

R.W.Bertram on REVELATION (Posted in two parts. This is Part II)

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Theses on REVELATION.

Crossing a Modern Theme with its Biblical Original (Part II) [Continued from ThTh 268]

Robert W. Bertram

IX. Divine Quandary

39. God, so to speak, is in a quandary. On the one hand, by keeping the lethal truth of the law veiled, the Creator in the short run spares sinners from immediate nihilation.40. But on the other hand, that very veiledness only deludes them into imagining that the law is survivable and, worse yet, that it is viable, a way to life rather than what it truly is, a "ministry of death." (v. 7)

41. Sinners are still doomed to death. But in spite of that they live under the illusion of a wrath-less, fulfillable law. Can God be part to that deception and still be honest, "righteous?"

42. On the other hand, can God be “open” with us (4:2), unveiled, without destroying us?

X. Christ the Unveiler

43. It is in Jesus the Christ, Paul declares, that the law’s veil has at last been lifted (3:14-15) but not in the way the bullfighter’s red flag is lifted to let the bull come charging through. 44. Rather, Christ lifts the veil by interposing himself in the law’s line of fire. He absorbs its scorching blast for those who stand downwind of it as a heat-shield absorbs the lethal radiation.

45. In his death, where “one died for all,” sinners now confront the fatal “glow-ry” which was directed against them but from which they have now been spared. In him, their stand-in, “the ministry of death” is executed and, only then, revealed.

46. But simultaneously with this consuming wrath there is revealed the diametric opposite of wrath, the far “greater glory.” In the same Christ “who for their sake died and was raised” there glows God’s surpassing, wrath-absorbing mercy. Indeed, that is the mercy happening, Christ extinguishing our death in his.

47. In one and the same action, as God’s “blessing” overcomes God’s “curse,” both are revealed for what they are: real curse which in Christ, as in none other, succumbs to real blessing.

XI. What is Not Revealed

48. Notice what the unveiling in Christ does not reveal. It does not reveal that the divine condemnation never was real

in the first place, that all along it was merely a scowling “mask over God’s smiling face,” a tactical fiction. Nor is that what Luther intended by that metaphor.⁴⁹ That revelationist fallacy trivializes not only divine wrath but Christ as well. It reduces him to only a revealer, merely a messenger of a foregone conclusion, as if God’s mercy toward us would be in effect with or without Christ’s revealing, except that now we know about it. This is the Christ of the gnostics.

50. And not only does that revelationist fallacy under-employ Christ. It disemploys the Holying Spirit. To put all our christological eggs in the one basket of “Christ the Revealer” evades a prior question, Doesn’t Christ himself need revealing quite as much as God does? If his death is Good News self-evidently, then what need of the Spirit?

XII. Reconciled

51. What Christ’s lifting the veil does reveal is how mortally real the law’s “ministry of death” is – and apart from him still is – and, moreover, how altogether “new” therefore must be God’s “reconciling to himself” such two utter opposites. (5:17-19)⁵². The opposites are, on the one hand, “the world” which in all honesty God finds infuriating versus, on the other hand, God “himself” who, though he yearns to love this world, yearns to love it not cheaply or permissively but in all honesty.

53. Among revelationists the verb “reconcile” in 2 Corinthians is usually subjectivized. We misinterpret God’s “reconciling the world to himself” as if God were merely getting the world to like him, improving our attitude toward God – as in marriage counseling, “reconciling” the alienated spouse (us) to once again feel love.

54. A more apt analogy from modern life, a more objective one, would be the reconciling done by an accountant, "reconciling" two sets of books which do not jibe, or balancing a frustrating checkbook. Or an investigative journalist tries to "reconcile" – to square, to harmonize – the claims people make with the actual facts.

55. In 2 Corinthians it is God who is reconciling "the world" – an utterly unacceptable, dishonest world – "to himself," an utterly honest God, who longs to square these two polar incommensurables, yet in all honesty.

56. It is in the history of Jesus the Christ, says Paul, that this infuriating world at last becomes honestly plausible to God, "a new creation." How so? By God's "not counting [sinners'] trespasses against them" but instead "for our sake" making Christ "to be sin who knew no sin." (5:17, 19, 21)

XIII. Revelation Begs Reconciliation

57. Though this whole change happens "in Christ," it is exactly to God that it happens. Whatever conflict there is in God is here reconciled, again, in God. What occurs in Christ occurs not outside of God. For it is "God [who] was in Christ, reconciling... to himself." 58. More pointedly, whose honesty is it which is here at stake? Whose "righteousness" is here in the making – not only which is being revealed but which here and now is in process of coming into being? Whose righteousness? Paul's answer: not merely ours but the very "righteousness of God."

59. Indeed, what we are coming to be – we in Christ – is not just righteous ourselves. That is another language, the language of our "justification." But here the talk is about

the reconciling of God. So what we are to become, extravagant as that seems, is God's own "righteousness."

60. Theodicies ask, Where in the world is God being righteous – notice, not merely being revealed as righteous but himself developing, acquiring, gaining in righteousness? Where? Paul's answer: in Christ and his believers. In that worldly process, as we are becoming, the inner-worldly righteousness of God is becoming.

