

# Getting Back on Track, with a Report from the Mockingbird Conference

Colleagues,

Nine dry Thursdays. That's what you've gotten since Maundy Thursday, when we last posted. It's not the first break you've seen in what's meant to be a weekly sequence, but it's certainly the longest. Other tasks have intruded. So has a stubborn writer's block.

To say that we're back on track would be promising too much. So we'll say instead that we're trying again. We're able today to tell you about some folks who, as of 2007, are suddenly touting the distinction between law and gospel in U.S. Episcopal circles. Those of you who identify as conscientious Lutherans—that's most of you, we're guessing—will find this refreshing, and perhaps exciting. It's certainly something for you to know about. Beyond that, we have a few other items in the hopper for you. We'll get them on their way in coming weeks.

Steven Kuhl wrote today's report for the Crossings' Board of Directors, which dispatched him to New York City this past April to check out the annual spring conference of [a group called Mockingbird](#). Board members Marcus Felde and Steve Albertin had been there two years earlier, and had come away convinced that Crossings would do well to develop some connections with the group. Steve, as you'll see, arrived at the same conclusion. Because he's writing for the Board, you'll find him lapsing at a certain point into some in-house shorthand that pertains to the Crossings six-step method for reading Biblical texts and assessing theological issues. To help you through that, here's a

quick review:

D-1/D-2/D-3 are levels of “diagnosis,” as in “what the Law exposes.” In light of that Law, what ails the sinners God seeks to save? Beneath sores on life’s surface (level 1) lie sores of the untrusting heart (level 2), which signal a deeper wound—deadly, beyond our capacity to heal—in our relationship with God (level 3).

P-4/-P-5/P-6 are levels of “prognosis,” as in “what the Gospel promises and delivers,” namely God’s will and work to heal. Comes first, in Christ crucified, the healing of that fundamental wound between God and sinners (level 4), the announcement of which leads, by the Spirit’s grace, to healed and trusting hearts (level 5), which give rise in turn to healed behaviors on the surface of life (level 6). We keep insisting at Crossings that there is no real healing at that final surface level until one has faced the dread of D-3 and tumbled to the wonder of P-4. Or to put that plainly, you can’t bark at somebody to start trusting God and expect that to happen if you don’t bother to show them how God in Christ has dealt, and is dealing still, with the deep-down issues that have driven the lack of trust in the first place.

With that as preface, we give you Steve.

Peace and Joy,  
Jerry Burce, for the editorial team

---

**Report on My Experience at the Mockingbird  
Conference**  
**by Steven Kuhl**

1. Thank you [to the board] for the opportunity to go to the Mockingbird Conference [in my capacity of the Executive Director of Crossings]. Overall, it was refreshing to hear people so excited about the importance of distinguishing law and gospel as a way to make the gospel clear. They are truly kindred spirits. My understanding of them not only grows out of the conference and its various presentations, but from the new book Mockingbird just published (first released at the conference) called [Law and Gospel: A Theology for Sinners \(and Saints\)](#). It is a short book of 91 pages, written in simple language, in collaboration by the three full-time staff people of Mockingbird: William McDavid, Ethan Richardson and David Zahl. None of them claim to be scholars, they offer the content of the book “for the purpose of commentary, study, discussion and critique.” I learned at the Mockingbird Conference that the organization is dedicated to the theological outlook its founders learned from Paul Zahl (David’s father) who studied for his doctorate in Systematic Theology at the University of Tübingen. Paul served most of his ministry as a parish priest, before becoming the Dean of the Cathedral in Birmingham, Alabama, (from 1994-2004), where he became known as a great preacher. In 2004 he also became known for his visible protest of the ordination of Gene Robinson to the Episcopate (flying a black flag over the Cathedral in Birmingham), causing some tensions in the community. In that same year he left that post to become the Dean and President at Trinity Episcopal School for Ministry in Ambridge, Pennsylvania, a seminary of the “Evangelical Wing” of the Episcopal Church that now does double duty of serving both the ECUSA and the NALC. He served as Dean and President until resigning in 2007 for personal reasons. He then took the position of Rector of All Saints Church in Chevy Chase until his retirement in

2009. Paul is a prolific writer, intent on bringing Reformation thought to bear on modern times. (For biographical basics and a list of his books, [click here](#).) Mockingbird Ministries was founded in 2007 by David Zahl, Paul's son, with the intention of relating faith and modern culture using the law-gospel theological outlook as taught by the elder Zahl. David, Mockingbird's full-time executive director, also works on the staff of Christ Episcopal Church, Charlottesville, VA, where he supervises their ministry to students and young adults. He published his first book, [\*A Mess of Help: From the Crucified Soul of Rock and Roll\*](#), in 2014. He has a keen interest in connecting the gospel to modern music and culture.

