

Jesus and Evolution? Seriously! (A Book Review)

Today we bring you another book review, this time by my fellow Thursday Theology editor, Jerry Burce. Jerry reviews George L. Murphy's *Models of Atonement*, a slim paperback that takes a meaty theological approach the question of how Christian confessors can speak effectively about salvation in a scientific world.

Jerry's review is compelling; I, for one, plan to get my hands on a copy of Murphy's book as soon as I'm able.

Peace and Joy,
Carol Braun, for the editorial team

MODELS OF ATONEMENT: *Speaking about salvation in a scientific world*

By George L. Murphy.

Minneapolis: Lutheran University Press, 2013.

145 pages, paperback, \$18.00.

I suppose George L. Murphy knows as little about Crossings as Crossings knows about George L. Murphy. According to Google, there's nary a mention of him at crossings.org. My first thought on finishing this little book is that we ought to get acquainted as fellow servants of the Word. For one thing, we share a couple of key passions. For another, Crossings could learn from Murphy, and Murphy, I think, from Crossings.

Let's start with shared passions. One of these is theological intelligibility, or, in Murphy's plainer terms, getting "the

message we proclaim to make sense to people” (58). Another is the message itself, or, more sharply, the message of messages. A less precise writer would call this “the Gospel” and let it go at that. Murphy doesn’t settle for code words. Here as elsewhere he spells out what he means, in this case reaching for St. Paul, who puts it better than anyone. So the message that needs to make sense is “the proclamation of the good news that Jesus ‘was handed over to death for our trespasses and was raised for our justification’ (Romans 4:25),” this proclamation being so important that “all theological work should in some way support and encourage it” (110). Thus Murphy. I can’t be the only Crossings insider who, on reading that, will think immediately of Robert W. Bertram’s insistence that “the systematician’s task is to ‘necessitate’ Christ” (“[On the Nature of Systematic Theology](#)”).

So who is George Murphy? Quick answer: a retired ELCA pastor with an M.Div. from Wartburg and a prior Ph.D. in physics that he earned at Johns Hopkins. Thursday Theology readers who follow discussions about the intersection of faith and science are likely to recognize his name, since he’s been publishing in that area for over three decades. This is his sixth book. His essays and articles have been many more, at least [three of them](#) appearing in *The Lutheran*. The erstwhile *Lutheran Partners*, a publication for ELCA professionals, featured him often. Those essays are presently lodged in the [Faith and Science](#) corner of the ELCA’s website. Does anyone read them? Well, yes. As Crossings ancients and their colleagues learned in the LCMS context of the sixties and seventies, the surest sign that you have an audience is noise from those who fear and loathe you. By that measure, Murphy is clearly a known entity. On Googling his name you’ll speedily reach an [unfriendly website](#) devoted to “creation science,” where he’s described as a “theistic evolutionist.” (That’s like Herman Otten calling Ed Schroeder a

Gospel reductionist, a note I toss in with apologies to those who don't know that history.) Were Murphy to design a response—though hints in the present book have me doubting such a thing—he would surely retort that he's a theologian of the cross who refuses to bury his head in the sand where real science is concerned. Otherwise one misrepresents the works of God. Worse, one closes off communication with a host of people for whom Christ died. That (I add) would include Charles M. Blow of *The New York Times*, and anyone in the past week who read his June 8 [tirade about Biblical literalists](#) with sympathy and applause.

This latter is the audience that Murphy thinks and writes for, if not directly, then by challenging his fellow theologians, pastors, and co-confessors—that would certainly include the Crossings community—to get serious about science as the way that thoughtful people appropriately understand the universe we live in and our evolutionary origins within it. And if we're to proclaim Christ crucified in today's world, then it's against this backdrop that we need to think Christ through.

This is the goal Murphy sets for himself in the present book. As he puts it in his introductory chapter, his aim is to formulate “an understanding of the work of Christ that is grounded in Scripture, retains some continuity with the theological tradition, takes seriously today's scientific picture of the world, and uses language that makes contact with that picture” (16). This final verb is key: “makes contact.” That's the least a serious proclaimer of God's Gospel has got to do. It's also the most that she or he is able to do, as Murphy plainly grasps. Parenthetically, one of the deep pleasures of reading him, especially in today's mainline theological milieu, is to find oneself in conversation with somebody else who pays assiduous attention to his Scriptural and confessional traditions, which, in the present case, leaves you knowing that he also knows how

faith in the God of the Gospel is always and only a gift of the Holy Spirit, this being as true in the hallways of Murphy's Johns Hopkins physics department as it once was in the Areopagus of St. Paul's Athens (Acts 17). The proclaimer's aim in either venue is simply to make contact. One has to speak the lingo, to identify and work with the existing assumptions of the audience one is trying to engage. To do that is God's style, as Murphy will underscore in one of his more intriguing arguments. He takes it for granted that serious servants and operatives of Christ will make it their style too. I'm sure he'd arch an eyebrow over the failure of the little band of Crossings writers to pay much attention over the years to the topic of evolution. How, he might ask, can you hope to necessitate Christ for hearers today if you don't dig into that?

In any case, that's what Murphy does. He digs. He formulates. He keeps his feet firmly planted on Scriptural turf and stays in impressively far-ranging and respectful conversation with the wider theological tradition, even as he sticks his neck out at key points to revise that tradition, such revision being required, in his view, by the realities science brings to light. He also knows and serves a greater light—indeed, “the Light of the world.” From start to finish he keeps his hands gripped firmly on the cross of Christ as the essential portal to “a unified picture of divine action in the world *and* of divine purpose for the world that takes science seriously” (33).

