

Following Jesus when things fall apart (Part 2)

Colleagues,

Last week we reprinted [Part 1](#) of Pastor Felix Meylahn's presentation at the Fourth International Crossings Conference, in which he described the liberation struggle in his native South Africa and the subsequent "second falling apart" of South African society. This week brings the conclusion, in which Felix lays out his thoughts on how our "ambidextrous" God "handles" us in the context of our daily lives, with an emphasis on what this means for his South African community in their current historical moment of brokenness. As you read, please refer to the attached drawing by Felix's daughter, Mia, which beautifully illustrates the core idea of falling into the hands of the ambidextrous God.

Peace and Joy,

Carol Braun, for the editorial team

Following Jesus when things are falling apart – a post-liberation perspective from South Africa By Felix Meylahn

B) Following Jesus when Things are falling apart – Or falling into the hands of the "ambidextrous God"

There is a verse in the letter to the Hebrews (10:31) that has always intrigued and frightened me. It sounds even more frightening in German: "Schrecklich ist's, in die Hände des lebendigen Gottes zu fallen." Hebräer 10:31 – "It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God." Hebrews 10:31

And yet, I believe, to fall into the hands of the living God is our only hope, and the preaching of the Gospel of Jesus Christ could be described as precisely that for both the preacher and the hearers: a falling into the hands of our “ambidextrous God.” This phrase or metaphor has helped me to understand better what has been happening to us in South Africa. In this critical, dangerous, and often hopeless situation, I see God getting a hold of us with both of his hands and not letting go. I will try to describe now, what that means to us as South Africans. (Remember that I am speaking for myself and for the members of my congregation and community.)

- a. **Before “Liberation”** it was all so clear and simple—we knew what we had to do: resist Apartheid, support those who struggle for freedom, take God’s “preferential option for the poor and the oppressed” and make it a practical reality in our communities. Much good was done, and this way of life, practiced by many brave Christians, despite all its ambivalences, was a major factor in bringing about the changes that led to the liberation from Apartheid. But, in view of our present situation and the symptoms I have described, I have to ask the question: Did we not confuse our activism, and even our political ideologies, with the Gospel, using the Law only against the others and claiming the Gospel for ourselves in smug self-righteousness? Looking back at that time, I shudder to remember the smug hypocrisy that I and many others displayed as we condemned the “others” and yet lived quite well in a system that granted us privileges while harshly discriminating against others. But, as much as we should critically reflect on our own part in the past, there is something more than our personal failings at stake here: to put it in rather harsh theological terms, the “wrath” of God’s left hand, of God’s Law, is showing us in no

uncertain terms that God's law is not to be mocked.

- b. **The "post-liberation" reality** that I have merely begun to describe above reveals the costs at which the glorious "liberation" was bought: The "People's War" strategists taught the youth that education, law and order, obeying civil authorities, as well as thinking for yourself and taking responsibility for your actions are not to be seen as valuable in the "struggle," as things one should strive for, whereas disobedience to state authority, destruction of public property, "making the country ungovernable," and, of course, blind party loyalty (ignoring nepotism and corruption in your own ranks) are acceptable means of gaining and keeping power. Whoever did not abide by these "rules" was eliminated by the most horrible death imaginable ("necklacing," a tyre drenched with petrol, hung around your neck and set alight). The results of this "education" are clearly visible today. In addition, the youth have learnt that entitlement on the basis of your "victim status" is the best card to play and if that is somehow questioned, it can only be because your questioners are irredeemably racist. Teachers in schools and universities are often threatened with assault by students who fail their end-of-year-exams, because "they have the right to pass" and the professors are just being racists, who do not want them to earn the degree to which they are entitled. The concept that (in its first use) the Law is there to sustain and protect life and make living in a community possible has gotten lost along the way. I suppose that this is not something unique to South Africa, but the stark consequences of such forgetting can be seen clearer there than in a society where a lot of "first-use-of-the-law-things" still seem to function quite well. I have a question that I would want to ask you here today in this regard, because I am not quite clear on this yet.

Looking at the stark consequences of ignoring our joint responsibility for “first-use-of-the-law” matters in our South African context, could one say that the killing/drowning of the old Adam, second use of the law can also be seen in this “falling apart,” in other words a kind of socio-political second use?

And could such communal second-use experiences drive communities to the crucified Christ, like the second use of the law does with the individual Christian? Perhaps I’m completely off the track with this, that’s why I thought I should ask.