2. The conference was held in old St. George Episcopal Church building (of the Calvary-St. George Parish in Manhattan), a massive structure that was built with Carnegie money in the 19th century. I arrived there early and had a chance to introduce myself to David Zahl and talk to him about Crossings. I was impressed that he remembered both Marcus Felde and Steve Albertin from their attendance at a previous Mockingbird Conference. He was gracious and allowed me to display both the Crossings brochure I had made as well as two separate newsletters I had brought along. The conference consisted of plenary session presentations (a half hour in length) and breakout sessions (an hour in length) that covered a variety of topics. Each plenary session started out with a homily/devotion given by Jim Munroe. They were excellent. The end of each session was followed by a magician/comedy act to bring a little levity to the event. The plenary sessions were of two different types. Some were theological and some were cultural. I found it odd that there was no Q&A after the plenary presentations. The only exception was with Nadia Bolz-Weber, which I'll talk about

later. Those in attendance tended to be an even mix of 30 to 60 somethings. In general, I believe they said there were about 150 in attendance for the whole conference. The exception was Friday night (7 p.m.) when the featured speaker of the Conference, Nadia Bolz-Weber, spoke. Attendance then was about 300.

3. The theological presentations, I thought, were good, although they were mixed with regard to depth of theological understanding, especially as I listened to them through the template of our own Crossings Matrix. The common theme was the Gospel as UNCONDITIONAL grace and it was related clearly to language of the conference title, "Clean Slate: Absolution in Real Life." The Gospel as forgiveness was the dominant image. The best presentations were the first one, given by Jacob Smith (rector of Calvary-St. George Parish and founding member of the board of Mockingbird) and the last presentation by David Zahl, which was very winsome and theologically superb. Although there was virtually nothing said explicitly about what we call "the crossing from D-3 to P-4," it was implied, at least by David Zahl. In personal conversation he affirmed the idea D-3 and said it was the presupposition of his substitutionary understanding of the atonement, P-4. Sin exacts a debt before God and forgiveness comes at a cost to God, the death of Christ. The point is that Christ pays the cost, not us. In general, the human malady, as the speakers presented it, focused on human self-centeredness (D-2) and they frequently cited the image of being "turned-in-on-self" used by both Augustine and Luther. This malady tended to manifest itself in two ways: by our desire to justify ourselves by way of the law (manifested often by moralism and "busyness," both of which dilute the law of God) and by our aversion to the idea that we need forgiveness (i.e., the idea that we are OK because we do

our best). But as all the speakers also made clear, such pretentiousness is illusory because they underestimated the extent of the law's demand, which was presented as "be perfect as God is perfect," an impossible demand to meet. Numerous illustrations were given to show this malady at work in our culture. They are very good at mining the culture for illustrations. At best this fixation on "fulfilling the law" dulls our senses and, at worst, fuels our anxieties. It can never bring true "satisfaction."

The gospel, by contrast, was generally presented as a word in stark contrast to the law and generally in counter-cultural terms: "counter," not in the sense of "anti-", i.e. purely negative about what is going on in today's culture (as is typical of conservative fundamentalist types of Christianity) but in terms of combating the moralism and justification by busyness that pervades our culture. The gospel is sympathetic to those held captive under law, and law is the defining feature of culture. Missing was the tension about the law being not only that which kills, but also that which gives some measure of "security" as a law of retribution—Luther's "political use"—to this fallen world. (See Werner Elert's [\*Law and Gospel\*](#), 14-15. [Editor's note: this superb booklet has long been out of print; [a synopsis is available online](#), courtesy of Singapore theologian Martin Yee.] ) Likewise missing was Bob Bertram's idea of the law as the Creator's critical support network, and the paradox that "we can't live with it and we can't live without it." Without that idea and paradox, Mockingbird's argument becomes vulnerable, I think, to the charge of antinomianism, a charge of which they are aware and that they try to address (Mockingbird, *Law and Gospel*, p. 85-6). Presenters were also explicit in criticizing the purpose-driven outlook of Rick Warren and the prosperity gospel of Joel

Osteen.

