

# Is Anybody Out There Listening? Or Even Interested Enough to Want to Listen?

Colleagues,

At the Crossings conference a fortnight ago, the final session was small groups doing roundtable talk at lunch. We were to address the question, "Does anybody, much less everybody, out there really need to hear our good news?"

Timothy Hoyer, pastor at Gloria Dei Lutheran Church, Lakewood, New York, a conference participant, sent me his further reflection on that question. At the end of his prose, you'll find a postscript from me. Let the conversation continue.

Peace and Joy!

Ed Schroeder

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Ed,

We did not do a good job answering that question at our table. It is a question that I try to figure out every Sunday. So, here are my thoughts about that question.

DOES ANYBODY OUT THERE REALLY NEED TO HEAR JESUS' GOOD NEWS?

Jesus' death for us is why there is a need for everybody to hear Jesus' promise. For those who trust Jesus to forgive them, give them love and life, that promise is the power of salvation. For those who do not trust Jesus, his promise, which is based on his crucifixion, is a scandal or foolishness and so is not needed. Christians base the hope and meaning and value of their lives on

Jesus.

For people who do not trust Jesus, they also have hope and meaning and put value on their lives. Their life is not randomness. No one does things for no reason (randomness). People always have a reason for what they do, such as: I like it; it's fun; it was the right thing to do; it's healthy; I need the money; I had nothing better to do; it's good for the environment. The reason is always based on some system of value. That system of value gives meaning to what people do. People do things they value and are connected to what they do by the fact they do them. Therefore, people feel they have value and meaning through what they do.

Without that value and meaning in what people do, people themselves would have no value and no meaning (randomness). People label acts as good or bad, right or wrong, according to whether or not the act agrees with their system of value or meaning. The systems of value nourish life or make life feel good, usually in regard to oneself, but also for others. People often take their system of value and meaning for granted, though some do consciously choose their system.

People who are not Christian will say they do not need "religion" or they do not need Jesus. But they never say they do not need their own religion-their own system of value and meaning. Actually, they are quite loyal to their system of value and meaning. That loyalty to one's system of value and meaning keeps people from being loyal to God the Father of Jesus. As long as a person's system of value and meaning works for them, they are satisfied, even unto death. As they near death they will give a value or meaning to their death and say, "I have lived a good, long life." Then death is a seal of approval on the goodness of their life.

To tell people that death is God's judgment against them as a way to make them feel a need for Christ Jesus does not work because people will respond from their own system and say that God's judgment does not exist for them. God's judgment and Jesus as mediator are not part of their system. They don't need Jesus. So a different approach is needed to offer the good news of Jesus to anyone and everyone. Christian preachers need to understand the systems of value and meaning that people use so they can show people how those systems of value and meaning are not as beneficial as Jesus is.

In Crossings heritage, we have two examples of getting people to see that their system does not work. In THE PROMISING TRADITION, a reader in systematic theology going back to Seminex days, there is Walter Bouman's dialogue, "Yes and No in a Taxi Cab," a story of a rider talking to the taxi driver. The rider shows the driver that the driver's loyalty to his children is his system of value and meaning, but that system will fail the driver because the kids will grow up and leave. If an accident were to kill the driver's children, then the driver would be left with no system. The other example is Ed Schroeder's steps on how to talk to an atheist, "The God Question." [<https://crossings.org/thursday/2003/thur102303.shtml>]. Those steps are the same as the rider's talking to the taxi driver. Those steps show the atheist that the atheist does trust in something. But how is that something doing, especially in those events of sickness, tragedy, and when "stuff" happens? When the taxi driver and the atheist realize that their system does not help them in bad times, then they are offered the promise of Jesus that can and does help in bad times.

C.F.W. Walther in his book on The Distinction Between Law and Gospel writes that the law is spoken to people who are confident that they are doing well in their system, and the Gospel is addressed to those who have lost confidence in their system or

themselves, that is, they are unsure or troubled. But must Christians wait until there are bad times or they can point out the possibility of bad times to convince people that they really need Jesus' good news?

