

“From Three to Four, Not Before!”

Co-missioners,

Michael Hoy has rendered enormous service over the years as chief steward of Robert W. Bertram’s legacy as a writer. Aside from ensuring that some of Bob’s work would appear posthumously in book form, he also tackled the large task of assembling a bibliography of everything Bob wrote and published over the course of his career. [The most complete version](#) of this was posted on the Crossings website in 2017. Much of what’s listed there is also lodged in the [Crossings online library](#).

Not all of it, though. Two weeks ago Mike sent us the item you’re seeing today. It appeared in a book Mike assembled in 1998 for Lutherans in Australia, entitled *Gospel Crossings: Programming the Gospel Pericopes from the Year of Luke* (Series C). Bob contributed material to the book. He also wrote its foreword and introduction.

Of particular interest in today’s item is Bob’s succinct description of the Crossings method of analyzing a pericope—a text heard in church and used in preaching—so that it drives us to Christ and bathes us in his benefits. Here is the rationale for the schematic followed by every text study that you’ll find on the Crossings website. And for those who strive to use it, here is a prod not to shirk from the hard work of digging to the depths where the cross of Christ turns death into life.

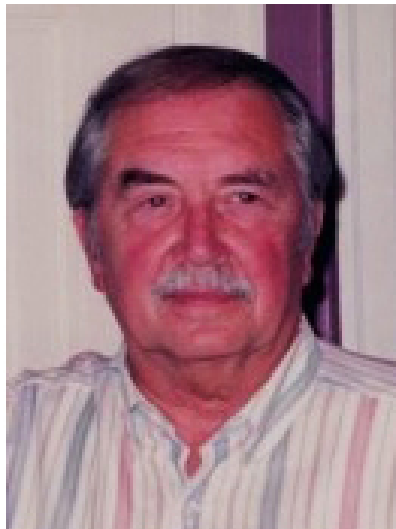
We should add that we’ve done some abridging and rearranging of the piece as originally written to make it intelligible in our web-based format. Bob laid out his illustrative study of Philippians 2 with the assumption that the reader would be

looking at two pages laid side-by-side, Diagnosis on the first page, Prognosis on the second page, Step One aligned horizontally with Step Six, Two with Five, Three with Four. That works in print, but not so well on a computer, to say nothing of a smart phone. One of these days we'll get the original lodged in our library in PDF format so that people so inclined can print it and lay those pages next to each other as Bob imagined they would.

Peace and Joy,
The Crossings Community

From Three to Four, Not Before! with a Text Study of Philippians 2:1-11

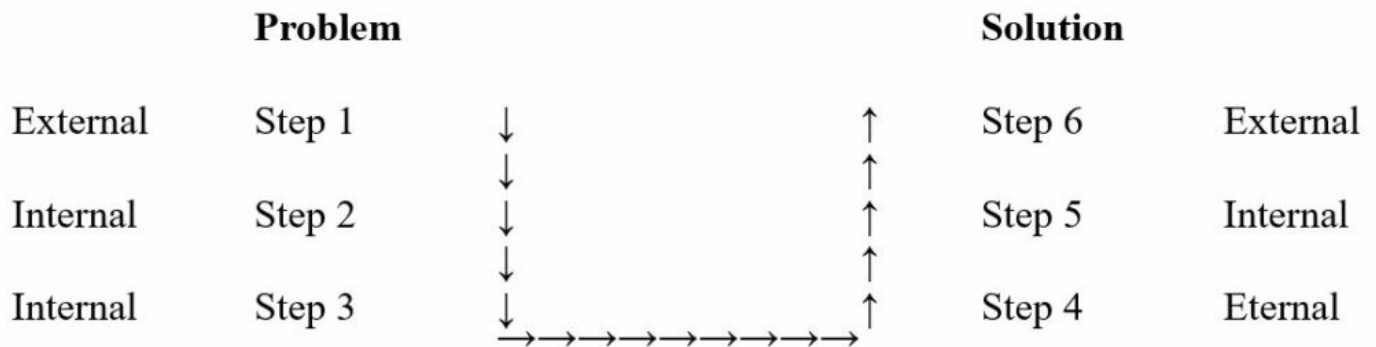
by Robert W. Bertram [1]



Bob Bertram

When laid out on a classroom blackboard, a Crossings text study follows a U-shaped progression.

Look at this diagram.



