

On Faith. Eleven Bertram Theses, Newly Unearthed.

Colleagues,

First, a passing thought—

I write this on Wednesday of Holy Week. Many of us listened this past Sunday to St. Mark's account of our Lord's Passion. Many of us will listen again two days from now as St. John unfolds the story. The words will wash over us. We'll think. We'll pray. After that we'll go home and sleep as soundly as we usually do. At no point will it cross our minds that we're in some kind of imminent peril for daring to believe what we heard, and for having our public identities hooked to the Person we heard about.

To put that another way: not a one of us will face the temptation Peter succumbed to in the high priest's courtyard. Preachers, desperate to extract a soupcon of relevance from that episode for a middle-class U.S. audience, will sometimes suggest otherwise. They're merely pretending.

Elsewhere in the world are siblings in Christ who do know what Peter faced. They'll likely endure it this very week. The [current issue of the International Bulletin of Missionary Research](#) is devoted to their stories. I commend it to your perusing between now and Friday. Then, when our ears have landed us in the courtyard shadows with Peter babbling his denials a few elbows away, let's remember them, and pray for them, and thank God the Holy Spirit for the faith and grit that keeps them loyal.

And if that should cast a starker light on our own fecklessness

as we stumble through our days in far safer places, so be it. Kyrie eleison. In the mystery of mysteries, Christ died for us too. Really, go figure!

+ + +

On to the main matter for today:

Cathy Lessmann is the manager of all things practical where Crossings is concerned. Some weeks ago, while sorting through some old files, she found a one-page rumination by the late great Bob Bertram that she hadn't seen before. It's not posted in the [Bertram section](#) of Crossings' online library. She found no attending notes that gave the piece a context. It was simply there, a bit of work under an odd title that doesn't quite fit the ensuing content. So what, or whom, was Bob addressing? How exactly was Luther's Large Catechism involved, there being no mention of this beyond the title? Might this have been the start of a bigger and more extensive essay, an initial sketch of core ideas? Or was it Bob doing as some writers and thinkers will, putting thoughts on paper to get them sharpened and clarified, and finding no reason—it being written for him, no other audience intended—to go back and adjust the title once the thoughts had tumbled out?

Be all this as it may, we pass it along for your refreshment. It comes to you in one of Bob's favorite formats, a set of numbered paragraphs of similar length, one thought proceeding ineluctably to the next, every word chosen with obvious care. The topic is faith—faith as law, faith as gift, faith as the matter that will either make us or break us, as Bob writes in his opening sentence. And at the heart of the faith—the one faith, the only faith—that will keep us alive: “Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world” (cf. par. 9).

I'm hard-pressed to imagine a better gift for Holy Week this year. Read. Savor. Thank God.

Peace and Joy,
Jerry Burce, for the editorial team

“Justification by Faith.” Is that in the Large Catechism? Well, sort of.

1. Faith can be good or bad, but it [is at last] what makes or breaks us. For faith, whether good or bad, means “having a god.” And the god we trust is the god we’re stuck with, for good or bad.
2. That kind of retribution (we get what we believe in) is the Law of God. Whether we believe in *that* God or not, *his* is the Law which governs us: what we most love and trust (and fear), that is our god. God sees to that.
3. This God, the one true God, is the God whose tenfold command is his precondition, his righteous requirement. His precondition for what? For our getting and keeping his good will, including all his gifts. Call it “life.” “Do this and you shall live.” No righteousness, no life.
4. If we fail at righteousness (that is, I we disobey the command) we may still receive life, except in that case the life we receive we become indebted for. And the debt we incur, always more and more, we cannot ever repay, even by dying.
5. No wonder that the more conscientious we are about obeying the Creator’s command, the harder we find it to trust that we please and delight him. For obviously our lives are anything but *God-pleasing*.
6. Still, we are commanded not only to *be* pleasing to God but also to *believe* that we are. Yet if we did believe that, we would be lying, and we are also commanded not to lie.
7. Notice how the problem comes back to faith. The one faith we are commanded to have – namely the faith that we

delight God – we cannot have, not only because we lack the strength to believe it but because, even if we could believe it, it would be untrue.

8. Enter Jesus the Christ. He still operates on the same premise of the Creator's Law: "righteousness" is the precondition of "life"; no "righteousness," no "life."
9. But now, with Christ Jesus, the "righteousness" which earns us "life" is HIS righteousness. And the life that he earns for us is HIS life. In exchange he accepts our sin and our death and calls it even.
10. Our unrighteousness is now hid or buried in Christ's righteousness and our lives in his life. No wonder that now we *believe* that we please God. For now we do, in this "joyous exchange," this Sweet Swap with Christ.
11. It is the Holying Spirit who gives us the power to believe that. But it is what God, the whole triune God, has done in Christ that makes the faith true in the first place.

Robert W. Bertram

November 9, 1993