

Robert W. Bertram “A Time for Confessing”

Colleagues,

ThTh 507 is a shameless promotion piece for Bob Bertram’s book. For your sake, not for his. Two weeks from today is already the fifth anniversary of his death. His royalties are a done deal. So hustling his book is not for him. Here’s why to buy. What Wm. B. Eerdmans has published in “A Time for Confessing” is more than just one book. It’s a Bertram library.

Although the cover says: “A Time for Confessing,” that title covers only the first 150 pages. Then comes an additional 55 pages that Eerdmans calls an “appendix.” Appendix shmendix! Those 55 pages are actually another book, the second of three books still in Bob’s computer at his departure. But that second one existed only in theses format—365 (sic!) of them—paragraph-long theses each longing for full-page exposition. The bones and sinews are there. Readers will have to flesh them out on their own. But that’s not as impossible as it might first seem. For after you’ve read the first 150 pages, Bob’s own enfleshment of his six fundamental theses for “A Time for Confessing,” you just might get the hang of it.

And as if that were not enough, there follows the icing on this double-layered cake, editor Mike Hoy’s ten full pages listing 189 items—essays, presentations, book reviews, articles and sermons—collected in Manila folders of Bob’s filing cabinets. Dear Thelda Bertram and Mike have been working through that mountain of stuff during this past five years. If these words of mine were really a hype for anybody, it would be for Michael Hoy. Weeks and weeks of Mike’s life are layered between the covers of this “liber” of love. All of it done “on the side” as

Mike carried out his double calling of pastor and theology prof among us here in St. Louis, lo, these many years. [Mike's dear to us here in town. So don't any of you try to steal him. However, on second thought, Bob always did make a point that God worked on the "Platzregen principle," moving his Gospel thunder-shower around from one place to the other—irrespective of how church strategists sought to manage things. Mike's a pro when it comes to the Platzregen.]

But I digress. At the "el cheapo" price that <Amazon.com> is still listing (\$19.80) you get two books presenting Bob's life's work in theology. First one, theology as an act of confessing (six case studies), and the second one, Bob slugging it out with the academic theologians of his own lifetime. Its title: "Postmodernity's CRUX: A Theology of the Cross for the postmodern World." Acronymn-addicted as Bob was, each of those capital letters are chapter headings: C is for Criticism, R is for Revelation, U is for Universality, X is for Christ-ening.

Before Eerdmans decided to print the two of them together, they'd asked me to do a Foreword for the first one, which does now appear in the "fore" of this book. To tease you into buying and reading this Bertram library (220 pages total), I'll post the original Foreword-text that I sent to Eerdmans as this week's ThTh offering. [They "improved" my text here and there in what finally got into print. So perhaps what's here below is not technically copyrighted, but I'm not going to ask.]

Peace and Joy!

Ed Schroeder

Bob Bertram is perhaps the most unpublished major Lutheran theologian of the 20th century. When I say "unpublished," I mean he never wrote a book—though there were three book-length

manuscripts in his computer when he breathed his last. So it's high time, even now post mortem, that we his students, his "living letters," do something about it—at the very least with those three manuscripts. Unpublished, of course, doesn't mean un-public. Bob theologized "in public" for all his adult life. [We have no information about his early childhood.] Where my life intersected Bob's theology "in public" was well over half a century ago (1949) in the classroom at Valparaiso University. He was a Young Turk prof, age 28, and I was just young at 18. My baccalaureate major was philosophy and that's where Bob was teaching—alongside colleagues Jaroslav Pelikan and Richard Luecke, equally youngish and possibly even more Turkish. At Valparaiso in those days, university and church politics being what they were, serious theology was being taught in the philosophy department. This trio of hot-shots (also competent philosophers for the required courses) were hustling theology under such camouflage titles as *Recent Religious Philosophies*, *Representative Christian Thinkers* or *Philosophy of Christian Theology*. And all this in a university linked to the Missouri Synod!

In the rest of that half-century Bob moved on to the classrooms (and intra-churchly conversations) of Concordia Seminary in St. Louis, Christ Seminary-Seminex (ditto), the Crossings Community (ditto) and a concluding decade at the Lutheran School of Theology in Chicago.

