

IAMS XII

Colleagues:

After 41 day and 40 nights (sounds almost Biblical) we're back home—and grateful to Robin Morgan (as of yesterday a grandmother) for keeping ThTh flowing for these past weeks. My plan is not a show-and-tell of all that happened during those days – though there are a lot of wild stories – but to focus on three pieces of our time away. For this week's posting the International Association for Mission Studies conference (IAMS XII) in Balatonfüred, Hungary; next week, d.v., the July conference honoring the 200th birthday of Wilhelm Loehe, major figure in USA Lutheranism in the 1800s; and the week thereafter some observations on church life in Germany and Hungary, e.g., the sermons in the six Sunday liturgies where we worshipped, one of them even by yours truly in Budapest.

The theme of the IAMS conference (August 16-23) was "Human Identity and the Gospel of Reconciliation: Agenda for Mission Studies and Praxis in the 21st Century." Over 250 participants showed up, representing 48 countries, a veritable multitude of "nations, tribes and peoples and languages." Yes, and in our conference worship we came close to Rev. 7:10: with all this mixture "crying out in a loud voice, saying, 'Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne and to the Lamb!'" Worship leaders included the Lutheran bishop of Hungary, the rector of the Reformed University in Budapest, Russian Orthodox priests, Pentecostals from Bulgaria, African Evangelicals, Dutch Protestants, and the bishop of the Roman Catholic Church of Serbia. A tad of what in seminary days was called "realized eschatology."

For four days of the week a keynote speaker got us started: Roman Catholic Miklos Tomka (Hungary), Religious Identity and

the Gospel of Reconciliation; Presbyterian Lalsangkima Pachuau (Mizoram, India), Ethnic Identity and the Gospel of Reconciliation; ELCA Lutheran Wi Jo Kang (Korea/USA), National Identity and the Gospel of Reconciliation. The fourth one focused on the upcoming Edinburgh conference 2010 commemorating the 100th anniversary of Edinburgh 1910, the world missionary conference that triggered the mission-ecumenism of the 20th century: Baptist Brian Stanley (England), Mission and Human Identity in the Light of Edinburgh 2010.

For one whole day the participants moved away from the conference site to get close to various aspects of religious life in Hungary. Of the eight options. Marie went back to Budapest to learn about Judaism past and present. I headed south to meet Roman Catholics and the gypsies in their congregations in several parishes.

At six points in the conference program small interest groups gathered to share their mission studies research in eight different areas. Eighty-five IAMS members presented papers. That's where my contribution, "Luther as Mission Theologian," had its audience.

Now ten days later, here is a Balaton retrospective. I'll begin with Bill Burrows' comment in the evaluation session way at the end. Bill said something like this: "For three IAMS gatherings now – South Africa [2000], Malaysia [2004], and now Hungary [2008] – we've had a major theological concept as one of the two key terms linked in our conference theme. But we've not given the theological term any serious attention in our discussions. The second term dominates our conversation. This year it was identity. Reconciliation was not given any comparable serious attention –Biblical, church-historical, yes, missiological."

In telling you about the IAMS gatherings in [2004](#) and [2000](#) in

days gone by I registered a similar complaint. Themes for those two events were “Integrity of Mission in the Light of the Gospel” and “Reflecting Jesus Christ Crucified and Living in a Broken World.” At those gatherings the explicit theological piece of the theme – Jesus Christ Crucified and Living, The Light of the Gospel – did not get assigned as topic for a keynote speech. Then—and now with reconciliation too—it was generally taken for granted that “we all know what that means,” so now let’s give attention to the broken world and mission integrity.

But is there consensus on the theological anchor-terms in those conference themes? Not really. What all of us IAMS members DO know is that at these cardinal points of Christian theology the differences in our marvelous ecumene would surface, so tactically it may seem wise to eschew going there. But if for this time we’d simply had someone give us a keynote presentation on the explicit Greek terms for reconciliation in the New Testament [katallassoo and katalagee], the differences in our respective theological traditions would surely have surfaced, but we’d be discussing NT texts and NT theology and not each other’s theological tradition – with all the “collateral” prejudgments (and collateral damage) that can accompany that.

