

A Message from the Field: “Ed, You didn’t get law/gospel right!”

Colleagues,

Kathleen Creager discovered Crossings in the summer of 2006, I think it was. While residing, of all places, in America’s Calvinist Mecca, Grand Rapids, Michigan! But then THEIR publishing house—Eerdmans in Grand Rapids—just published the first-ever Crossings book, Bob Bertram’s A TIME FOR CONFESSING, whilst allegedly “more Lutheran” publishers demurred. Do denominational lines mean anything anymore? Things do get curiouiser and curiouiser. Yet perhaps even more curious is that Kathleen is doing a theology degree at Calvin Theological Seminary there in Grand Rapids! But all that’s a story in itself.

For now Kathleen is running with what she’s discovering—running fast, so far as I can tell. Couple weeks ago she came running after me to whisper the words in the Topic-line above: you got law/gospel wrong. You won’t be surprised that I paid attention. She was tweaking me about the last three paragraphs of ThTh #503—<https://crossings.org/thursday/2008/thur013108.shtml>—posted at the beginning of Lent—“Pardon My Imprisonment – Anticipating Ash Wednesday.”

After a couple of e-exchanges (with me trying NOT to think of Luke 11:7) I made this offer to Kathleen: “OK, you compose three paragraphs that do a better job; tell my why you think they’re better, and I’ll post it to the Crossings listserve and we’ll see what they say.” She did her part, so now I do mine.

Gold was the color at our Easter liturgies this past Sunday. I think Kathleen put a Golden Egg into my Easter basket. See if you want it in yours too.

Peace and Joy!

Ed Schroeder

[Btw, this date, March 27, back in 1921 was Easter Sunday. Bob Bertram was born that day. It figures.]

Ed's original paragraphs: If you can't get the Holy Roman Empire to repent, Luther counseled his readers in the face of the Moslem jihad of his day, remember the Abrahamic finesse, how the patriarch whittled the numbers down (and God's mercy up) in interceding for Sodom and Gomorrah. "Would you spare that evil empire, God, if there were 50 righteous ones there? How about 45? 40? 30? 20? Maybe just 10?" And God always said yes. Finally, "For the sake of ten I will not destroy it."

"Surrogate repentance" was Bob Bertram's tag for Luther's proposal to try the Abrahamic finesse. Repentance on the part of a remnant works rescue for the unrepentant as well. How about that for this year's Lenten discipline? [I wonder if we could stick with it for 40 straight days in our own household—in addition to walking that Siegfried Reinhardt Lenten path on the Crossings website.] "God be merciful to me and all the rest of us in bondage to those p-and-p's of our empire, those encrypted aliens within us too, with their engines running." And God said: "For the sake of ten who repent, I will relent."

Yes, Sodom didn't survive, but Vienna in Luther's day did. Sodom's fate came to pass not because God's mercy was untrustworthy. It was rather that hardly anybody deemed it

worth trusting. What if 600-plus listserve receivers—or just 50? 45? 40? 30? 20? or just 10?—deemed it worth trusting in our own case? What all might happen, both in, and to, the one remaining empire in our world today?

Here's Kathleen:

OK, Professor Schroeder, here is my revision of the last three paragraphs of ThTh#503. You may wonder what took me so long, because I didn't really revise all that much, and most of the words are yours. What took so long is all the other versions I wrote and then threw away.

If you can't get the Holy Roman Empire to repent, Luther counseled his readers in the face of the Muslim jihad of his day, remember the Abrahamic finesse, how the patriarch whittled the numbers down (and God's mercy up) in interceding for Sodom and Gomorrah. "Would you spare that evil empire, God, if there were 50 righteous ones there? How about 45? 40? 30? 20? Maybe just 10?" And God always said yes. Finally, "For the sake of ten I will not destroy it." If only a few of Luther's readers were to heed his call to repentance, perhaps God would spare Vienna. What if 600-plus listserve receivers—or just 50? 45? 40? 30? 20? or just 10? — were to heed a call to Lenten repentance? "God be merciful to me and all the rest of us in bondage to those p-and-p's of our empire, those encrypted aliens within us too, with their engines running." What all might happen, both in, and to, the one remaining empire in our world today?

Yes, Sodom didn't survive, but Vienna in Luther's day did. Sodom's fate came to pass not because God's mercy was untrustworthy. It was rather that no one deemed it worth trusting. Even Lot did not believe and get out of the city as

he was told, but had to be taken by the hand and led away. What then would make us think we can repent? God promises to spare the many for the sake of a few righteous, but can we become righteous? Isn't it impossible? Some outside lord has to intervene. Ah – and he has! “Just as one man's trespass led to condemnation for all, so one man's act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all. For just as by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous.” (Rom 5.18-19) For the sake of Jesus Christ, the righteous One, God spares the many. Not only spares them, but even gives them Christ's righteousness. So repent! Mercy, justification, life, and righteousness are yours.