So there are thousands of us living letters. But we're not the only public for whom he theologized, though he probably honed his distinctive teaching method with us regulars who appeared before him several times a week for a whole semester. At one Seminex commencement a graduating senior, saying thanks to each faculty member, identified Bob's own version of Socrates' method thus: "And to Blessed Bob Bertram, who always took us on the scenic route. Yet if we paid attention, we did get to the

destination just before the bell rang."

Bob had publics beyond the classroom. "On journeyings often," he put his theology out in public—at conferences of all sorts, church consultations, presentations at professional academic meetings, with the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches, the Lutheran World Federation, the USA Lutheran – Catholic Dialogue, his long years as co-chair of ITEST [Institute for Theological Encounter with Science and Technology]. The Crossings web-page <www.crossings.org> has archived almost 100 of these "Works of RWBertram."

Not that his theology never got into print. Some of these essays did get published in Festschriften, conference proceedings and random journals. But Bob never got around to putting a string of them together into a book by the time he died at 82 years old in March 2003. Not that he didn't have that in mind. Thus these three major manuscripts in his computer. One reason for them staying in the computer—so some of us think—was his perfectionism. No version of a frequently-revised chapter was quite good enough. So he would tweak it and try it out again on a new audience the next time he was asked to speak. But even that re-tweaked version needed more tweaking.

Such "self-doubt" that his prose was good enough even plagued Bob's doctoral dissertation at the University of Chicago. Not till 1963 (at age 42) did Bob hand it in to his committee (Paul Tillich and Jaroslav Pelikan) and get the degree after 15-plus years of "working on it." I remember hearing Pelikan himself once say: "We told Bob, just hand in the Chicago telephone directory, and we'll give you your degree!" Granted, it is a magnum opus, though not quite as big as the phonebook. Its title: "The Human Subject as the Object of Theology. Luther by Way of Barth." Its egghead-sounding agenda is "the grammar of

theological predication."

One might say it set the direction for Bob's half century of public theologizing. Bob opens his case noting Karl Barth's complaint that the human-centeredness of modern theology, Feuerbach the arch-proponent thereof, but Schleiermacher too, came straight from Luther. Barth says, "Luther emphatically shifted the interest from what God is in himself to what God is for man." One might say that Barth's immense theological production was dedicated to correcting Luther's mistake. Well, Bob "cross-examines" Barth's challenge, waltzing his readers through pages and pages of exegesis of Luther's two great classic works—Bondage of the Will and Galatians Commentary—to show that Barth is actually correct. For Luther, theology is indeed about "what God is for man." But that is not to be lamented—pace Barth—but rather celebrated "for us and for our salvation."

One of Bob's dissertation chapters on Luther's own venture into the grammar of theological predication (heisted from Paul's Galatians) has generated a Bertram bon mot. In academic prose the issue is: How our sins (rightly predicated to us) become rightly predicated to Christ, and how Christ's righteousness (rightly predicated to him) rightly becomes predicated to us sinners. Bob's shortcut shibboleth for that was "the sweet swap," his American translation of Luther's classic "fröhlicher Wechsel." You can still hear it in the theological vocabulary of his students everywhere.

Bob's theological work might be seen as a lifelong set of variations on that cantus firmus. Over and over again he piped that tune—though largely unknown (or sung off-key) in modern theology (Lutheran or otherwise)—demonstrating its currency, its "winsomeness" (one of his favored terms) to us moderns as music to our ears.

Another phrasing for Luther's theological Aha! according to Bob—both back in the 16th century and still today—is “the proper distinction between God's law and God's gospel.” Bob might already have learned that even before his years of Luther-probing at the University of Chicago. It could have been in his DNA. How so? His maternal grandfather, William H.T. Dau, had translated the Missouri Synod patriarch's classic work into English: C.F.W. Walther's “The Proper Distinction between Law and Gospel.” Bob's father, a Germanics prof, later translated Werner Elert's dogmatics (where the law/gospel distinction is the fundamental axiom for Lutheran theology) into English. Though Bob could read and speak German—and didn't need these translations—might such Lutheran theology have been transmitted at the family table (or even from mother's milk)? We'll never know.

Whatever its provenance, sweet-swap theology of the cross and law-gospel hermeneutics are what Bob was up to all the time. And for most of Bob's subsequent teaching years I was not too far away.

