

Crossings Theology: Roots and Branches

Colleagues,

The posting of 2 weeks ago, ThTh 127, linking the lectionary-appointed Gospel for Thanksgiving Day 2000 (in the USA) to theological instruction at Valparaiso University forty-plus years ago, elicited some responses. Here are three of them. You may remember that ThTh 127 reported on the “new curriculum” [New Testament Readings, aka NTR] at V.U. in the late 1950s and the significance of Matt. 6:24-34 in that whole enterprise. Today’s three responses are from (1) **Bob Bertram**, the “head honcho” of the whole NTR operation; then (2) **Walt Keller**, a new instructor on the dept. staff as the venture was launched; and finally (3) **Joan Cole-Heine**, a VU student at the time of the first run of the experiment. Bob and Walt are both retired—well, sortuv. Joan is a long-term deaconess recently ordained as Lutheran pastor at a nursing home in Canada.

Peace & Joy!
Ed Schroeder

1. Dear Ed,

For a seventy-year old your memory is remarkable. (Ten years from now, you’ll discover, it will be even better.) The way you recollected the “Programming of the Pericope,” Matthew 6:25-34, from our curriculum at Valpo over forty years ago is almost photographic. I should know, I was the one who wrote that programming (You said I honchoed the

“prime paradigm” and the rest of you “hammered it out.” Actually we all hammered it out, beginning with the honcho. Since Mt. 6 was the first gospel lesson in the fall semester, the chairman had to go first.) To this day I—you too, I suspect—have been made to eat my title for that first programming, “the grasslike fate,” which you quote. In short, we not only hammered the text out, it hammered us out—at the hands of many of our critics then and since. And wasn’t that the whole point of the pericope, something even we cocky faculty found hard to learn? “Following” the Matthean Jesus meant following him right through the flames of his cremation? What is so good about that Good News is that his cremation is our New Creation. Sometimes our students, like Gail McGrew Eifrig [current editor of VU’s magazine, THE CRESSET], learned that better than we, their teachers, did. You’re right: it is to give thanks for. Along with Gail’s moving memoir of those heady days, there is the article by Jerome Taylor in the prestigious Roman Catholic journal COMMONWEAL almost exactly forty years ago (1/29/60). With that the Valpo curriculum became a national headline, only exacerbating our celebrity/notoriety. It’s been hard to live with us ever since. We made enemies the old-fashioned way: we earned them.

Nevertheless, Peace and Joy!

Bob Bertram

2. Ed:

ThTh 127 sent me way back down Memory Lane. I dug up my file for Fall Semester, 1959, the first semester I taught at Valpo. I have the NTR-1 syllabus [first course for freshmen] from that semester, complete with all the notes I took to work my way into that Mysterious Master Mind

behind that syllabus. The title for Trinity 15: Anxiety, Hatred, Distrust, and Grass, so fully descriptive of a young instructor, recently come from the familiar surroundings of the parish, trying to become a worthy professor in the unfamiliar surroundings of a university full of Ph.Ds. Those years were not so much a "Platzregen," as they were years of "Sturm und Drang," that ultimately yielded (I speak autobiographically) to the gentler rains that watered the earth and made it fruitful in all the years that followed. For that I thank God and all His earthly agents. When our current VU Academic V-P (now Provost) Austenson came aboard (How many years ago now?) he soon met with the Department of Theology, went around the horn and asked us each in turn for a brief verbal bio. When I said I had come in 1959, he interrupted to say/ask, "You were one of Bertram's boys?" "Yes," I gladly acknowledged, although I felt as though I had been tattooed for life!

Thanks for the memories!

Walt Keller

3. Dear Ed,

What prompted this letter was my search for the new Series C Sabbatheology from Crossings (but it's not there yet). I stopped at the Thanksgiving Day ThTh [#127, Valparaiso University and Matthew 6]. Now I could have used that back in October, since I had to preach on [our Canadian] Thanksgiving Sunday. Well, having been thoroughly versed in grass-like fate some years ago, I had little trouble dealing with the text. But it would have been nice to have your words of wisdom. The thing is, I had a funeral the day before (for a really fine lady), and on Sunday morning here in the nursing home, just as I was ready to start the

service, in trooped her whole family. Well, I'm no ad-lib-er, so I just went ahead with what I had. I wouldn't have changed it anyway. Sin is sin, the cross is the cross, and Christ says we're his. You can't top that. Funny thing: on your US Thanksgiving Day, I had another funeral. I didn't use the grass-like fate pericope, but I guess I could have. Only an angry son and his wife showed up for the graveside service. But the message was still: sin is sin, the cross is the cross, Christ came to save scoundrels, and only he knows if the man was ever able to hear or believe what I had ever said to him or prayed for him. The son left in a huff – not a good thing.

I must say that I miss good theology around here. We had a clown for worship for Christ the King Sunday – running around the chancel, jumping up on the pews, crawling all over the floor – I never got the point, except that the pastor loves to entertain. Of course, the last word in his shenanigans is always JESUS, and he thinks that's enough gospel for us. Well, I'm sure that, even if I don't hear much gospel at the church I attend, the people at the nursing home do hear it when I preach. And I hear it, too, because I often preach to me.

Anyway, thanks for good theology that I get through Crossings. The peace of Christ be in you. Blessings. Joan

F.Y.I. Couple months ago we mentioned that the money had run out to pay our listserve-provider. The response was underwhelming—four checks came in from the 600 of you. Like Florida election officials these days, we're still trying to interpret the vote. If you didn't cast the ballot you intended when we first mentioned our need, you can do so now and it will still count. There'll be no court challenge. It's also tax-

deductible. Here's the address: Crossings, P.O.Box 7011, St. Louis, MO 63006-7011.

Cheers!

Ed