

Correlations and Crossings

Robert W. Bertram

[Originally published in *The Cresset*, Vol. 51, no. 1 (1987)
Reprinted with permission -- and blessings -- from *The Cresset*]

Robert W. Bertram is Semine Professor of Historical and Systematic Theology at the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago. He is a member of the Commission on Faith and Order of the World Council of Churches and of the Lutheran-Roman Catholic Consultation, USA. He is also Vice-Director of the Institute for Theological Encounter with Science and Technology and founder and President of Crossings.

During the “fourth decade of the twentieth century” Otto Paul Kretzmann first went public with his little *Cresset* “toward a new fusion of the intellectual and spiritual life,” of “culture and Christianity,” “a surrendered unity” between “truth [as] relative and fragmentary” and “truth...as God has revealed it.”

It was a sign of the times. That was the same decade another great teacher of ours, another Paul, was also going public with a similar “correlation.” Paul Tillich had just emigrated from Nazi Germany and was beginning to awaken Americans to his correlation of “reason and revelation.”

For both Pauls this discovery in Christ was so different, so publicly different from all other discoveries, that it required some such distinction as “revelation,” but only in order that both kinds of discoveries, new and old, might be newly recombined—in a recombinant intellect, yes, but really in a whole recombinant public “life.” This public recombination of “reason and revelation” is what some of us Cresseteers later came to call “Crossings.”

The correlationist “charter” from the two Pauls, not to mention their patron saint, has by now, five decades later, become almost commonplace even among Christians who are not knowingly Pauline. In view of how taken for granted the “correlation of revelation” has since become, and in the process how reactionary and rancid, the whole idea could use some refreshing from the original Paul.

First, recall: the discovery of God in Christ was for Paul the apostle so new and fresh that even the term “revelation” was not distinctive enough to contrast it with its old opposition, the Law. For the Law, too, the divine “wrath,” qualifies as revelation—literally, unveiling, un-covering, dis-covery. If it is in “the good news of Christ” that “the righteousness of God is revealed” graciously, what is just as “revealed” (“against all human unrighteousness”) is “the wrath of God.” (Rom. 1:17, 18)

The glaring antithesis, and so the needed public correlation, is not between divine revelation and something less than that, like “reason.” It is between two contrary

revelations or dis-coveries of the same God, both of them true and righteous and therefore contradictory.

But God, whether as gracious or as wrathful, is not the only one being revealed. So are we, and all as part of those same two revelations of God. For Paul, there simply is no revelation of God without a corresponding, reflex revelation of us. Indeed, that is exactly how God's wrath shows, by showing up our sin, the one thing we are most bent upon hiding even from ourselves.

The mere mention of a God who is determined to prove us wrong, to incriminate us, we find not only hard to believe but offensive. Yet by that very resentment of ours we unwittingly prove the Critic right. See, we are indeed resenting God, even clinically. God is so vexed with us as to vex us into open enmity. We and God are both dis-covered in the same transaction.

For instance, when I hear a feminist pastor preach divine indignation (which she admits she relearned from Scripture as one of God's womanly traits) I am already glimpsing the divine wrath "revealed," I suppose, just in her preaching it, but nowhere nearly so experientially as in my own petty resistance to her preaching.

"The Law," Paul said, "increases trespass" (Rom. 5:20), not faith. What sort of God, we protest incredulously, would want to do that? What a revealing response, revealing both ourselves and God. "The Law," Paul said, "angers" (Rom. 4:15), and in doing it adduces the incriminating evidence to vindicate the anger of God.

Theologians have sometimes pitted "revelation" against "reason" as if the latter proceeded only by proof and the former only by faith. Not so, at least when what is being revealed is divine wrath and human sin. This revelation, like much of reason, threatens faith and may even subvert it. This revelation, like sound reason, does marshal proof, quite empirical proof.

No doubt the law's dis-discovery of human sin and divine wrath is more than conventional reason can grasp, especially in our culture, and may well need something more drastic like a "revelation" to coax reason to its logical conclusion.

Still, this revelation of the Law functions, maybe just more unsparingly, on much the same wave-length as reason does, especially critical reason. The *Cresset*, thanks largely to the Christian genius of John Strietelmeier, has a tradition of articulating the Law's revelation with exquisite—and best of all, humorous—reasonableness.

What could possibly be humorous about humans so fallen as to provoke their Creator to expose them against their will, often fatally? The humor, certainly for Paul, never meant trivializing the damning candor of the Law. Yet exactly because the Law is always so devastatingly right about us, how all the more humorous it looks when for once it accuses one of us wrongly, namely Jesus, and so has to eat crow.

Christ, says Paul with obvious amusement, took “the handwriting of the ordinances against us, . . . nailing it to the cross, and . . . made a show of [it] openly.” (Col. 2:14-15)

Which of us browbeaten culprits can refrain from snickering at this impudent spectacle? Pity those who operate with meager Law, and hence with meager laugh. For here in this one hilarious Crossing is a diametrically opposite revelation. Here the very Law of God is not only doing the exposing but is itself being exposed.