I will not try here to rehearse or sketch the many moves Murphy makes. It would run to more pages than you'd care to cover in a review, and, in any case, Murphy has done that himself. His preface points us to a summary of his basic ideas in an online essay entitled “[Human Evolution in Theological Context](#).” You'll want to read it. It will whet your appetite for the expansion the book provides. What I'll give you in the meantime is a pre-appetizer of sorts, a little headline-style list of things that

most grabbed my attention as I went along:

1. Evolution. Face up to it. It's God's way of doing God's creative work.
2. Death. It's essential to the evolutionary process. There can't have been a time when death was not.
3. Humankind. Yes, it emerged from a pre-human ancestral tree. There cannot have been one Adam, one Eve.
4. The first humans in a theological sense: "hominids in whom reason, self-awareness, and communication had developed to an extent that it was possible for them to be aware of God's address to them" (63).
5. The model human? No, not a pre-lapsed Adam, but rather Christ. And that's according to the Scriptures.
6. Sin. Luther nailed it: failure to fear, love, and trust God.
7. Sin's effect. Turns "good death" into evil death, the former leading to God, the other not.
8. The Genesis creation accounts. Examples of God's "kenotic" communication style, the Holy Spirit deliberately confining God's Word to the limits of human knowledge and understanding. Take it seriously today? As theological address, absolutely!
9. The work of Christ (1). To enmesh God's self, via cross, as fellow sufferer and loser in the misery of the evolutionary process, and, via resurrection, to transform and redirect the process; to launch "a new creation."
10. The work of Christ (2). To enable atonement. Thereby to restore creation "by rescuing it from the hopelessness and ultimate annihilation of separation from God" (102).
11. Atonement. The at-one-ment that ensues when sinners trust God.
12. Classic atonement theorists. Anselm: off the mark, but deserving of more respect than he gets. Abelard: closer

than Anselm, but still no cigar. His mistake? Emphasizing love instead of faith. (In Crossings lingo: attempting a direct jump from Step 4 to Step 6 without passing first through Step 5.)

13. Salvation. Creation made new. God achieving “something not included in our presently understood laws of physics” (118).

And there is more, much more. Some of it will startle in the way that certain of the items above have startled. The greater part will draw a Crossings-style reader into a renewed celebration of the astonishing gift of Christ crucified. Will the startling bits equip the Christian insider to help an outsider get excited about Christ too? That, finally, is Murphy’s aim. Whether he manages to meet it is something this reader is still thinking about. One point on which I’d press him is an assertion that “the particular language of justification, and especially the forensic understanding of it..., does not easily make contact with people who are imbued with a scientific understanding of the world” (105). I suspect that scientists continue to be as concerned as poets are about the evaluations they get; hence my suggestion at the beginning that a conversation between Murphy and some Crossings-minded types might be of mutual benefit.

What I don’t need to think about at all is whether Murphy is a genuine theologian that the rest of us are obliged to take seriously. Of that there’s no question. He passes the aforementioned Bertram sniff test, and does so with flying colors. He “necessitates” Christ. I will draw this to a close by letting him do so in his own words, but first a quick prelude:

In addressing his central concern—an appropriate model of atonement; a way to speak of Christ’s work that “makes contact” with scientific assumptions about the world—Murphy draws heavily on Gerhard Forde’s insistence that atonement presented as an

abstract proposition about some kind of God-and-Jesus transaction for the rest of us to believe, with eternal brownie points handed out to those who swallow firmly, is not worth talking about. Real atonement is an “actual event,” a reconciliation that “takes place between God and people in the real world” (92). The key to that reconciliation is trust in God’s promise of life. It falls to Christ to anchor and evoke this trust, while simultaneously exposing the folly of ultimate trust placed elsewhere. This is what happens in a crucifixion that is shown by its subsequent Easter to have been an execution of the Son of God.

Here I hand the baton to Murphy—

“Jesus died ‘for us’ because we had to get rid of him to preserve our systems and projects that were challenged by his life and words. Jesus Christ is what humanity was always intended to be, so humanity that has turned away from God and refuses to be what God intended killed him. That means that the cross is the destruction of humanity, the end of sinners. When we are brought to understand this, we realize that the idols upon which we depended and which motivated our behavior work death rather than life. They cannot be trusted. And when the objects of our deepest faith are seen to be lies, in a real sense we die.

“God has allowed us to kill our one real hope, the union of God with humanity, as the end of our self-chosen road. This alien work is foreign to God’s loving character, but it is work that must be done in order for true faith to be possible. Only if our false faith is shattered can we be brought to see that we cannot put our ultimate trust in ourselves or any other creature.

“And the cross-resurrection event is saving grace. When we are brought to see that our true creator was willing to die for us,

indeed *did* die for us, and come back announcing peace, then we will be convinced that God is trustworthy 'above all things.' This is God's 'proper work,' bringing about true faith and reconciliation with the God who 'justifies the ungodly...gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist (Romans 4:5, 17). And when true faith arises, God's wrath comes to an end. We are, as Paul says, 'dead to sin and alive to God' (Romans 6:11)" (96).

I suggest that you get Murphy's book and spend some time with it.

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