

# Carl Braaten's Autobiography

Colleagues,

ThTh 624. Six hundred twenty-four Thursdays. Divide that number by 52 and you have exactly 12 complete years. So here on the cusp of year 13 Mike Hoy reviews the life-story of a major voice in American Lutheran theology for the past half century. Along the way in that rich lifetime both Seminex and Crossings intersected (interrupted?) Braaten's theological hopes for American Lutheranism, he tells us, sadly to his dismay. So his autobiography has more than just historical interest for many of us. Who to do the review? Mike Hoy, of course. Mike's a Seminex alum, also past president of Crossings Inc., also editor of Bertram's posthumous works, and for Braaten-expertise, he did his doctorate under Braaten's supervision.

Peace and Joy!

Ed Schroeder

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## **A Review of Carl E. Braaten's BECAUSE OF CHRIST: MEMOIRS OF A LUTHERAN THEOLOGIAN.**

**(Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., Grand Rapids, 2010) 224 pp. \$18.00**

Carl Braaten has had a most prolific life. He is the author of 18 books, editor of 25 books, and has written 240 articles. It is impressive! What is equally impressive is how he can write his Memoirs with such wonderful candor and in a style that will lead the reader to appreciate his personal story.

Years before I came to Chicago for graduate study, I came to appreciate Carl's thought through his books which I had time to

read in my first parish call to a small church in northern Manitoba. My first meeting of Carl Braaten on the campus of LSTC in 1983 was an honor and an opportunity for brief conversation. I took several courses with him, including a most illuminating course on the theology of Edward Schillebeeckx's massive two volumes, JESUS AND CHRIST. He appreciated my essays, and lifted them up on occasion in class. I was even more deeply honored that he would become my Doktor-vater for the completion of my dissertation. Like his own Doktor-vater Paul Tillich who suggested that Carl work on the theology of Martin Kähler, it was he who suggested my own thesis on the theology of works in Juan Luis Segundo, S.J., on which I had written and published a brief essay. For all of this, and so much more, I am eternally grateful for Carl's encouragement and guidance. And I am even more honored that he would lift up my name and dissertation in these Memoirs (in fact, this is probably the first time I have ever seen my name listed in an index!).

Carl's autobiography traces several epochs in his life, on which he has provided twelve chronological chapters. His title for these memoirs, BECAUSE OF CHRIST, he traces not only to his affirmation of "WAS CHRISTUM TREIBET" (what conveys Christ) as the center of the gospel, but because "it identifies the center of my existence as a Christian theologian." (viii) In fact, he will contend that his principle theological battles were fought primarily over the doctrines of the Trinity and Christology.

The first third of the book recounts his youth and early development as a son of missionaries in Madagascar, and then his educational years in the United States and Europe (college, seminary, and graduate school, including fellowships in Paris and Heidelberg), followed by a brief commentary on his parish work at Messiah Lutheran Church while also teaching at Luther Seminary (St. Paul, Minnesota). These chapters are clever and humorous, but also deeply conveying of the passion of Carl's

innermost longings and personal struggles for the truth.

In the early 1960s, Carl came to serve on the faculty of Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago, and this comprises the second third of his autobiography. They also lift up his years of theological encounter and engagement with other circles of theology. It is, in fact, in these chapters that I perceive a shift in Carl's thinking and directions in life upon his encounter with radical theological feminism in particular. While he was clearly progressive in his thinking and supportive of many liberating efforts (and I have no doubt he retained much of that even after this encounter), he found especially troubling the feminist critique of God-language which undercut the Triune name of God, particularly in the liturgy.

The final third of the book is about his departure from LSTC, and his life and work at the Center for Catholic and Evangelical Theology. He commended his lifelong friend and colleague, Robert Jenson, for understanding this transition: "What made Carl Braaten overturn his life is a judgment: seminaries of the ELCA are now institutions emphatically inhospitable to theological work and instruction, and are likely to remain so for the foreseeable future." (127) The final straw would be the desire of many at LSTC to hire Elizabeth Bettenhausen over Reinhard Hütter in the field of theological ethics (including the students, with their slogan "Anybody but a white male") . These pages include some of Carl's latter writings on this perceived unstable trajectory of the ELCA.

One phrase that Carl often used in class when I studied under him that always brought a chuckle to me as well as others was, "whatever you do, be provocative." He certainly was that. And he does not hide his provocative encounters. There are several of them, and even hearing them again brings both a chuckle but also a feeling of sorrow for his painful experiences – and also for

the deeper clarity of the truth that Carl is seeking mostly to identify. There are many sections of this book that elicit some provocative claims of my own, and I have noted many of them in the margins and underlinings. But I will cite here three points I hope worthy of provocative reflection with Carl.

The first is my total affirmation with Carl on the meaning and importance of WAS CHRISTUM TREIBET. That has been a motto of my own theological reflection in life, and in this regard the desire for truth and faithful confessing of the gospel has been very much at the center of my own life. I probably learned more of that from Bob Bertram than I did from Carl Braaten, but in this regard we are all kindred spirits. I'm not sure I have always seen in everything that Carl produced this same passion for the gospel; and I suspect that he may have overreacted against movements that are probably more supportive of the gospel's message and vision than he realizes. But I certainly applaud this accent.

