Lutheran-land where he was born and infant-baptized in Alt Schlawe (1926) in Pomerania, Germany—not far from where my own grandfather was also born and baptized (1871).

But he's also a Methodist in the original meaning of that denominational term, namely, privy to the “method” whereby sinners become Christians: “We have to follow the proper order of events. First comes commitment to Jesus. Then comes the redemption from guilt and sin. After that comes the call to discipleship and to service in Jesus' sheltering presence” (131).

There's more. He opts for Erasmus over Luther on the topic of the human will.

- “God has created us...in order to have partners who have free wills that they will submit to his will.” (181)
- “What would human beings have been without free will? We would have been like robots fully dependent on God's will. People can today, just as in the beginning, exercise their own free will.” (112) [Note: from him sin has not impaired human free will.]
- So it comes as no surprise when Corduan gives humans some initiative in coming to faith: “When we make ourselves fully available to Jesus, we are grafted into him, and we

are part of the body of Jesus!" (130)

The Bible is the solid rock for his faith.

- "The Bible, and only the Bible, gives us the clear instructions from the living God for making our pilgrimage through this life." (73)
- "The Bible teaches unequivocally..."
- "It is important to know what God says in the Bible and then to follow his instructions." He speaks of "the fundamentals of my faith, which I have found in the Bible" (74).
- "The source of my faith and my assurance is simply the Bible.... The Bible is not a history book. Nonetheless the events reported within its pages are unquestionably true. And that includes the first eleven chapters of the Bible." (110)
- "Either we believe what the Bible says, or we do not" (116); "Road map to Jesus. That is the Bible" (129).
- "The Bible tells us everything we need to know." (199)
- "My faith rests on the firm foundation of the Bible." (209, the book's last page)

So why should I review a book that only puts more stress on my aged (four-score-years-plus) heart? Why doesn't he say "Gospel" in all those places where he says "Bible"? Why doesn't he see that it's not the water, but the promise "in and with the water" that makes Baptism a God-offer to me and not a me-offer to God? Why go with Erasmus and not Luther when you claim Luther on your side? And even more when you get a bigger/better Gospel with Luther's take on the human-will debate?

And I haven't yet mentioned some even bigger stressors that come to this old Augsburg confessor along with Corduan's conservative evangelicalism, but I will.

- “Theologians have promulgated an erroneous concept. It is called original sin.” (201)
- The dozens and dozens of times the words ‘must’ and ‘required’ and ‘obedience’ and ‘full assurance’ and ‘decision’ appear in the book.
- Underlying these is this: “In our conversion...we are born again; we become new creatures... Only now, as a consequence of our renewal, is the law released to perform its real function. It provides us with an understanding of the boundaries or what is pleasing to God as we pursue a life within God’s will” (81). The very first use of God’s law is to give Christians the rules for living. That’s almost a verbatim quote from John Calvin, spoken by him contra Luther five hundred years ago.

So why review this book at all?

1. Well, we both have family roots in Pomerania!
2. I was asked to do it.
3. Corduan is a Christ-confessor and a Nazi-era survivor. Both at the same time. That invites attention. I was an exchange student in Germany shortly after WWII. Many of my fellow students had also been both at the same time. I spent hours listening to them. Bruno was another such witness.

Which brings us to the first seventy pages of his book. His life story.

Alt Schlawe was Lutheran-land when Bruno was born there in 1926. His parents were members of the territorial Lutheran church, but with an add-on. They were also members of one of the Pietist “little-groups” that dotted the Lutheran landscape. “Our family lived in the Fellowship House of the ‘Christian faith Community.’ This evangelical fellowship, which considered itself a part of the state church, belonged to the Association of

Pentecostal Assemblies... Aside from Sunday school, I also eagerly attended the children's services of the Lutheran State Church" (10).

When Bruno was eight years old, his mother died. "I had only one thought, namely, 'Where is my mommy now?' That question gripped me and did not let me go for many years. ... Since my father was a lay preacher, he had a small library. I would often secretly search through it...to find the answer to the question. Through a special grace I was given a clear answer: my mommy was now with Jesus. That solution brought me peace...I simultaneously recognized the necessity of belonging to Jesus myself. I did so in the best way I knew how: by resolving to let Jesus be my Lord and turning my life over to him—quietly and without any outward ceremony." (9)

He tried to tell his father and (by then) stepmother, but "neither...took me seriously. Instead they instructed me to pursue a life style based on my works rather than on a direct relationship with my Lord. They admonished me to conform my life from then on out to God's laws and various rules of piety. I was disappointed, but not frustrated. My life with Jesus had started." (9)

And he never looked back. That's the golden thread throughout the next eighty pages of autobiography, his journey "from day laborer's son to diplomat," which is the actual title of his German original book.