Let me describe the stark consequences of ignoring the first use of the law briefly as they are experienced by various members of our congregation/community:

- Two of the **teachers** in our congregation were “redeployed” to teach in “township schools” (“townships” are very poor areas, often with no formal housing for the residents). They were asked to teach subjects they had not been trained to teach and they struggled for long periods without receiving their salaries from the Education Department. In addition, one was constantly under threat of violence, being harassed repeatedly by colleagues, because he was speaking up against the corrupt principal of the school. How are they to cooperate with God’s caring left hand in such circumstances? And yet that is exactly what they are doing: quietly and with admirable determination, these two teachers have kept at it. The one just said to me, “I cannot leave those children in the lurch!”
- **Nurses** and other **medical staff**, working in “government hospitals”, to which again the poorer

people, with no health insurance, have to go for medical treatment, report circumstances that are the stuff of nightmares. No linen for the beds, no medical supplies (these are often sold by corrupt staff members to boost their meager incomes), and far too many patients. How are committed nurses and doctors to work well in such circumstances? But that is exactly what these members are doing. Facing the daily chaos with more courage than I could ever muster, they continue to serve, caring for the patients far beyond their official duties.

- I have already mentioned the struggles that **lecturers** at university and other staff working at tertiary education institutions are having with students who insist that they have a “right” to a degree. How tempting a call to a foreign university can be, if this is what you are dealing with daily. But these lecturers and teachers stay, because they know that South Africa needs well-trained and -equipped academics, if it is to survive as a rainbow community and make a real difference for the whole continent.
- There is a grass-roots organisation in the townships, calling themselves **Abahlali baseMjondolo** (shack dwellers), that have established themselves along autonomist Marxist principles to fight the battle against a government on the local level that has not come through for them in any way, although at election time far-reaching promises of poverty alleviation, etc., have repeatedly been made. The Abahlali refuse to vote at election time; they organize themselves for education (a kind of grass roots university) and community safety in their areas (since the police are incompetent and

unwilling to help). According to some sources, they are the one group that the ANC really fears, because they could mobilize the disgruntled masses (who elected the ANC) to rise up against their corrupt rulers. This is why these groups are being violently harassed by police and ANC cadres, and there is a smear campaign to cast doubts on their integrity. But in spite of this very harsh treatment, they doggedly carry on serving in their communities. The leaders are not paid for their work of organising and leading the movement, and they do not want to compete for power as a party—they are trying to make life work in their communities, trying to do the necessary work of caring for life, and in my estimation, unwittingly co-operating with God's left hand. I could continue describing the critical situation our country is in and the many people that are quietly going about keeping life safe and possible, but I need to get on to the next part of my presentation.

In describing our situation like this, which could be understood as mere moaning and groaning, I need to remind myself and others to not fall into a similar trap of smug hypocrisy about these problems in the "new" South Africa, as happened to us under the previous regime. We are all in some way or another co-responsible for the situation, and there are none that could be called innocent or blameless. Troubled consciences abound, because it is certainly not just a matter of separating the good from the evil and then siding with those that are deemed to be good. If we want to stay, we need to soberly face our own failings and those of each other with the clarity that comes from living as forgiven sinners.

- c. And yet, many **People are leaving the country**, because for them the situation has become unbearable. Many trained and skilled people cannot find work (often because untrained or not well trained people are appointed on the basis of their race). Many others do not want to continue living under the constant threat of violence. I know of no family in my congregation/community, white or black, in which there has not been a case of serious crime perpetrated against them with impunity by criminals who get away with it more than 50% of the time, because the justice system is so corrupt. So they leave, and those that remain either can't leave (for financial reasons) or are tenaciously holding on to the idea that they do have a responsibility, a calling (vocation, "Berufung") to be in South Africa, and to do their share of the work of "care and redemption" in this part of the world.
- d. My question as a pastor and particularly as the trainer for the "lay preachers" of our church is this: what does the task of preaching, fulfilling our calling as servants of the Word, contribute towards dealing with this crisis situation? The more my work has been governed by the distinction of "Law from Gospel" (getting to know the Crossings Community and your resources on the internet has revitalized this thinking in my work tremendously), the more have people been saying to me: "We need that Word!" "We come on Sunday to get our shot of Gospel adrenalin for the week!" I have tried to understand what is happening, why they say that and how it works-I'm a little scared that systematizing it too much may in fact mess it up-but for my own clarity I need a system of sorts, even though every system is also an oversimplification of the matter. Such a systematization does help me to keep my focus clearly on the distinction of "Law and Promise" and helps me to recognize it at work in the people around me and in

myself.

