

God Hidden/God Revealed—an Essential Bertram Corrective, per Matthew Becker (Part 2 of 2)

Colleagues,

This is a continuation of the item you received a week ago, in which Matt Becker laid out an argument between Crossings' own Robert W. Bertram and another Lutheran theologian, Ronald F. Thiemann, a former Dean of Harvard Divinity School. As Matt pointed out (and will do so again as you continue reading), this argument mirrored the earlier one between the German theologians Werner Elert and Karl Barth that you read about in the two posts prior. I will add that anyone operating as a thoughtful student of the Word in today's mainline milieu, be she pastor, theologian, or member of a congregational council deciding how to allocate the mission budget, will find herself swimming in the same disagreeable tides. That's why this essay needs your own careful reading. It also calls, perhaps, for a supplemental reflection on exactly how it is that a highflying argument between egghead theologians plays out in those conversations around the table in the church basement about where to spend the mission money. I will stick that in the messy, overflowing hopper of things to work on. If someone else would like to tackle it in the meantime, let me know.

I should mention that today's offering comes with an appendage. Matt crafted five questions for discussion by his audience at the Crossings Conference last January. Each of them contains additional material that Matt plucked from Bertram's glosses on Thiemann's *Revelation and Theology* (see last week's post for

bibliographic details.) The questions themselves bear extended and careful thinking, so I pass them along.

Peace and Joy,

Jerry Burce

From Faith to Faith: Knee Bracing for Troubled Times

Deus Absconditus* and *Deus Revelatus

according to Werner Elert and Robert Bertram

(Part 2.2: Bertram)

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What is at stake here? Why should these two theological disagreements (the one between Elert and Barth, and the one between Bertram and Thiemann) concern us today? Well, for starters, the questions of God and of how we come to know God are still pressing issues for us. The epistemology of faith (for example, the debates about philosophical foundationalism and post-modern non-foundationalism) is still a key issue in academic theology. But even beyond the academy, Christian teaching about revelation is difficult for many to accept in our era. Is God real? If so, how does one know? Is the Christian faith true? How does one know? Is it authentic? Relevant? Within the Christian community, further questions arise along this path: Is God only a giver or is God also a respondent to us humans? If God is a responder, are all of God's responses to us gracious? Might God's revelation be other than gracious, a

revelation of divine wrath, as Luther discovered from his own experience, an experience that he thought was confirmed in the teachings of Isaiah and the Apostle Paul? Does Jesus merely “enact” God’s grace or is Jesus also the sufficient *reason* or basis for it? Does God’s grace succeed no matter what the human response to it is or only when humans respond to it with a particular God-pleasing response, namely, *faith*?

Bertram’s criticism of Thiemann’s understanding of the nature of the revelation of God is still instructive. I think this criticism is pretty devastating but also quite comforting. It is wide-ranging, so I will focus on only four issues.

(1) Contrary to Barth and those influenced by him (e.g., we could add Robert Jenson and Hans Frei to that list), the Christian doctrine of revelation is not about identifying who God is. Rather, revelation is “what enables us to see how God identifies us” (Bertram gloss, vii). “That is the only way we know God, how he regards us—and that, how he regards us, he wishes us to know only through the Law and the Promise” (ibid). God is unveiled by law and promise. We, too, are unveiled by law and promise, and we are then concealed in Christ, according to the gospel promise.

(2) Contrary to Thiemann, the “hidden God” does not mean, “the unknown and unknowable God beyond the revelation in Christ.” Rather, “God hidden” is, according to Bertram (following Luther), “all too knowable and precisely for that reason unbearable, who though knowable should not be made known, ‘preached,’ as only ‘God revealed’ in the Gospel should be. Yet it is the Gospel itself, what Thiemann might call the Christian narrative’s own ‘logic of promise,’ not just scattered grim Scripture quotations, which entails this gruesome *Deus absconditus* as the Gospel’s negative converse” (Bertram, “Review Symposium,” 70). God’s prevenience is not solely a matter of

grace. Apart from Christ, God remains a very real threat. This incoherence within God cannot be resolved except by faith in Jesus Christ, crucified and risen. This incoherence in God is that which necessitated Christ in the first place, who functions in a far more radical manner than merely to identify who God is. Of course, "the only thing worse than taking that destructive though valid *Deus absconditus* out of hiding and proclaiming it is the sort of revelationism which, by theological fiat, defines it out of existence as untrue. To be sure, that way the whole God-problem is obviated in advance, modern Christianity is spared its most scandalous cross-and, alas, its closest theological affinity with unbelievers" (Bertram, "Review Symposium," 69-70). By avoiding the problem of the hidden God we shortchange Jesus. We "under-ask" what the gospel accomplishes.