In Acts, Paul's sermon in Athens presents the Athenians the God they did not know, the God who is to be honored and worshipped because this God raised Jesus from the dead. The resurrection of Jesus vindicates him and opens the door to his Father as the God who resurrects the dead to everlasting life. Jesus says that he has not come to call the righteous, those who are doing well in their system of value and meaning, a system that was even God-given. Jesus said he came to call the unrighteous-those who knew that they failed the God-given system.

So maybe Christians need to understand well the systems people use and the systems society uses, so that they can recognize when people feel they fail society's systems and empathize when people's own systems are not working. When Christians are well acquainted with others so that the Christians learn their friend's system, then Christians can point out the not so good parts of that system, and they can also point out how the person cheats to deal with the not so good parts of their system.

The not so good parts of all systems that give people meaning and value are: they are conditional; they are retributive; they are demanding; the systems are always full of threats; the system will demand action but not enable you to do what is demanded; the system offers no help to correct the errors people make when they fail to do what their system demands; and the demands of each person's system always point out when the person fails to fulfill those demands.

An easy example is having a job. People often base their identity on their work and base the goodness of the day on how

the work day went. The system of having a job is conditional. You get to work on the condition you do your work and keep doing your work well. The system is retributive in that a worker is docked for being late, or given a bonus for working extra hard. A worker is promoted only if the worker does something to earn the promotion. The system of a worker demands that you get to work on time, that you work diligently, that your work meets quality standards, that you don't come to work drunk, that you don't take extra sick days, that you treat other workers with respect, that you do what your manager tells you, and that you do an honest day's work for an honest day's pay. All those demands are made of the worker but the employer does nothing to help the worker meet those demands. The employer does not make sure the worker gets to work on time. The worker is responsible to meet those demands or the worker gets fired. And every demand points out how you are doing meeting those demands or not meeting them. The system always judges you.

Those demands of the system are not always met. People call in sick when they are not sick, or they take extra-long breaks, or they hang wallpaper not quite perfectly but it's good enough. When people are honest about not always meeting the demands of what a worker is supposed to do, they make excuses. That is, they cheat. The cheating is done in two ways. One is to be confident in one's system by ignoring where one has not followed one's own system. The second is to lower the system's values or expectations, or to say doing some of the expectations is enough, or to say trying is enough. "I'm only human." "Rules are meant to be broken." "Do it, no one is watching." "No one is perfect."

People don't say that having a job is their religion. But it is what they use to make themselves good, and the job can make the day good or bad. When asked how their day was, people will answer that they were busy, or that they got a lot of things

done so it was a good day, or they feel good because they got all the orders filled correctly. People will say they want their kids to choose their religion when they grow up so they don't send them to any church. But those same people will tell their kids to grow up and get a job, to work hard, make something of themselves, be honest, do what is right. In that way they are giving their kids their religion, and not letting them make a choice about it. They don't realize that their system that gives them value and meaning is a religion, is something on which they depend. For them, that is just how life works, as if there is no choice. If there is any choice, it is choosing an additional system, such as being a sports fan, or taking pride in one's family, or becoming an expert in a hobby, or being a volunteer firefighter, or being very involved in one's church.

So Christian preachers can point out a characteristic of a system to the hearers and make them aware of how that characteristic works in their lives and how it makes them feel—whether it burdens them or benefits them. Then Christian preachers can point out the characteristic of Jesus' realm (system) that is good and new.

For example, as the worker's system is retributive, Jesus' system is mercy or forgiveness, and life suddenly is not just there but becomes a gift. Or, as the worker's system is full of demands, Jesus' realm is free of demands, only his offers to love and to forgive. For every characteristic of a person's system of value and meaning, Jesus' realm has a characteristic that is new and good. As already said, for retribution Jesus has mercy; for demands, Jesus has offers. For conditional, Jesus has no conditions, he just gives. For threats, Jesus only invites. For demands that point out how you do good or bad, Jesus has only his promise that in him you are always good. For the times you do wrong, systems offer no solution, but Jesus offers his death and resurrection, which is his way of forgiveness.