- e. I have found for myself as well as for the members of our congregation and church, that such clear “law – gospel” distinction, **the understanding of God as “ambidextrous”**, as caring for and redeeming the whole of creation is a welcome help in keeping us in South Africa and keeping us sane while we work and live there as disciples of Christ. After again reading Werner Elert, Christian Möller and Oswald Bayer together with the writings of Ed Schroeder and Robert Bertram and many others on the Crossings Website, I believe that this kind of preaching, this way of “experiencing” the Word, is a rediscovery of the **sacramental character** of the Word and of its proclamation. C.f. Christian Möller, *Seelsorglich Predigen* [Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, Göttingen, 1983], “Die Gleichzeitigkeit von Jesu und unserer Situation ist ein sakramentales Ereignis,” page 22, and again on page 23 Luther’s “sacramentaliter meditari”. Christian Möller puts it very succinctly: “Den biblischen Text sacramental zu meditieren, heißt für Luther, ihn mit der Erwartung auszulegen und zu predigen, daß Gott auch tut, was er verheißt (Ps.33:9) weil Christus für sein Wort einsteht, es mit seiner Gegenwart begleitet und in die Herzen der Menschen übersetzt.” (Seite 24) “For Luther, to meditate on the biblical text sacramentally means to listen to and to preach the text with the expectation that God will do what He promises (Psalm 33:9), because Christ stands in for his word, accompanies it with his presence and translates it into the hearts of the people” (my translation). And recently Oswald Bayer has reminded me again of the “Performative Word” that does what it says! Based on this rediscovery of the “sacramental word,” I’d like to introduce to you a **“pattern”** that I am using as a “grid” for my thinking, preparation, and practice of

teaching and preaching God's Word in the South African context, so that the Christian community to which I belong and in which I serve up the Gospel can itself also discern and consciously experience/recognize the two hands of God in their lives, and thus become "coworkers of joy"(2 Cor.1:24) with and for one another in Christ.

C) Finding ourselves in the Story of God's Faithfulness>

The model presupposes/takes as its point of departure Luther's three experiential "rules" for being a theologian (oratio, meditatio, tentatio), and then takes the "Law – Gospel" framework also found in his Small Catechism and combines that with the three steps of meditation used by the mystics of the middle ages (purgatio, illuminatio, unio) which Luther had learnt and practiced during his years in the Augustinian Order and later filled with new theology, in order to understand what the "Word of God" is doing to us and with us—or, to use the ambidextrous metaphor, how God is handling us, what it is like to fall into the hands of the living God—or, to use narrative language, how we find/discover ourselves and the life we are called to live in the Story of God's Faithfulness, which kills us and creates us anew as free children of God.

Luther encourages all Christians into a life-long catechumenate which takes us into the pattern and process of Baptism. Johannes Viebig calls this the "practice" of the Word of God. And Martin Nicol's Book, "Meditation bei Luther," shows in a lot of detail the meditation practice in which Luther lived and worked all his life, and it shows very clearly, how the Reformational rediscovery of the Gospel was in fact the result of this continuous "practice of the Word of God" in **prayer, meditation,** and **agonizing struggle** (oratio, meditation, tentatio). This threefold experience (Erfahrung) of the Word of God is what makes one a theologian, says Luther.

In his Small Catechism, chapter IV Part 4 on Baptism, Luther reminds us that Baptism “signifies that the old person in us with all our sins and evil desires is to be drowned through sorrow for sin and repentance, and that daily a new person is to come forth, and rise up to live before God in righteousness and purity forever.” How does such drowning and being raised up happen in daily life? It happens when we practice the “Word of God”.

In an article called, “Evangelische Meditation als ‘Übung des Wortes Gottes’, Anstöße aus Luthers Kleinem Katechismus und Erfahrungen mit Meditationstagungen” (in Herausforderung: Religiöse Erfahrung, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, Göttingen, 1980), Johannes Viebig, in view of the meditation retreats that he leads, asks the question: “How does God meet us personally? And we found the answer: in his ordering Word, in the witness of what he did for us and in his giving himself to us (Hingabe), through which he binds us to himself. In this we rediscovered the three phases of meditation, the ‘purgatio’ (Reinigung), the ‘illuminatio’ (Erleuchtung) and the ‘unio’ (Einung)—and that these three ways of meeting God (Begegnungsweisen) are congruent with the order found within the Small Catechism of Martin Luther, which mirrors these three steps: In the **Ten Commandments** we encounter the **ordering Word**, which purges us, the ‘purgatio,’ in the **Baptism Creed** we have the **witness of what he did for us**, the ‘illuminatio,’ and in the **Communion** at the Table we have **the giving of himself to us**, the ‘unio’” (Viebig 82, my translation). The basic distinction of “Law from Gospel” and its impact on us can be seen working behind the scenes here. The Law does the “purging” and the Gospel does the “illuminating” and the “unio,” the binding together with God in Christ.