He concludes: "I was born a weak baby in the bleak hut of a day laborer, and my chances for survival, let alone 'success' were bleak as well. But in the preceding pages, I have pointed out that God is not dependent on our human qualifications. He can use us without formal scholar training and degrees. Jesus, my Lord, saved me, and I trusted in him. It was he who enabled me

to accomplish all that I have done both professionally and in his service for the proclamation of the gospel. I have recorded some of these events in order to give hope and courage to those who are struggling with their faith.” (69)

Here are the teen-age segments of that wild ride:

1. School Years during the Hitler Regime
2. Membership in the Hitler Youth
3. Call Up for Military Service
4. In the Navy
5. Testimony on Board a Wrecked Ship

He’d just turned 19 when the war ended.

When one of our neighbors here at the old folks’ home, a German woman born the same year as Bruno, who also survived Hitler’s twelve-year-long Third Reich, read the book, she said, “I can’t believe that he was such a Jesus-witness and still survived under Hitler. But it sounds like he’s telling the truth.”

Bruno’s adulthood in postwar Germany is also a wild ride. With no university education—an absolute MUST, doctor’s degree included, in order to be anybody in Germany—doors open for him into federal government service. He becomes a diplomat for the German government and for NATO, negotiating multimillion-dollar contracts, achieving greater success than anyone could have imagined. All the while actively linked to the conservative evangelical heritage of his childhood, that now puts him into a pastoral role at “Christus-kirche” in his retirement community, “Pilgerheim” [Pilgrims’ Home] in Weltersbach, Germany.

For this reviewer, this book was a wild ride too. A yin/yang, with my yea, yea, yea during the Part 1 autobiography, “A Life Guided by Jesus: The Son of a Day Laborer Becomes a Diplomat.” Then my ouch, ouch, ouch while reading Part 2, “Basic Concepts

Derived from the Bible” that have “led and encouraged me throughout my long life” (73). He was 82, a widower, when he wrote that.

How to connect the yin and the yang?

One facet of this conundrum showed up for me when Bruno quoted several verses of Bonhoeffer’s hymn “By Gracious Powers.” Key elements of Lutheran theology that anchored Dietrich’s faith are pointedly negated in Bruno’s “basic concepts.” How does that compute?

There is one item that never appears on Bruno’s pages. He never tells of any “Anfechtung,” any challenge, that ever threatened his Jesus-connection. Maybe there were some and he never told us. Jesus and Bruno are always side-by-side in the roller-coaster ride of his life, and never do we hear that either of them ever fell out, stepped out, of the roller-coaster car. Were all those years so un-conflicted? No valleys, no shadows? Or was it another “special grace,” more of the same as the one that answered his Anfechtung at age 8 about his mother, that then led to his primal bonding with Jesus? Special grace indeed that would be.

For now, the best may be for me to remember that “there are a variety of gifts, but the same spirit.”

Yet I can’t comprehend why items that sound like gifts to me—gifts linked to the Gospel-hub of the wagon-wheel of theology—are un-gifts for Bruno. Gifts such as:

- Baptism and the Lord’s supper as Gospel-promise offers;
- God’s law as not the best guide for the Christian life, but Christ himself as Lord and Master;
- Free will as not only not necessary (while Bruno says it is, with extensive rational argument), but conflictive

with the Gospel, a Pelagian slide toward Christ having died in vain;

- the Aha! that “require” and “must” (you gotta!) are the rhetoric of God’s law, now blessedly replaced with the Gospel’s vocabulary of “offer” and “you get to.”

Now closer to 83 than to 82, I’ll pass this on to you co-crossers. If you see more light at the end of my tunnel, speak up.

Peace and Joy!

Ed Schroeder

Addendum: a reflection on Luke 12:13, in a note to Pr. Ron Starenko—

“Someone in the crowd said to (Jesus), ‘Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me.’ But he said to him, ‘Friend, who set me to be judge or arbitrator over you?’”

[This] line of the pericope...has recently brought a new Aha! to me.

Namely, that Jesus says “no” to being a judge or arbiter of “justice” in the realm of God’s left hand. “Not my job.”

Thus contradicting all the never-ending drumbeats today for Jesus as the challenger to the Roman Empire, as crusader for peace and justice in the old creation, as peasant revolutionary against the system, etc. Ad nauseam.

“Not my job” he says here. “Abba has assigned to me another task, another agenda. To get sinners forgiven. Too bad, if y’all think that’s a trivial assignment. Or that anybody can do it. Or that since Good Friday and Easter it’s all over and there are no more sinners around who need forgiveness. So you Christians can

get go to work on other 'bigger' agendas, like, returning the world to the Garden of Eden."

And nowhere in the gospels is Jesus' "Thanks, but no, thanks. Not my job" ever contradicted.

So it seems to me.

EHS.