The gospel as presented focused on grace alone (as forgiveness and Justification) and Christ alone (as the Giver of this grace), but there was no talk of “faith alone.” That made me think about the language of “unconditional grace” that dominated the talks. It sounded more like Calvin’s “unconditional election” or modernism’s “universalism” (see Bertram’s [A Time for Confessing](#), p. 172-183) than Luther’s “justification by faith.” I don’t think they intend that, but more thought is needed on the interrelationship of the THREE “alone’s” of the gospel. (“Faith alone” is also conspicuously absent in their new book, *Law and Gospel*.) Still, in Mockingbird’s telling there is a “condition” that applies to grace – and it is faith! “By faith you have been saved...” (Eph. 2:8). The caveat is that while this “faith” is not our creation, it is a creation of the Word and the Spirit (contra [Arminianism’s](#) accent on free will), it is certainly our possession (as Luther underscores); and as our possession it constitutes the new foundation (as faith in Christ) out of which we live (because Christ and the Spirit are present and active in us by faith). Beyond that, there seems to be little talk about P-5. However, talk of P-6 as “the fruit of the Spirit” was a very important theme and correlating it to D-1 (the cultural specifics) was very evident. That’s where Mockingbird’s interest in relating faith and culture comes in loud and clear. Cultural studies are very important to them for correlating the gospel’s answer to the culture’s question. Though no explicit reference was made to Tillich, I thought I could hear his method of correlation at work in their law-gospel method. In addition, the Mockingbird *Law and Gospel* has a huge section on the “Fruits of the

Gospel” and a very overt critique of the “third use of law” which has become the dominant way of clouding the gospel today. I’m going to quote their footnote on this at length, because I think it is so good.

The “third use of the Law,” which occupies a tiny spot in John Calvin’s work and is nonexistent in Luther’s, means that the Law is needed as a motivational tool—like a whip to a “lazy sluggish donkey” (Calvin)—to spur the believer to good works. It’s needed as a guide. This “third use” has exercised enormous influence in Christianity over the years. In Protestantism, it has grown from a page and half in Calvin’s 1100-page work to the primary theme in many church pulpits. Either it is assumed that the Gospel of forgiveness is for non-Christians in the congregation or for relatively new believers, but after a while, our main focus should be on living a better life [as defined by the law]. This is probably not the dominant theme in Christian history, and it is certainly not one in the work of the Reformers. But because the human heart is always inclined to the Law, to wanting rules and conditions so that we may exercise control, the theme crops up regularly. (p. 63)

In this regard, understanding P-6 as the fruit of faith/Gospel and not as the work of the third use of the law, Crossings and Mockingbird are natural allies. Indeed, if you look online at the numerous groups and sites that call themselves “confessional Lutherans” today, you will see that many of them tend to assert their “confessional pedigree” by arguing *for* the “third use of the law,” making the law the guide to the Christian life, and *against* those of us who consistently apply the distinction of law and gospel to say that “the Holy Spirit is the guide of the Christian Life. Mockingbird rightly calls this Spirit-guided life a life of freedom (because

sin in the heart is conquered and love arises by inward movement of Christ and the Spirit) and the law-driven life a life as slavery (because sin still reigns in the heart and it is subject to the punishment of the law). But in saying that, they would do well to clarify the character of the Christian as “at once entirely righteous and entirely sinful” (*toto simul iustus et peccator*).