Specifically important for this year’s program would have been that the NT use of that reconciliation term (unique in St. Paul) does NOT mean “enemies becoming friends,” which is the common meaning of the term in today’s English. And it was that meaning intended every time I heard the term used at our assembly. With one explicit exception. Keynoter Brian Stanley took us to the Greek term in 2 Cor. 5 and showed in that fundamental reconciliation text that “katallagee” means “exchange.” It’s a commercial term from the Hellenistic marketplace, not a term for restoring fractured human relations.

But we didn't hear Brian, or if we did, we soon forgot it, and "friendship restored" took over again as the reality of reconciliation. How might our week-long conversations have been different, yes, even improved, if that had been the meaning we'd all used for reconciliation? Not that "restored friendship" is unimportant, but if *kataallagee* means something else when it shows up in the NT, why not mine that treasure? What consequences are there when "God the Exchanger" is put at the center of *Missio Dei*? What consequences for our "identity" discussion when God's own Son changes identities as Paul brashly claims in 2 Cor 5? "Christ assumes the identity of sinner, so that sinners might take on the identity of righteous." "A great exchange indeed"—as one old Christmas carol puts it.

Such a NT study on those key terms, focused on 2 Cor. 5—yes, reading the text in terms of identities new and old—was exactly what Christoffer Grundmann offered in the discussion group he chaired at Balaton. If his had been the first keynote presentation, it was not only conversation that would have been different. His paper did not move from the Gospel of Reconciliation TO issues of Human Identity. He tracked out how the Gospel of Reconciliation IS all about human identity: Who we ARE—better, who we BECOME, when "God was in Christ reconciling the world unto himself."

When Paul elsewhere speaks of the "scandal" of the Gospel, it is precisely this scandalous exchange he's speaking of. God MAKES His Beloved Son TO BE sin for us (though on his own he KNEW NO SIN), so that we might BECOME the (very) RIGHTEOUSNESS OF GOD in Him." Granted, "restored friendship" is one element of the result, but God is being wildly friendly to sinners in the reconciliation action without any prior signals that the intended receivers are going to be friendly to God in return. In fact, it is precisely "while we were yet sinners" that God unilaterally initiates this incredible exchange—righteousness

exchanged for sin. Luther rendered the NT term with his “froehlicher Wechsel,” a joyous exchange—translated by Bob Bertram as “a sweet swap.”

OK, some may say—especially if they haven’t yet heard Grundmann’s essay—“Reconciliation is indeed a big deal, possibly bigger than we remembered at Balaton, but how does that help us at the “Human Identity” pole of our bi-polar theme? How does that help us with the manifold identity conflicts in our own day?

Just this. The Human Identity topic is central to the first term in our theme. It is not that “reconciliation” is the theological element and “identity” is the sociological/anthropological element, and at IAMS XII we want to bring them together. Not so. “Identity” is a primal theological term. God engineering the exchange twixt Jesus and us is an identity change—big time. Sinner and Righteous are identity terms! We agreed at Balaton that identity is a “relational reality.” So here too it is in the sinner’s God-relationship, Paul claims, that God in Christ is first off exchanging identities—Christ gets the sinner’s identity, sinners get Christ’s righteous identity. A great exchange idneed!

So the conference theme might have unfolded like this:

1. The Gospel of Reconciliation is an identity change at the primal relationship human beings have with God.
2. Before any encounter with that Gospel all of us humans have multiple identities as God’s creatures, manifold relationships in the human webs and networks into which we were born and grew up. Most of them without our ever having chosen them.
3. And they persist even after we have encountered the joyful exchange of the Gospel of Reconciliation.

4. How does the primal identity change in our God-relationship intersect with all those other identities we have?
5. The Biblical text that accompanied the promotional material for IAMS XII (Galatians 3:26-29) was explicit and graphic. For those enjoying the new identity of “children of God through faith,” the prior identities are wiped out! Gone! “There is no longer Jew or Greek, slave or free, male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s offspring—heirs according to the promise.”
6. In the plenary sessions it got no attention. What might have happened if it had? What if that feisty thesis from St. Paul had been in focus in our conversations? New human identity flowing from the Gospel of reconciliation—Abraham’s offspring, heirs of the promise—wipes out all prior identities—including the primordial ones of race, ethnicity, social class, gender. They are ‘no longer.’ Isn’t that what Paul says in Gal. 3? How can that be true?
7. I don’t remember that text ever surfacing in the discussions where I was present. That was surprising, I think, since the executive and conference committee commended that text to us from the very outset. How did it get lost at Balaton?
8. Though I never heard Gal. 3:26-29 cited in the plenary sessions during the week, there were hints of it now and then. One I recall, like Bill Burrows’ comment, came right near the end in Norberto Saracco’s response to Wi Jo Kang. Wi Jo didn’t clarify in his presentation just how God’s reconciliation in Christ connected with Korean reunification. Norberto thought that was needed and I think he offered a solution—but oh so subtly. It is “partly right . . . that the Good News of the Gospel . . .

