

A Grass-roots Theologian on the Faith-Works Connection

Colleagues,

I won't tell you his name because I don't have his permission to do that. If I asked him for it he'd likely demur. He'd wonder why the likes of you would be at all interested in what he had to say. I suspect he'd object vigorously to being styled as a theologian. I'll do that anyway. I think it fits. I trust you'll agree.

For the sake of convenience, nothing more, I'll call him John.

John is sliding into his late 30's. He's a husband, a father, and a life-long Lutheran who doesn't skip church or let his children do that. For him this is a familial piety that stretches back for at least five generations that I'm aware of, and probably more. I catch myself praying that his children will succumb to the infection and keep it alive for their kids too.

This is not to suggest that John has this Christian thing down pat. Please, who of us ever did, or does? In nearly twenty years of serving as his pastor I've watched him struggle with issues that I had to fight through myself before Christ first smacked of joy. I recall that as the moment when a theologian was born. So if I now call John a theologian, it's because I've seen him taste the joy too. Only then does serious Christian thinking begin, of the kind that Luther lauds in [Theses 20 of his Heidelberg Disputation](#).

John's breakthrough happened about three or four years ago when he witnessed someone else's real-life descent into Step Three of the Crossings matrix where death terrifies and all one sees of

divinity is its dark, foreboding underbelly. As he watched, waited, remembered, and thought, the light somehow flipped on, or so he told me later. Suddenly all that pro forma Jesus stuff he'd been hearing his whole life long flowered into glorious good news, above all as it kicked open a future with God for the dear person he was sitting with; and if good news for that person, then good news for him and for his children, and his children's children too. His focus ever since has been on puzzling through the magnificent difference that Christ-for-us makes in our perception of the world around us and, even more, in our response to it.

What we send you this week (with John's permission) is a little sample of John's current thinking. I wish we could somehow infuse it into the water they make coffee from in the cafeterias of all the Church's seminaries.

The item is a note John sent me after a recent session of a weekly study group we attend. It's a small group, restricted to men in their twenties and thirties. We've seen some new attendees trickle in this year. Our latest guest was a drifting Roman Catholic who is still entangled enough in the faith that he wanted to spend an evening finding out what Lutherans might have to say. I've known him for a while. Again for convenience, nothing more, I'll call him Pete. We gathered quickly that Pete is wrestling hard right now with the kind of questions that are bound to surface when you spend your days wading in the muck of human despair, moral indifference, and downright bad behavior that officers of the court—he's one of them—are expected somehow to control.

The springboard for conversation on this particular night was the second half of Matthew 5. We'd been exposed to that on a recent Epiphany Sunday. It's tough stuff, as you'll recall. Turn the other cheek, walk the extra mile, love the enemy, and all

this arising from what sounds like a terrible and foreboding premise. “Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and the Pharisees, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven” (Mt. 5:20). We spent some time discussing where righteousness like that might come from. The point that emerged: either Christ gives it or it’s nowhere to be had.

Next question: if such is the righteousness Christ gives, what do we as recipients do with it? With that the conversation took off, our new friend Pete playing the role (not intentionally, I think) of devil’s advocate. The next day came, and with it the note from John.

I’ve already mentioned the Crossings matrix. (See any one of the hundreds of text studies on the [Crossings website](#).) John nails cold the connection between Steps 5 and 6–i.e., between faith in the God of the Gospel and action in the world that Christ died for and owns. Have I ever seen this spelled out more plainly or clearly? If so, I can’t recall it. But read for yourself. I leave things as John sent them, in the rough, unpolished style of the fast email.

Peace and Joy,
Jerry Burce, for the editorial team

Grass-roots theology: A note from John–

Enjoyed last night. Especially liked Pete’s question in response to Matthew 5, “What good does living like **that** do me right here and now in today’s world?” Spent the better part of last night thinking about it, because in most cases, he’s right. We’d be pariahs.

Supposed that God would have two answers:

- 1) You're right. Doesn't make sense. Not what the world expects.
- 2) Just trust me.

It's the most fundamental thing I want of you in the first place—trust. Trust the ripple effects the uncommon approach may have on those around you.

A pariah? Maybe so. See earlier in Matthew (5:10) though. Blessed are they...kingdom of heaven belongs to them! Just trust me.

What's more? Embrace those difficulties. As hard as it may be to do so, just trust me. Romans 5:3 urges us to rejoice in suffering, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame.

You're concerned about right now? All things are yours (1 Cor. 3:22)! As distant as it may seem, trust it!

Sounds tough. Sounds nonsensical. But trust me. Don't fear what you are about to suffer...be faithful to death and I will give you the crown of life (Rev. 2:10). And then...no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man imagined what I have prepared for those who love me (1 Cor. 2:9).

Jesus handled everything for you. Here is your opportunity to seriously trust that, take up your cross, and confidently follow the new system.