4. The cultural presentations were interesting, but lacked connection to the theological themes. The speakers had impressive credentials. One, Jamin Warren, is a culture reporter for the Wall Street Journal and co-founder of video arts and culture company, “Kill Screen.” He spoke of online “gaming” as a model of Christian freedom (=we make up the rules). I found it interesting but not very helpful. It seems to me the video game phenomenon feeds our desire to “be like God” rather than frees us to be faithful disciples in God’s world. Another, Jim Gilmore, is a philosopher of business (of sorts) who co-founded Strategic Horizons, LLP, does adjunct lecturing at Darren Graduate School of Business at the University of Virginia and guest lectures at Westminster Seminary in California on Apologetics and Cultural Hermeneutics. He presented a typology of various kinds of hermeneutical lenses he is working on for looking at culture. Again, there was no real connection to the theme. No Q&A.
5. The major keynote speaker of the Conference was Nadia Bolz-Weber. She drew some three hundred to the conference at her Friday night, 7 p.m. presentation. She is certainly a rock star: an entertaining speaker, an in-your-face-kind of person, who tells stories of grace in a humorous stand-up comedic way. I’ve read her book [\*Pastrix\*](#) (will produce a review of it sometime), heard her speak on Wisconsin Public Radio (while in Madison for a speaking gig) and now

heard her at Mockingbird. She certainly has a "grace alone" kind of theology and is an eloquent advocate for what one might call the "lepers" of our society (i.e., those who do not fit in) of which she counts herself as one. She speaks positively and intentionally about as being Lutheran, because it is the tradition where she heard all about "grace." She used familiar Lutheran language about justification, the theology of the cross, Christian freedom, and about being simultaneously sinners and saints throughout her presentation even as she refracts it through the theological lens of God wanting us to be ourselves, our own authentic selves. The foil over against which she speaks is the conservative, legalistic evangelical Christianity she grew up with—and rejected!—because of how it pietistically defined God as a punishing God and true Christians as those who exhibit a well-defined Christian personality-type. That is inauthentic in her mind. She started her presentation by giving (reading) a sermon she preached at her church on the "fall story" of Genesis 3, arguing that it is not a "fall story," but a "being duped story." From there she went on to tell (humorous) stories of grace. She is very self-conscious about using her own life as a foil to show that even a "f\_\_\_ up" like her can be acceptable to God while being herself. The point of the gospel and the desire of God is that we stop hurting ourselves, leading self-destructive lives, and become the selves God created us to be. I found very little "authentic" Law-Gospel theology in her message, appealing though it was. She explicitly criticized "atonement" theories in her talk, apparently believing the caricature of them as being akin to justifying divine child abuse, God getting his pound of flesh by punishing Jesus instead of us. The cross is the symbol of the "shit" we bring on ourselves or have to put

up with from others, not the confrontation of the mercy of God with the wrath of God. God is monolithically love. Jesus' crucifixion is the sign that God is always there with us in the midst of the muck. The point is to see that and to understand that that is what is to define us. What defines us is God's unconditional love. I did ask David Zahl if he agreed with her rejection of D-3 and the idea of Christ's atoning death, P-4. (I had not yet heard his excellent summing-up presentation.) He said he did not. He held to a "substitutionary" view of the atonement, which is stated in *Law and Gospel* and which came through in his excellent closing talk, but with no reference to Nadia. (He did reference things he liked about Nadia's talk.) He went on to say that they did not necessarily bring her to the conference because they agreed with everything she said, but because they are interested in hearing what others have to say AND that she would draw a big crowd. In addition to Nadia's talk, there was an interchange the next day between Nadia and Tullian Tchividjian, the Coral Ridge champion of Law-Gospel theology. I learned that Nadia and Tullian are "good" friends, though on the opposite poles of the "moral questions" of our day, but nevertheless in sync on the message of the gospel of grace and the need to distinguish law and gospel to keep morality morality and gospel gospel. As they spoke, it sounded more and more to me like the idea of the "distinction" of law and gospel meant the "separation" of law and gospel, the way Jaroslav Pelikan used the word "separation" to describe the gnostic position in Volume 1 of [The Christian Tradition](#) (pp. 71-80). I hope my meaning is clear and that I am not misrepresenting what they said.

6. I'm going to stop my description here. As I said, I really enjoyed the Mockingbird conference and people, and think we have a lot in common. I also find them open to

discussion and learning more about the art of distinguishing law and gospel in order to clarify the gospel and bring its liberating power to those burdened by law-laden modern culture. I hope we can find a way to network with them in bringing the law-gospel outlook to today's church and world.

Peace,  
Steve Kuhl