In my work as pastor in the congregation, in preaching, teaching and pastoral care, in the retreats that I lead with our church wardens and our confirmands, I have taken this scheme and

developed it further into a pattern for discerning how God handles us in our context, in our daily life. I'd like to briefly show this pattern to you, using a drawing by my daughter, Mia Meylahn, which shows the two hands of God and the gift these hands give to us through the Word, as summarized in the Small Catechism.

To make it easier to remember left and right, the hands are

facing away from the viewers, as if they were our hands. Of course they should be turned around towards us, since they are God's hands, giving the gift of Life in Christ to us. But that would just make things more complicated, as the left hand of God would then be on our right and the right hand on our left.

On the left we have God's Left Hand, the Law, the Ten Commandments; this is the hand which cares for the whole of creation. It makes life possible, bearable, livable for all beings, and it calls, entices and even forces all to work with it for the sustaining of creation. Much of what I have been talking about above happens here, as we experience the left hand of God caring for us and as we work with it to "make the new South Africa" work as best we can.

But this hand is also experienced in the terrible, fatal experience of wrath (the second use of the Law), which drowns the Old Adam, punishes and puts down all that within us that is born out of mistrust and unbelief, all the stuff we do to impress God and boast before humans. As I asked before, could we see this part of God's left-hand-work happening in the terrible falling apart that we are experiencing in South Africa today? Is this the cross we are called to bear as we stay, work, and struggle on in South Africa? If yes, then we can only do it because we have "inside information" about God's further plans of action, we know about the Right hand of God.

On the right, then, we have God's Right Hand, the Gospel, the hand that reaches out to us, that grabs a hold of us and does not ever let us go again. It is inscribed with the Our Father Prayer, although, of course, the Gospel is more centrally found in the Creed (especially in the Second Article). However, the Lord's Prayer, and in particular the explanation that Luther gives to the "Introduction," i.e., the "Our Father in heaven", is to me a core experiential description of how the Gospel-God

deals with us, how the Right Hand of God handles us: "With these words God wants to attract us (Luther says, "Gott will uns locken"), so that we believe he is truly our Father and we are truly his children, in order that we may ask him boldly and with complete confidence, just as loving children ask their loving father."

And in His two hands, God holds out the greatest gift there is: His Son Jesus Christ, and in Him we receive faith (Trust) in the triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. How? We are called, invited, or even grabbed by the scruff of our necks, to join the creative and loving dance of the Holy Community (perichoreisis), the dance of "care and redemption." This Divine "handling" takes place through the Word and through the sacraments of Baptism and Holy Communion, as well as through Confession, which Luther never quite took off the list of the Sacraments. These different aspects of God's handling of us, the dynamic Trinity and the gifts of new life in Baptism, Communion and Confession, are composed into a star of David, reminding us of the truth that "salvation comes from the Jews" (according to Christ in the Gospel of John), and in the midst of these peculiar people, the Jews, we find the Saviour of the World, the crucified Lord, Jesus Christ.

As you can see I am still stammering about these matters myself, but I have had some very interesting conversations about this drawing and the message it tries to convey. And what is more, it seems to reach down deeper than our understanding, because it uses the image of the ambidextrous God holding out the gift of Christ to us, and as we are joined to this Christ in Baptism (we celebrate the remembrance of Baptism regularly in Port Elizabeth), we come to understand at an experiential level, that, united with Christ, we are safe (saved) in these two hands of God. And then the adventure begins of discovering exactly how that is true for us.

Then the teachers, the nurses, the doctors, the lecturers, the shack dwellers get to know, experientially, perhaps through prayer, meditation and agonizing struggle, or more probably, through hearing the proclamation of the Word, that while the left hand of God lies heavily upon their shoulders, pushing them to stand firm for the sake of the children, the patients, the students, the community, and while this heavy hand makes them realize that they are co-responsible for the mess, for the “falling apart” all around them and they experience how their trust in themselves has to die, how it is in fact killed every day—while experiencing all of that, they suddenly or gradually come to the glorious illumination, the discovery that they are also, gracefully held by the other, the right hand of God, where they find sustenance for their failing faith/trust and true peace through forgiveness for their troubled consciences. And bound together with Christ in their Baptism, they discover that whoever is plunged into the waters of union with God in Christ, surfaces next to the Poor, and discovers that he/she loves God by serving the neighbour. “Wer in Gott eintaucht, taucht neben den Armen wieder auf.”

I end off here, with the hope that I have been able to give you some insight into how the community I serve tries to hear the Word of God and live by it (which is my very simple understanding of discipleship), as it faces the critical situation in which South Africa finds itself at present.

The Divorce of Sex and Marriage: Sain Sex, a new book by Robert Bertram, is now available for a \$10 donation to Crossings. Please include \$3 for shipping and handling, and send your request to clessmann@charter.net.

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