To be sure, our laughter is not without some nervousness—“fear and trembling,” to be exact—for in our irreverence we could well seem to be crossing God. Such a conclusion would be reasonable, lawful.

One tempting way to relieve the nervous contradiction, and so not to “correlate” it at all, is to pretend that the condemnatory Law never is all that real, only apparent, or at least is never final. Exploiting the biblical analogy of a cover (as in “dis-cover”) or a veil (as in “re-veal”), the divine wrath is then reconstructed as merely a temporary veiling of God’s true identity, which can only finally be love.

The assumption is that we need but trust that behind the mask of wrath is the hidden face of love. Faith, then, would in effect be a removing of the veil, or peering through it, to get at the One who has been watching us from beyond, presumably all smiles.

Paul has no such illusions. True, he knows from experience (who doesn’t?) how the Law can in fact eclipse divine mercy repeatedly and perhaps terminally. But the alternative is decidedly not “removing the veil,” except on pain of death, not even *God’s* removing the veil, for the divine glow, the glower, the “glory” which lurks behind that Law is even more unpromising, a sure dead end. (2 Cor. 3:6-13)

The fatal illusion here is in seeking God beyond the Law, or above it, rather than on *this* side of it or, as Paul says, “under the Law.” (Gal. 4:4) For the veil of the Law dare be removed only when one of our own, that One who alone can take its heat, so dissipates the Law’s critique and outshines it as to reduce its glare to comparative “darkness.” Christ keeps the “hidden God” hidden by interposing himself, but in so doing he transforms the divine glow-ry into a revelation we can live with—“in the face of Christ.” (2 Cor. 4:6)

Notice, the humor only gets wilder. But doesn’t the gospel’s sheer incongruousness, almost playfulness, make a mockery of its correlate, “reason,” which if it is anything is serious business? Still, humor and play need not exclude seriousness and indeed may include a most rigorous rationality.

Case in point: playing bridge. It was from those bridge-playing *Cresset* folks, the Koenigs and the Kruegers and the Loomans, that this unteachable neighbor of theirs learned at least about trumping, the sheer delicious logic of it. An ace of spades, even if it is not trump, may still count mightily and in fact might take the whole hand. But though

it retains its awesome value, it does not have the last word, even in face of a lowly two of hearts, should hearts be trump.

Analogously Christ does not eliminate the Law (yet), but trump it he does and therein lies the “bridge,” the crossing. Reason, too, like the Law, is trumped by the Cross, superseded by events which defy conventional rationality. Yet since even this happens for good reason, there is now an alternative promising rationale for making sense of the world and eventually replacing it, including the world’s divine Law.

I recall what Walt Reiner, another *Cresset* type, once wrote about The City, for which over twenty years as an urban activist he has yearned and bled: “We are called to make this city more livable, yet without putting our heart into it—namely, with a sense of humor.” Experienced believers find that not only credible but transcendently reasonable.

Only believers? There’s the rub. For Paul, as for the Christ he followed, everything depends on faith—in this Christ. Trump is good news for those who hold it, not for those who don’t. If there is no revelation of God, also not of God’s grace, without a corresponding revelation of its human respondent, then faith is that human response by which those people are revealed who are graced—“justified,” “saved,” “great.” Otherwise not.

But then how public, really—how universal, in that sense how rational—is the God who only in Christ is outlastingly merciful, if that public alone which believes that can corroborate it? And if it is true only of those who corroborate it, that is, by their faith, is it true even of them?

There is no denying this naggingly exclusivist scandal. But neither should the scandal be unduly publicized, which is the temptation of legalism. The one best remedy, according to the Pauline precedent, is to keep the scandal hidden—really to keep its scandalous God hidden—not because it is untrue but because its truth is destructive of people and antithetical to the same God’s mercy which pursues them in Christ.

We believe it is God, finally—not we—who in Christ hides the destructive divine anger and who in Christ prefers instead to be dis-covered to us as the triune lover in person. Neither the hiding nor the dis-covery is in the first instance our doing.

Yet, we do cooperate. Strenuously we share in this revealing-by-hiding. We cooperate initially by preaching it. The *Cresset* has always taken special note of such preaching, though not on its front pages. Rightly so. For preaching, where the crossing-by-trumping is only announced, is not yet the whole crossing, not even when preaching dis-covers faith.

The consummate crossing, the decisive “correlation” (Tillich) through “a surrendered unity” (Kretzmann), happens only in lives, in faithed lives, “in literature, the arts, and public affairs.” For there the crossing reenters the most public sector, the Law, and becomes most inclusive and universal and rational.

How truly faithed these lives have been will eventually be dis-covered, only too soon. But now already, even before *The Last Analysis*, there are telling clues. As my favorite *Cresset* poet sees, thanks to “The Different Drummer,” “when everyone else is still as a dime..., [we’re] bound to walk funny.”