

Last Week's Sixth Crossings Conference. A Quick Review

Colleagues,

It's been a week and a day since I got home from the Great Feast at Belleville, Illinois, otherwise known as the latest Crossings conference. We'd held six of these so far. This was among the best. The main event that kicked off on Tuesday morning featured six riveting presentations, one after the other, by speakers who, with one exception, were new to Crossings. Among the six were affiliations with four Lutheran church bodies. I trust this was noticed. It pray it reminded all present of the Holy Spirit's blithe and wondrous disregard for the lines we draw among ourselves when this same Spirit doles out gifts of clarity and insight about the Gospel, and a passion for getting it told.

Here's a quick sketch of who the speakers were and the topics they discussed. I offer it as mere appetizer for a Lesser Feast of future posts that will feature outtakes from their presentations, with links to the Crossings website where the complete texts will soon be available, or so I hope.

1. Stephan Turnbull led things off on Tuesday morning with a stunning analysis of Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus in John 3. Among much else I came away with a new appreciation for the pivotal role that the word *anthropos*—"human being"—plays in John's Christology, or, more pointedly, in the Good News anchored in Christ Crucified that John passes along. May it be that we'll have this ready for you to peruse well before Holy Week barrels in at the end of next month. Preachers and listeners alike will be glad to grasp what's at stake when Pilate intones, "Look! The *anthropos*!" as he trots Jesus

in gruesome king's costume before the crowd ([John 19:5](#)). You'll also see why all four evangelists assign a pivotal role to [Daniel 7:13-14](#) in making sense of who Jesus is, and what he dies to accomplish. Steve serves chiefly as senior pastor of First Lutheran Church ([LCMC](#)) in the St. Paul suburb of White Bear Lake, Minnesota. Thanks to his New Testament Ph.D. he also does some seminary-level teaching on the side, mostly in the Twin Cities.

2. On Steve's heels came [Amy Schifrin](#), president of the recently established [North American Lutheran Seminary](#), where she also serves as Associate Professor of Liturgy and Homiletics. Calling on her deep experience as a pastor in several settings, some troubled, she explored the fear and anger that can surface in the life (and death) of congregations—this as prelude to a rich discussion of the means and ways by which the Holy Spirit keeps calling the dead to life again. Among my frantic notes is a scribble about “Jesus putting his life into ours” through the regular practices of the Christian community. Think here of baptism, confession, the constant hearing of the Word, a steady connection with Christ through the Eucharist. Two treats in particular stand out in my recollection. One was the way she framed her presentation with the three stanzas of the classic hymn, “O Holy Spirit, Enter In” (*Lutheran Book of Worship*, #459), reminding us of the power and importance of song in shaping the faith and confessing the Gospel. The other was her masterful analysis of the Eucharistic Prayer of Hippolytus (Option Four in the LBW altar book). Look for that when her paper gets posted, and be prodded, as I was, not only to attend with great care to the riches of our liturgical tradition, but also to use them in the ongoing catechesis of the faithful.
3. Toppo Takamura spoke next. A pastor of the [Japan Evangelical Lutheran Church](#), he is presently completing

doctoral studies at the Lutheran Theological Seminary at Philadelphia where, if I recall correctly, he's working with Timothy Wengert on Lutheran confessional theology. His topic at the conference was the challenge of legalism in the Japanese church. Not that the same challenge isn't present wherever Christians gather—Crossings could go out of business tomorrow were this not so; but the form it takes in Japan bears a stamp unique to that country, with its deep cultural and religious traditions as expressed in Shinto. At the risk of being rude, I point you to the home page of the JELC's English website (see the link above) for a hint of what Pr. Takamura was talking about. Absent are key words like "gospel" and "Christ." He will want our prayers, I think, when he's done with his studies and heads home to tackle what he faces there. For the tools he'll use, wait for his paper.

4. Arndt Braaten was the last of Tuesday's presenters The son of missionaries to Madagascar, he presently lives and works in the vicinity of Duluth, Minnesota, where he practices family medicine, and also uses the gifts of an M.Div. degree and ordination to serve a small LCMC congregation. (If you missed the explanatory link to "LCMC," check above, under Turnbull.) Dr. Braaten told us about his effort of the past few years to persuade administrators of the Catholic hospital he's affiliated with to let him incorporate attention to matters of faith as an explicit component of his work there as a physician and healer. The response so far has been a polite yawn, to which he refuses to yield. His reasons for that comprised the substance of his paper, which featured an interplay between theological and medical thinking that I, for one, have not encountered elsewhere. Almost all of you, I'm guessing, will have friends or acquaintances who go to church on Sunday and practice medicine on Monday, and

wonder about the overlap, if any, between the two. You'll want to share this paper with them when it reaches you.