(3) Jesus does not merely reveal who God is but actually accomplishes something *coram deo*, namely, the justification of sinners who need to be so justified before God. Christ did this by completely identifying himself with sinners, dying the death of a God-damned criminal on the cross. According to the apostolic witness, the cross of Christ is the means by which God's wrath was revealed against Christ and, much more importantly, the means by which that wrath was borne away (and concealed!) by Christ. "God made him who knew no sin to be sin for us so that in him we might become the righteousness of God" (2 Cor. 5.21). Bertram, following Luther, identifies Christ as the cursed One, the highest, the greatest sinner of all time, the only sinner.[ref]For more on this theme, see Robert Bertram, "How Our Sins Were Christ's: A Study of Luther's Galatians (1531)," in *The Promising Tradition: A Reader in Law-Gospel Reconstructionist Theology*, 2d ed. (St. Louis: Concordia Seminary in Exile, 1974), 7-21.[/ref] Christ reveals "the depth of God's affinity with the unpleasing" (Bertram, "Review Symposium," 70). Any other way of understanding Christ (and what

Christ reveals) under-uses Christ. In fact, such under-utilization makes Christ and his death useless. So the revelation of wrath and the revelation of the gospel are at the same time the revelation of Christ's sinnerhood and the concealment of God's wrath. It also spells our concealment in Christ until our own glorious unveiling on the Last Day. That gospel concealment in Christ is good news for sinners! Christ was made a curse for us, was made sin for us. Christ put all sins to death in his body, and we are in his body through baptism. In baptism, the Spirit has put us to death with Christ and raised us anew in him. In the end, "God's Christ so identifies with unbelievers that he not only assails their illusions about God but agreeably confirms their own worst fears. It truly is God, regardless of whatever else, from whom they need to be saved, and saved by being replaced... by a whole new, plausible identity..." an identity of faith, "to which God in turn is now the pleased respondent" (Bertram, "Review Symposium," 70-71). This point is made again and again in Bertram's marginalia. (This issue is the centerpiece of D3 diagnosing in the hermeneutics of Crossings.) I'll quote just one instance: "Christ is not only 'the narrated content' of the promise—in the radical sense that he is the very gift to us which the Promiser promises and gives—but also he is (i.e., his historical biography is) the reason why this Gift is given and indeed the Reason, the Ground, why God is gracious to us in the first place" (Bertram gloss, 98).

(4) In order for God's promise to work, faith of a specific nature is called for, namely, faith in Jesus Christ, crucified and risen for the forgiveness of one's sins. Bertram returns to this issue again and again. He repeatedly asks, as he does at the bottom of p. 104: "Does RFT appreciate how bound the promise is to faith?" (Bertram gloss, 104) The primary commission to the church is to preach God's law and God's gospel promise for the

sake of eliciting repentance and summoning forth faith in the promise. And what is the character of this particular faith? Is it not *trusting* that despite the fact that we anger God because of our sin and sins, we are nevertheless pleasing to God for Christ's sake? Apart from this trusting faith, God's promise becomes judgment and wrath. That is the revelation of the law, about which Paul speaks in Romans 1-3. Talk about an enormous incoherence between *Deus absconditus* and *Deus revelatus in Christo*! So Bertram faults Thiemann for underplaying the role of faith, which itself underplays the gospel promise. Another example: On p. 94, Thiemann writes, "Truth and falsity characterize ordinary religious language when it is used to mold lives through prayer, praise, preaching, and exhortation. It is only on this level that human beings linguistically exhibit their truth or falsity, their correspondence or lack of correspondence to the Ultimate Mystery" (94). Bertram's comment? "That's ok as a nomological criterion of truth [that is, as a criterion in relation to God's law] but it would not suffice as an evangelical one. It's like saying, since talk (also religious talk, God-talk) is cheap, the only kind of talk which is capable of being true religiously or false religiously is that which is lived out in practice. But then, how about that supremely evangelical claim to truth which asserts that sinful believers, who are still much more sinners than believers, have their faith reckoned as righteousness—even though their faith not only is far from fully lived out in practice but is not even very full-fledged as faith?" (Bertram gloss, 94). If you have a weak-kneed faith, take heart from that observation! Talk about bracing faith!