As we unpack and repack the biblical text, as we “program the pericope,” we usually do so in six steps. In the first three steps we let the text diagnose the readers’ Problem. We begin at the surface with the text’s initial Diagnosis: the readers’ problematic outward behavior. Then, Step Two, we probe beneath the surface to an Advanced Diagnosis, the readers’ “heart,” as Jesus would say, their unbelief. Finally, Step Three, the text plumbs the depths in a Final Diagnosis, the Last Analysis, where the readers’ problem is ultimately with God. (And vice versa.) On the blackboard these three diagnostic steps are added, one after the other, in descending order.

By now it may already be apparent why the “follow-UP”—Steps Four, Five, and Six, which are the Good News of God’s Prognosis—begins where it does: not at the *top* of the blackboard, that is, on the surface of the readers’ social-ethical behavior, but rather in the uttermost depths, in the “infernal” enmity between ourselves and God. And why way *down* there? Because that is where God’s own wondrous Solution in Christ begins—the initial Prognosis—namely, at the very pit of our God-forsakenness. It makes sense, therefore, to segue across to Step Four at the same low-point where we ended—died!—in the Final Diagnosis. But then, *after* Christ’s Crossing the hell of our godlessness for us, everything else which follows in Steps

Five and Six—faith instead of unfaith, good work rather than evil—is a looking up, one gift on top of another, grace upon grace. If Diagnosis is a downer, Prognosis is sheer lift, all the way back into our earthly lives.

Put it negatively. Think how tempted we are not to diagnose the human problem to its roots, our very Godlessness, and hence *not* to want a Solution radical enough to originate down there. Instead, the temptation is to confine the diagnosis to skin-deep symptoms—our ethical misbehavior, our interpersonal breakdowns—or at best to our subcutaneous psychological innards—our faithlessness, denial, despair—and then to settle for merely those *solutions* which likewise skin across the same shallow levels of ethos and pathos. That, as Luther would say, is to mistake the foam for the beer. That kind of theology, if it deserves the name, offers people no more than a little Jesus for little sins, that's all. No wonder Christ, the real Christ, is so often out of a job. He is constantly being told he is over-qualified.

Crossings is a way of remembering to Cross over only from 3 to 4, not before, since that finally is where sinners—all sinners!—hit bottom and Christ with them. No jaywalking from 1 to 6. No shortcuts from 2 to 5. No short-circuiting the utter depths of the divine pity, which is also faith's rock-bottom foundation. And when we do incur Christ's Crossing for us at the lowest bottom, from death to life, the healing/holying tremor is felt all the way up: 2 gives way to 5 (unfaith to faith) and 1 to 6 (lovelessness to love). Pathos and ethos, too, come alive when the Crossing underneath is seismic.

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Glory: Empty or Full? [1]
Philippians 2:1-11

DIAGNOSIS: What is the Problem?

Note 1. *Dia-gnosis* is a seeing-through, in this case God's seeing through us. That is bad news. So the diagnosis dare not be blurted out all at once but instead step by step: initial, advanced, final. Else it is too much to take in, like trying to fill a glass with the faucet on full-force.

Step 1–Initial Diagnosis: *Our External Problem—with One Another*

The problem with Paul's readers, at least their most conspicuous problem, is that because of each one's vainglorious self-concern they are losing Christ's concern for one another (vv. 2-4).

Note 1. Who are "Paul's readers"? Only the first century Philippians? Or also his readers today? Does the shoe fit? Then why not use "they" and "we" interchangeably?

Step 2–Advanced Diagnosis: *Our Internal Problem—with Christ*

Worse, if the readers are losing Christ's concern for one another they must also be losing the concern which Christ has for them. For if we don't believe in spending ourselves for others, we must not believe all that much in Christ's spending himself for us. And not believing him is to lose him.

Note 1. The King James version mistranslates verse five to read, "Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus." No, that is not where Paul places the distinction, between "this mind" which Christ has but which his readers do not have. He begins more subtly. He allows, at least for the sake of the

argument, that they too have Christ's mind, since that is what they assume. For example, Evodia thinks the same thing about herself that Christ thinks about her, namely, that she is dear to God. Trouble is, she does not think the same thing about Syntyche. And vice versa (4:2). But with that sort of self-inflation we not only get ourselves wrong, as if we were better than others, we also get Christ wrong, as if he loved us because we are better. That, frankly, is unbelief. That is not-having Christ—not only his "mind" but himself. No wonder we can't give his love. We don't have it from him to give.