61. It is only when and as the divine opposites, curse and blessing, wrath and mercy, are in Christ historically reconciled that there is any revelation of mercy. Indeed, only then is there any actualized mercy to be revealed. Apart from that and prior to that historic reconciliation, the revelation is at best anticipatory.

XIV. Being Reconciled

62. But God's reconciliation "in Christ" does not conclude with the death and resurrection of Jesus. True, it was then and there (past tense) that "God was reconciling the world to himself." But what still remains is for the world, us, to suffer ourselves to be reconciled – or not. 63. And true, as of God's reconciling in Christ, "everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new." But our seeing that newness is intrinsic to our being included in it. That is why Paul says, "If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation." (5:17)

64. To accept that in Christ we are honestly made plausible to God or instead not to accept that and thus to forfeit such plausibility – both possibilities persist. In the one case the God-world reconciliation succeeds and is so revealed. In the other case, there is no reconciliation to be revealed,

seeing it is spurned. Effectively so.

XV. One Aroma, Two Scents

65. What prompts some to allow themselves to “be reconciled,” that is to believe, and others not? Paul is frank to admit that the difference lies not in themselves alone but also in the revelation itself. The very idea of God’s unveiling the law in Christ, to his hurt and to our advantage, strikes people differently.66. To some people, as Paul says, the God-world reconciliation in the cross reeks of death and morbidity, hence is obnoxious, and for understandable reasons right within the Christ event itself. Such a reaction, though understandable, reveals the reactionaries – if not to themselves, at least to believers – as “perishing.”

67. To others, however, the same original odor, “the aroma of Christ,” comes across as joyous and vivifying, “a fragrance from life to life.” They thereby, in view of their quite different response of faith, are revealed as “those who are being saved.”

XVI. Revealing Us

68. Hence it isn’t only God who is revealed. So are God’s believers. Or as Paul says to the Galatians, “faith [is] revealed” – revealed for what it is, namely, as justifying, as the birthmark of junior deities. (3:23-26)69. This revealing of faith – notice, not just a revealing to faith but of faith, disclosing its wondrous clout – recalls how in the Synoptics the compliments which Jesus pays to faith sound almost idolatrous: “great,” “has made you well,” “has saved you.”

70. In 2 Corinthians, faith is revealed as our “accepting” of

the world's having been reconciled to God in Christ. (6:1) And therewith, with our accepting, that part of the world which is we is in fact "being reconciled." (5:20)

XVII. Ministry of Reconciliation

71. We have saved until last the crucial missing link, what Paul calls "the ministry of reconciliation." (2 Cor. 5:18) Between God's "reconciling the world to himself in Christ," on one hand, and believers' suffering themselves to "be reconciled," on the other, there intervenes that link of love, a "means of grace," the apostolic ministry.⁷² Like the incarnate "God in Christ," the apostolic ministry is likewise divine-human. Though it is obviously "we," the all too human Paul, who here and now "entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God," it is no less "God [who] is making his appeal through us." (5:20) So vulnerably does God submit to human mediation.

73. The divine plea, "Accept your reconciledness," though that may be rebuffed by many, is meant for everyone. So the apostolic messenger "from now on...regard(s) no one from a human ["fleshly"] point of view." (5:16) In Christ everyone is eligible. Where there is faith there is hope.

XVIII. An Open Ministry

74. Apostolic ministers, as the name "apostle" suggests, are messengers. Though they are personally chosen for this messengership, their authority inheres in the Message they bring. Paul's "ministry of reconciliation" is "the message of reconciliation." (5:18, 19) The Message makes the messenger, not vice versa.⁷⁵ "We are engaged in this ministry," says Paul, as opposed to what other ministry? The opposite

ministry – and there is such – is “the ministry of death,” “the ministry of condemnation.” The apostolic ministry, by contrast, is “the ministry of the Spirit,” “the ministry of justification.” (4:1, 3:7-9)

76. However, it is not as though “the ministry of death” has simply been by-passed. It has been fulfilled, remember, in the cross of Christ and only thus superseded. Indeed, the very thing which distinguishes the apostolic ministry, namely, its sheer openness, its unveiledness, lies in its frontal and free dealing with sin, law, death.

XIX. A Readable Bodily Letter

77. Moreover, the death and rising of Christ not only marks the Message the messenger brings but even marks those who receive the Message. “We are afflicted in every way but not crushed, ... always carrying in the body the death of Jesus so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies.” (4:8, 10) A quite bodily revelation! 78. Thus Paul can picture his readers, the believers, as themselves a revealing message – to the world. “You yourselves are our letter.” The content of the letter is “Christ.” Its verbalizer is the apostle. The One who inscribes it, not on tablets of stone but on the believers’ hearts is the Spirit.

79. This “letter,” which is the believers themselves and whose content is their crucified and risen Lord now bodying forth in their own mundane crosses and easters, renders them legible. To whom? “To be known and read by all humanity.” (3:2)

80. It is into believers’ “hearts” that “the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ” has “shone.” Thanks to the mediating ministry of messengership, the original “glow-ry”

of God's "reconciling the world to himself" in Christ now radiates into that same dark world through the cruciform and paschal lives of the reconciled ones. (4:6)

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