On the next page Bertram writes: [Earlier] RFT [Ron Thiemann] "had quoted ML [Martin Luther] as saying, in effect, that the 'promise' always requires 'faith'—what RFT himself calls 'human reception.' How seriously will RFT be able to take that kind of

conditionality? The promise is being 'conditioned' upon its reception? No. Yet (at least for ML, if not for RFT) the promise which is not received by faith is simply not fulfilled. It does not deliver" (Bertram gloss, 95). And on the next page, in criticism of Thiemann's claim that "the promise is simultaneously a pardon and a declaration of righteousness," Bertram replies, "It is the forgiven sinners faith which is 'declared' to be her 'righteousness,' and that *propter Christum*—viz., because of the *Christus* whom faith has hold of" (Bertram gloss, 96). Bertram strikes this same note in his second review: "What the promise reveals, then, is not a God who, all along, would have been savingly gracious anyway, with or without Christ, believe it or not, and who needed Christ only to be publicly identified as such. There is a bolder alternative for making the promise all-inclusive, a hope which, for Christians at least, is non-negotiable: not by relieving the Promiser's dependence on faith but by using the promise" (Bertram, "Review Symposium," 71). By using the promise in this way in proclamation, the promise actually accomplishes what it describes. Faith is the way in which a promise gets fulfilled! The gospel promise then is all the foundation one needs for faith in that promise to be properly braced.

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For further thought—

(1) What do you make of Bertram's Elertian use of God's wrath? He faults Thiemann for thinking that the biblical category of "promise" is only one of "graciousness." "The 'logic of promise' would seem to apply quite as well to *threat*" (Bertram gloss, 110). This also applies to Bertram's appeal to the apostles' claim that on the last day Jesus will serve as God's appointed judge/agent. (See also p. 132 in Thiemann's book.)

(2) Bertram faults Thiemann's Christology for failing to stress "how deeply who-Jesus-is depends on who-we-are—we and all other sinners. Thus, if the Matthean account of our universal human neediness is defective, then so is the account of Jesus—not only as Jesus but as the Son of God. Not as though Jesus' divine Sonship could be inferred from our sinful condition. The Gospel is not deductible from the law. But neither does the Gospel retain its validity apart from the validity of that 'evangelical exposition of the law' which the Gospel entails as a basic presupposition" (Bertram gloss, 114). How would you describe the "evangelical exposition of the law" which Bertram stressed is a basic presupposition of the gospel?

(3) Thiemann initially downplays what the obedience of Jesus to the will of God entails, namely, *his complete identification with sinners*. (Thiemann does refer to this at the bottom of p. 128.) Bertram: "Jesus' identification as Son of God lies not only in his obedience to the Father's will. That much, by itself, would be plausible enough. What taxes credulity is what his obedience is claimed to consist in, namely, his '*identification with sinners*.' That *that* is 'the fulfillment of righteousness,' hence, 'obedience to God's will,' is the challenge to faith—and to the evangelist's portrayal. It finally is a question of the most basic relation between God and humanity" (Bertram gloss, 118). How are we to preach Jesus' complete identification with sinners today? Strengths and weaknesses in this type of Christology?

(4) Bertram holds that "one of the book's most fatal flaws" (Bertram gloss, 110) is its down-playing of the role of faith in fulfilling the promise. Permit one further gloss from Bertram:

Poor RFT! How he struggles to recognize, to do justice to the mutuality, the correlative character of divine promise and human response (faith), & yet how fearful he is that, in

conceding the latter, he might encourage those who see the human response as something less than the doing of God! The real question, which he fails to see, is a Christological one: What is it about Christ, in whom such faith is based, which gives the faith its value—its unique value? RFT has somehow been suckered into thinking that what gives faith its value is that it is the creation by God, the prevenient initiator. But that much is true of everything we have from the Creator. That line of argument also sets one up to conclude, not implausibly, that unfaith—or at least the permitting of it—also comes at the initiative of God. No, to locate the value of faith in its creation by prevenient God does not nearly account for why, in the Christian gospel, faith is so uniquely valuable. Only the value of Christ, the object of faith, can account for that. But that Christological explaining is reinforced, is ‘necessitated’ by, the negative evidence which the Law reveals about all human beings, Christians and non-Christians.” (Bertram gloss, 149)

But if faith plays the sole role in fulfilling the promise, what are we to make of the universalist aim/claim of the gospel promise? And of the evident fact that so many human addressees reject the promise?! Does the latter question not take us back to the mystery of the *deus absconditus* (ala Luther in *The Bondage of the Will*)?

(5) On p. 109, Bertram criticizes Thiemann for thinking that Thiemann can avoid incoherence in his theology. Bertram: “I suspect that sooner or later any Christian theology is going to incur some kind of contradiction [or] at least incoherence. So will RFT’s, if he’s a candid enough Lutheran. My question would be: Is this contradiction at least one which was occasioned by the theology itself—by the Gospel? By God?—or was it merely a contradiction occasioned by the [oppositions?] in foundational epistemology exposed by recent American philosophers?” (Bertram

gloss, 109) What do you think?