Note 2. Paul does not state the problem quite as bluntly as this—not here. All he says is, "This mind which you have in Christ, have among yourselves." But what he does say about the solution helps us infer what the opposite, the problem is. That is the case also with the next step, Final Diagnosis.

Step 3—Final Diagnosis: *Our Infernal Problem—with God*

Worst of all, mindless of others because mindless of the real Christ, the self-gloriers face a humiliating end: their glory turns out to be hollow ("vain"), empty of all approval from God; they die as God's defeated competitors, compelled to "bend the knee" to the very Jesus they spurned, having to concede him—rather than themselves—dominion (vv. 9-11)

Note 1. This Final Diagnosis, where our gravest problem becomes not merely ourselves but God as well, an angered God, is the hardest step for Crossings students to make. Some never do. It would be easier if all we were up against were ourselves, our own sin—"sin and grace," our sin, God's grace. But

biblically, what we need saving from is not only ourselves, who are bad enough, but an accusing Creator, whose accusing (diagnosing) makes us even worse. So it is worse than “sin and grace.” It is “law and gospel,” God’s gospel versus God’s (the same God’s) law. Our whole folk religion protests, “People may be bad but they’re not as bad, or as badly off as all that.” Crossings risks a more radical source, scripture. Also, that does drain the swamp for all to see.

PROGNOSIS: What is the Solution?

Note 1. Pro-gnosis here means God’s seeing us through. This is Good News, almost too good to believe. Especially its news about believers prompts the folk religion to scoff, “People may be good but nobody is as good as all that.” So, again, it is best to break the news gently: initial, advanced, final—just so it comes across as too good not to believe.

Step 4—Initial Prognosis: *God’s Eternal Solution—for Us*

Unlike us, Christ did not seek to equal God by clutching onto what he had, deity though he was. Instead he humbled himself to become one of us slaves, Christ Jesus: empty, guilty, executed. Yet that is just how he did equal God, who in return for Christ’s identifying with us raised him from the dead and, to God’s lasting credit, gave him title to us and to the whole creation (vv. 6-11).

Step 5—Advanced Prognosis: *God’s Internal Solution—in Us*

Better yet, because the readers believe in this God-equaling, glorified slave as the Lord to whom they now belong, they are—as

believers—"in" him.

Note 1. Here again the "initial" stage focuses on that part of the solution which is most conspicuous. And what is always most conspicuous—to non-Christians "scandalous"—about the Christian solution is the way it, so to speak, changes the subject. Throughout the diagnosis it was we, the sinners, who were the subject of investigation. Now suddenly, with the prognosis, Christ Jesus becomes the subject. He and we change places. Luther called this "The Happy Exchange." (My students have learned to call it, affectionately, "The Sweet Swap.")

Note 2. The Christian solution is not what any practical person might do. Ordinarily if your congregation were divided by some vainglorious prima donnas who put themselves ahead of one another, wouldn't the practical thing be to confront them directly, say, by means of some sort of conflict management? Then why Paul's scenic route, reciting as he does this whole long "Christ Hymn" about Jesus' humiliation and exaltation? Ah, but that is because Paul grasps the depth of the problem: God. The other, "practical" approach only is shallow, it is law-shy and, worse, has no need of Christ. But popular? Oh, yes.

Step 6—Final Prognosis: *God's External Solution—through One Another*

Best of all, the readers begin to think with the same Christ-mind toward one another. True, if you look only at their behavior their one-anothering still falls far short. But if you look at it as Paul does, in his preaching, it already sounds

better than it looks. To hear him tell about it, their same-mindedness is already assured, just a matter of time. He preaches them into it. Or Christ does. At *this* level of give-and-take, preaching and hearing, saying so makes it so. Here, quite publicly, they are already a promising one-anotherhood.

Note 1. Their faith is not just inside *them*. As believers in Christ they are “in” *him*. They feel about themselves what he feels about them, with his same “mind” (v. 5). And how is that? Not indulgently or permissively but as being crucified and raised with him, his history as theirs. Their faith, internalizing his passion for them, echoes his *chutzpa*.

Endnote

[1] “From Three to Four, Not Before!” is dated May 14, 1996 in Bob’s typed manuscript. According to Michael Hoy’s bibliography, the appended Philippians text study was first written in 1983. On adding it to “Three to Four” Bob amended its title from “Glory: Empty or Full?” to “Glory: Vain or Sain?” We reverted here to the original title to spare readers a trip to the dictionary.

Thursday Theology: that the benefits of Christ be put to use
A publication of the Crossings Community