The second is this marvelous quote when he was affirming the ordination of women even when some criticized that it may damage relationships with Roman Catholics and Eastern Orthodox. "To that I counter that we should not be willing to pay any price to please our ecumenical partners. No Lutheran can believe in unity at all costs." (108) Wonderful! But then, why is this now being made a principle objection in the face of the ELCA's direction on homosexuality? In the "Open Letter to the Voting Member of the 2009 ELCA Churchwide Assembly," the counter point is raised: "If the ELCA were to approve the public recognition of same-sex unions or the rostering of persons in such relationships, it would damage our ecumenical relationships with the Roman Catholic Church, the Orthodox Church, and Evangelical churches, all of which affirm the clear teaching of Scripture that homosexual activity departs from God's design for marriage and sexuality." Carl's name is on the list of signatories. My sense

is that Carl no longer sees the ecumenical partners as the problem, but his contention that the ELCA has drifted toward liberal Protestantism. Nonetheless, the contrast of these two phrases, almost identical, is striking.

The third is the critique rendered in the section entitled, "Seminex Joins LSTC [The Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago]" (p. 118-122). And here I will have to take issue with several things Carl has written. Carl claims that when the Seminex faculty came to LSTC, LSTC moved sharply to "the left on social, cultural, and theological issues." Keep in mind that Carl himself had supported many aspects on the left in social, cultural, and theological issues. His sharpest critique is what he calls the "paradigm shift" that comes from the "antinomianism or a close relative" that was introduced by the founders of Crossings, Robert Bertram and Edward Schroeder. "Both were greatly influenced by the law/gospel theology of the German Lutheran theologian Werner Elert of Erlangen University. They followed Elert in rejecting the third use of the law. Elert maintained that the title of Article VI of the Formula of Concord, 'Third Use of the Law,' mislabeled what it really affirmed. The question was debated among first-generation Lutherans whether the law applies to regenerated Christians; that is, whether they are to live in obedience to the Ten Commandments." Later, he adds, "The ideology of Crossings moved in a straight line from the rejection of the third use of the law to the support of the gay/lesbian agenda that has since taken the ELCA by the throat." (121)

The short answer to this is that, with all due respect, Carl's criticisms are unjustified – and on several counts. For such an eminent and astute scholar, he misreads the available data and imagines data that simply do not exist – both at LSTC and in Crossings theology. The whole section is badly in need of a re-write. Here are some points for consideration:

First, his understanding and presentation of Seminex's history is weak. Seminex did not "walk out" as he suggests, but were "exiled" – literally, told that they would not be tolerated and told to leave! – by the leadership of the LCMS. Each "intolerable" professor received a letter of dismissal from the seminary's new acting president. Much more can and has been said about this, but the presentation here is misrepresentative of the facts. When Seminex later deployed, it deployed to three locations, not two. Missing is any reference to the Austin faculty.

Second, LSTC's "move to the left" after the Seminex professors arrived was promoted by other forces in the school's administration and board. Seminex voices at LSTC during those years regularly protested LSTC's "move away" from confessional Lutheranism. They did not prevail. More often than not, they were a "voice crying in the wilderness," as Braaten himself has regularly been throughout his lifetime.

Third, Ed Schroeder never taught at LSTC, and his alleged influence there is non-existent.

Fourth, the alleged influence of Elert is absurd. Schroeder actually studied with Elert in the 1950s, but never taught at LSTC. Bertram, however, never studied with Elert, nor claimed him as mentor. When occasionally reminded of his proximity to Elert in understanding Luther, Bertram would say, "I got that directly from Luther himself in my doctoral dissertation on Luther and Barth at the University of Chicago." [Note: in the 1000-plus footnotes in Bertram's dissertation, Elert's name never appears once. The full text is available on the Crossings website. Bertram and Braaten also have in common the services of Paul Tillich – for Braaten, Tillich was his Doktor-vater; for Bertram, Tillich and Jaraoslav Pelikan were his doctoral committee.]

Fifth, Schroeder and Bertram are not antinomians (nor am I, as a willing participant in the Crossings Community). They affirm, along with FC VI, that the law applies to the “old creature” of Christians by precisely bringing the first two uses of the law (civil and theological) to bear upon Christians as upon everyone else. What is rejected is the supposition that there really is a “third use,” something that would let the law, not the gospel, have the last word in Christian ethics. How can this point be made while holding up what Carl held up so eloquently earlier, WAS CHRISTUM TREIBET? None of us at Crossings has been paid or programmed to go along with everything the ELCA promotes, including “support of the gay/lesbian agenda.”

To be sure, Schroeder has made some candid remarks on this issue of late, and they are all available on the Crossings website. But his constant drumbeat has been that the theological foundation – used over and over again – in ELCA sexuality documents is an “other foundation” than the one which the Lutheran Confessions propose for ethics. There is absolutely NO “straight-line” between Crossings’ kind of confessionalism and the theological ethics undergirding these ELCA decisions. The lines go in opposite directions.

But the theological issue is much more substantive than any false-charge of “antinomianism” can warrant. I am now on the finishing touches of Bertram’s intended third book, which he entitled SAIN SEX: THE CROSSING OF SEX/MARRIAGE (but to which I have added what I hope is a clearer title, THE DIVORCE OF SEX AND MARRIAGE, AND HOW TO SAVE THEM. There are some candid remarks in that manuscript that will make it quite clear that Bob is anything but antinomian in his thinking. This latter point deserves a lengthier treatise and I hope dialog, especially with the critics of the ELCA who have lumped Crossings into the ELCA’s back pocket. But this will have to suffice for now.

All in all, I am grateful for Dr. Carl Braaten's contribution to Lutheran theology, and his open and fine sharing of his memoirs with us all, even in spite of any misleading, misunderstood, and misguided fabrications in regard to Seminex and Crossings – which, at the very least, are provocative.

Blessings, dear friend, and thanks!

Michael Hoy  
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