5. [Jill Baumgaertner](#) got things started on Wednesday morning with an exploration of ways in which law and gospel can emerge as topics for conversation in the college classroom. She would know, having served at Wheaton College for over 35 years as an English professor and these days as Dean of Humanities and Theological Studies. Her academic specialty is the work of John Donne. Her publications include two volumes of her own poetry and a study of Flannery O'Connor. She shared one of her poems with us, composed for the first birthday of a granddaughter. The gifts displayed there were stunning. Not least was her ability as a theologian of the cross to make the essential "crossing" between Scripture and a toddler's life today, with Christ and his benefits front and center. If I can secure permission to pass that poem along, I will. For now I confine observations to her important reminder of something that ought to be obvious, however often it gets missed, namely that the issues God addresses through law and gospel are in constant play when human beings start thinking and writing about their lives in the world. Those blessed with the Word of Christ to share need to keep their eyes wide open for this.
6. As if we weren't already stuffed to overflowing, there came at last [Rob Saler](#), whose final presentation was not so much dessert as another main course. Rob is a product of Valparaiso University and the Lutheran School of Theology in Chicago, where he earned a PhD in systematic theology. He serves these days as Executive Director of the Lilly Endowment's clergy renewal programs, operating from a base at Christian Theological Seminary in Indianapolis. Rob's assigned topic was "The Publically Engaged Church." He addressed it as the scholar he is,

pushing all in the room to keep pace with him. My scribbles include a comment early on that could well serve as a theme statement: "God's people are called to love the world even better than the world loves itself." As it happens, the world doesn't love itself so well, a point Rob illustrated in a discussion of how the marketplace works, its success depending on the use of endless advertisement to "poke holes in our lives," forbidding us to be satisfied with who we are and what we have. Against that stands the promise of the God who hides in suffering, and sets us free through justifying faith in Christ to let our neighbors' need draw us away from own, and thereby to love them as no one else will, or can. My overriding take-away: it is beyond question that the world needs what the Gospel gives. Thanks much to Rob for giving us another angle, both fresh and refreshing, on why and how this is so. Again, look for more—so very much more—when the paper gets posted.

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So much for a summary that doesn't do justice—not even close—to all that we were fed.

Wholly unmentioned thus far is the host of other gifts we attendees enjoyed. There was an evening and a day of pre-conference work, featuring presentations mostly by Crossings regulars—Marcus Felde on Law and Gospel; Gary Teske (an irregular) on traditional spiritual conceptions in the highlands of Papua New Guinea; Ed Schroeder on his days in Erlangen as a student of Werner Elert; Steven Kuhl on Pentecostalism; Martin Lohrmann on issues of the Holy Spirit in the Reformation era; and the undersigned with a keynoting setup for the conference proper. Much of this will be also be available for your perusal

soon, or so I trust. Steve Albertin and Chris Repp ran the standard Monday tutorial on the Crossings method of analyzing Scriptural texts. Our text study editor, Lori Cornell, made the long trip from Washington State to preach at the Tuesday night Eucharist. Cathy Lessmann did her usual magnificent job of making sure all things ran smoothly.

Some have gone home from previous conferences feeling as if the event had served chiefly as a Seminex reunion. There was less of that this year, if any at all. That's an important step forward, I think. If Crossings isn't serving the church in place today, we might as well pack it in. Hence the joy in hearing from so many main-event speakers whose roots were not in Seminex or related LCMS controversies of yore. There was joy too in seeing other fresh faces, not least the three seminarians that Martin Lohrmann brought along from Wartburg, where he teaches these day. David Paap became a new friend. He's a retired pastor in the St. Louis area. He recently composed a hymn in response to the tumult that erupted in Ferguson, Missouri. We sang it, were moved, and were bound together in holy prayer for a world beset with fear. Amid all this, we thanked God for lots of old friends who have been there before, who came again—two of them, Martin Yee and Richard Chiu, all the way from Singapore—and whose company in this venture is a gift from the Lord.

So too with all of you who read this today.

Peace and Joy,

Jerry Burce