undermines national identity...true that national identity is linked with religion.” That sounds close to Paul, at least “partly” close.

9. Wi Jo responded citing his own Lutheran language for God’s ambidextrous work in the world—with God’s “left hand” working to preserve the world (e.g., a unified Korean people) and God’s “right hand” work in Christ to “reconcile that world unto himself.” Same God, two distinctly different projects. So, yes, even if Korean reunification never comes [God forbid!], God’s reconciling offer to all Koreans is not diminished.
10. I happen to know that one of Wi Jo’s teachers (mine too) articulated God’s ambidextrous activity with the acronym DEXTRA, Latin word for right hand. He’s done this complete with visual presentations of his own two human hands:

D: *The works of God’s two hands are DIFFERENT (holding the hands up and apart, one with thumb on this side, the other with thumb on the other side).* **E:** *The works of God’s two hands are EQUIVALENT (five fingers here, five there).*

X: *X is for the CROSS. In the Cross of Christ, God’s right hand intersects the left (hands together, thumbs up, with right hand fingers “crossing” into those of the left).*

T: *God’s right hand work in Christ first of all TRUSSES the left, supports and sustains it (visually demonstrated)*

R: *. . . but begins to REPLACE the left (right hand—still interwoven with the left—starts to overturn the left. E.g., the “old commandment” of “love your neighbor as yourself” gives way to Christ’s “new commandment . . . as I have loved you”).*

A: . . . and eventually ANTIQUATES it (left hand–like the “heaven and earth” of the old creation “passes away”).

Wi Jo didn't say all that by any means, but he could have.

Another hint of Galatians three came in the discussion following Miklos Tomka's address. He concluded his paper by telling us that the widespread attraction of “religion” in former East Block countries needed deeper probing. Needed at the base was “the healing of wounded identities” as “the first step to reconciliation.” When asked in the discussion for his own words for what is being sought, he said: “God. . . redemption . . . a genuine hope for the future.” After session concluded I mentioned “promise” (from Gal. 3) to him as a unifying term for all three. “Next time I'll mention four words,” he said.

A third hint of Galatians three came in Kima Pachuau's presentation, but he didn't go far enough. Kima convinced us that relationships are fundamental to identity. Yet he never got around to the new God-relationship explicit in being “Abraham's offspring, heirs of the promise.” Expressed in the language of 2 Cor. 5, this is the new identity that comes from being a reconciled sinner instead of “just” a sinner in whose identity God still “counts trespasses.”

Kima highlighted Imago Dei as the Gospel's word for human identity, but didn't move on to Imago Christi as the “even-better-than-that” new identity that flows from God's reconciling work. And he hyped the neighbor-love “as yourself”, but eschewed the New Commandment and its even better “as I have loved you” new criterion.

I have a hunch that Kima's and my respective heritages—Calvinist and Lutheran—are surfacing here. And that brings us full circle to the topic at the outset. If at IAMS XII we'd specifically

focused on Biblical reconciliation texts, our denominational heritages would surely have been in the mix. But instead of arguing Luther or Calvin—or Thomas or Wesley or whichever theological tradition, we'd have been working from scriptures—wrestling with Paul and John and Matthew—to get our theological bearings. And as Milos told us with his final 5 words, “And this is not a little.”

Peace and Joy!

Ed Schroeder

P.S. We've been home long enough to learn that registrations continue to come in for the Crossings Conference Oct. 20-22. But there still is room. So why not y'all (or some of y'all) come and join us? Registration information is at <www.crossings.org> or you can call the office at 314-576-7357.