What makes it “better” than the original three paragraphs? I think it is better because it more clearly makes the call to repentance a “gospel thing,” and because it says the “Abrahamic finesse” is about Christ's righteousness rather than our repentance. There is a third thing I wanted to “improve” but gave up on – I think ThTh#503 mis-states or at least over-states Luther's use of that Abrahamic finesse argument. But I found that I am not clever enough to make that better while still keeping both the reference to the Abrahamic finesse and the references to empire, to tie back to the very beginning of the ThTh.

In more detail –

*** Why a call to repentance is a gospel imperative ***

Repentance is a response to the law – confession and contrition, recognizing that we do not fear and trust God and we deserve God's wrath and condemnation, and that there is absolutely nothing we can do to save ourselves. It is also a turning away from trusting the wrong deities, turning to

trusting the true God – and in the Lutheran understanding of law and gospel, that turning-to can only be a response to (an effect of) the gospel. So – is the command to respond to the law and the gospel in this way a law imperative or a gospel imperative?

1. Which direction are the cause and effect happening in “Repent and be saved”? In the law and gospel grammar of ThTh#501–<https://crossings.org/thursday/2008/thur011708.shtml>–does it mean “If you repent, then God will save”? Or does it mean “Because God saves, therefore repent”? Looked at this way, I think the law statement is self-contradictory. If “God will save” is conditional on my repentance, then I am in part saving myself, which makes “God will save” not true.
2. Law language makes repentance into a work, just one more example of trusting the wrong thing – our own repentance.
3. A law imperative to repent is circular – being told to confess that we don’t and can’t do what the law calls for and to turn away from the wrong deities, and the law calls for us to confess that we don’t and can’t do what the law calls for and to turn away from the wrong deities, and we can’t. “Not only that we don’t, or won’t, turn away from these deities. We can’t – even if we wanted to. We’re unable, incapable.”
4. From ThTh#170: “But repentance is tough. Repentance is hard to do even for one person. It’s like dying, says Jesus, like crucifixion. No one in their right mind would do it, unless Unless the alternative were even worse. As it is. But that conviction takes faith. And for that repenters need help so that it becomes a repentance unto life, and not a repentance unto despair. According to the Word of God such help is available.”

Repenters first need faith, need the help that the Word of God

promises. It follows that a call to repentance is a gospel imperative.

**** Why the call to repentance in ThTh#503 can too easily be read as a law imperative ****

It may be true that, in the context of the entire essay, the call to repentance is not stated as a law imperative. But for some of us (well, at least for one of us!) who have not been studying these things for decades, gospel is not readily apparent in the last two paragraphs. There are two sentences that are more easily read as law.

- 1. "Repentance on the part of a remnant works rescue for the unrepentant as well." "Works"!! And is it really repentance that rescues? That would not "necessitate Christ."*
- 2. " I wonder if we could stick with it for 40 straight days" "Stick with it" is a phrase more usually associated with a "got to" than a "get to." And "I wonder if we could" has a far different meaning than " GO for it! You CAN do it." (ThTh#501)*

**** Why the call to repentance in the revision is more clearly gospel ****

- 1. Eliminated the language that was more easily read as law.*
- 2. Added a reference back to the section of the ThTh that explained that Christ has already conquered the principalities and powers. Used language that is closer to the "gospel grammar" formula – (Because) This is what Christ has done for you. So (therefore) repent.*

**** Why it is better to tie the "Abrahamic finesse" to Christ's righteousness than to our repentance ****

Genesis 18:23-32 is not so much a story of surrogate repentance

as a story of surrogate righteousness. There is no talk of repenting or turning. For the sake of a few "tsadiq" [Ed: Hebrew for "a righteous one"] God would forgive the whole city. But "no one living is righteous before [God]." (Ps 143.2) Even Lot did not believe and get out of the city as he was told, but had to be taken by the hand and led away. So who are these righteous for whom God will forgive many? "The righteous one, my servant, shall make many righteous, and he shall bear their iniquities." (Isa 53.11) "The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will fulfill the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah. In those days and at that time I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David, and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. . And this is the name by which it will be called: 'The LORD is our righteousness.'" (Jer 33.14-16) "Therefore just as one man's trespass led to condemnation for all, so one man's act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all. For just as by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous." (Rom 5.18-19)

Does God spare the many for the sake of a few who are righteous? Yes! For the sake of Jesus Christ, the (only) righteous one, God spares all who trust his promise. Not only spares them, but even gives them Christ's righteousness. For the sake of Christ, God spares the many who keep on trusting the principalities and powers even while they (we) trust the promise, simul justus et peccator, always needing to repent, every day being "buried with Christ by baptism into death, that like as He was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life." Christ's death and resurrection work rescue for the repentant (simul unrepentant) ones.

Peace,

Kathleen