This diagnosing of the systems of value and meaning can be done with Crossings' Diagnosis/Prognosis paradigm. Step 3, the Eternal Problem, the level that gets us to needing Jesus' death and rising, needs to be described differently than "we have a problem with God," as was done in the Taxi Cab story. As said earlier, people don't have God in their system and so God is not a problem for them. But their problem is that they have their systems of value and meaning which bring with them not-so-good characteristics and they can't get out of it. There is no system in the old creation without those characteristics. And there is always a system.

People need an end to that way and the creation of a new way, which is and has been done by Jesus dying and rising to create a new way of life for us. People can still and will still have their work, their sports, families, and hobbies, but they don't depend on them for value and meaning. Jesus is their value and meaning. Sports and work and family and hobbies are now gifts to use, to enjoy, but not to depend on. Anyone and everyone needs the good news of Jesus because he died and rose for all to have life in him.

Timothy Hoyer  
9 Feb 2010

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P.S. from EHS

In a message dated 2/2/10 Richard Koenig of Cromwell, Connecticut, tells me of "an event I hope we will be able to pull off up here, a one day event of reflection on The Future of Justification."

And then he asks: Got any thoughts? I did. Like this . . . .

Richard, I suggest you ring the changes on a theme something

like this: The contrast between folks in a culture that is ho-hum about the Christian Gospel of justification before God and the 24/7 drive of each of us to “be right.”

If you’ve got money, get Fred Niedner (Valparaiso University) to come out and give his stump speech on this topic which starts out: “Some folks say that sex is the most powerful human drive. Not so. It’s the drive to ‘be right.’ If you don’t believe that, just get married.” Justification—proving that I’m right, that I’m OK – is THE AGENDA of everyone’s life. And it never ends. Tomorrow you’ve got to get up and do it again. One way to stop the rat race is the justification Jesus offers. First benefit is very practical: full-stop on the drive to self-justify. That’s real relief. Aka Freedom.

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Or this from the Elert seminar we just had at the Crossings conference: Elert starts his theology with this axiom. “The Ur-mythos in Gen. 3 is the trademark of human existence, human history, ever since. We are called to justify our lives before God. And we never can. Even if folks don’t acknowledge the voice as God’s voice, the voice itself, calling us to justify ourselves, never goes away. The pressure never ends—unless, until, there comes the Christ-encounter.”

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Or Arthur Miller’s less-famous play AFTER THE FALL where all the characters—none of them “religious”—are working hard to justify themselves. Everyone. From protagonist Quentin, a lawyer, we hear words that (as I remember) go something like this: “I’ve spent my entire life arguing my own case before some mysterious bench. And then one day I looked up and there was no one sitting on that bench.” So even for atheists (nobody on the bench), “justify thyself” (Adam, where are you? Quentin, where you?) is

the maddening mantra that won't go away. Marvelous Biblical theology from Miller: After the Fall everyone is working hard on self-justification. It's a "you gotta." Where does that pressure come from?

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Here's a parallel from the Crossings shindig a few days ago.

In a small group session I heard Lori Cornell (Seattle, Washington) give her show-and-tell on the non-religion professed by vast numbers in the US Northwest. "They're not interested in the Christian Gospel," we learned, "because if you're healthy and have money [that's an important qualifier], the alternate gospels of Mt. Rainier, the ocean, the Cascades, the adventure of the next exhilarating experience, the... the... the... fill all alleged religious needs."

Then someone offered this: Before Christians seek to show such folks how winsome the Gospel is – also for these dear worldlings–the full reality of life without the Gospel, "deeper and final diagnosis" in Crossings lingo, is what we should be about. Reminds me of a story about a homiletics professor at Union Theological Seminary in NYC, who kept teasing his students about the dull titles on the sermons they handed in. "If I were riding the bus up Broadway and came past your church and saw the sermon title on the sign out in front, would it prompt me to get off the bus." One student finally came up with a winner– "There's a Bomb on Your Bus!"

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Whether or not you hear the voice as God's voice calling you to justify yourself, or just the voice of one of his creaturely masks doing it for him, "justify yourself" is the bomb on everyone's bus since Eden. 2010 is but one more year in this human history after the fall. Relief from THAT voice would be

relief indeed. Thank you, Jesus.