After being his student in the late 1940s I returned as greenhorn instructor to Valparaiso University in the late fifties just as a “real” Theology Department had been finessed through university politics with Bob as the chair and thus my boss. There Bob led the department—some, not all—into a curricular venture grounded in this double axiom of sweet-swap and law-gospel. The ancient Latin proverb proved true for us: *docendo discimus*—by teaching we learned. And so did our students. They said so.

In 1963 Bob moved to Concordia Seminary, the Missouri Synod's major seminary, as professor of systematic and historical theology. A few years later I was called to teach there too, and the hurricane brewing in the synod—substantively about this

doublet of cross-theology and law-gospel lenses for reading the Bible—soon made landfall. The consequence was Seminex, originally Concordia Seminary in Exile, where the expelled faculty and students recouped and lived out for ten years the cross-theology and Biblical hermeneutics that had so aggravated our antagonists.

Bob's final chapter in this volume takes that event as a "time for confessing" that we learned not from books, but from lived experience.

I'm convinced that were it not for Seminex, the chapters in this book would never have been written. Although Bob became the theological interpreter—for insiders and outsiders—of what was happening, it was not right away that he (nor we) got clarity on what was happening to us and on what we ourselves were doing.

One example was our understanding of the word "exile." Early on we thought it was linked to the Hebrew scriptures—the people of God exiled from their homeland, but anticipating "some day" to come back home again, home to Missouri. Then one day at morning devotions, senior professor "Doc" Caemmerer, pioneer Gospel-guru for most of us on the faculty when we were his students at Concordia Seminary, preached on the text of Hebrews 11, Abraham as an "exile" – a thousand years before the Babylonian captivity. Doc showed us that Abraham's exile was not "from a country to which he longed to return, but from a better country, one up ahead, where he'd never been before." Exile in the N.T. is not like exile in the O.T., returning to a place that once was home. Exile for Christians is heading toward a promised future, something brand new up ahead, "a city which God has prepared for them."

So looking back to Missouri soon faded into looking forward to

something better. Even the ELCA, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, that eventually came over the horizon, “better” for sure than the old homeland for Semtexers, is still a ways away from that city God has prepared.

But we didn’t come into exile with any consensus about it being a “time for confessing.” Partly that derived from the widespread ignorance for most of us about Article 10 of the Formula of Concord from 1577. We’d all learned in seminary that it was about that funny term, *adiaphora*, things neither commanded nor forbidden in Scripture. It seemed to be ho-hum stuff. But had any of us learned that it REALLY was about coercive authority in the church and how cross-theology and law-promise hermeneutics are called to respond in such a time as this? I don’t remember anyone talking this way early on in our community. We hadn’t really caught what that article’s key Latin terms—*tempus confessionis*, *status confessionis*—were talking about. In a word, they were talking about us! Here’s how the title of this book came to be.

Three years into Semtex, 1977, was the 400th anniversary of the Formula of Concord. Bob gave a lecture—on Article 10—at a major conference celebrating the four centuries. In that essay he showed us that “times for confessing,” the first term, are crunch-moments in church history, not just everyday occasions for Christian witness. And the crunch is heightened in the second Latin term “status.” Said Bob, that means being on the witness-stand, on trial, out in public, before the authorities. You are in the dock, accused of “bad” faith and under orders to “fess up,” to testify (*martyria* in Greek, with the overtones included), seeking to show your critics that the faith they call bad is indeed the faith that Christ commends.

Where Bob first got wind of this in FC 10, I don’t know. My hunch is that it may have come through his depth probe into

Bonhoeffer's writings, and then early on in Seminex's history from the visit of Bonhoeffer's biographer and one-time student Eberhard Bethge to our community. There had been some talk among us before our cataclysm struck of an "exile seminary," and where any precedents might be. A few of us knew of Bonhoeffer's "exile" seminary hidden away in Finkenwalde during the Third Reich, and that prompted more serious investigation. We knew that our church opponents were a far cry from the Gestapo that threatened Finkenwalde—though now and then we wondered.

We learned from Bethge that—of all things!—FC 10 was fundamental to the confessing that Bonhoeffer himself learned—and did—during the time of the Third Reich. It was also a cornerstone piece of the Finkenwalde curriculum during Bethge's student days there. At a conference in 1984 commemorating the 50th anniversary of the Barmen Declaration, the anchor-piece of the Confessing Church in the Third Reich, someone asked Bethge if he'd ever experienced anything close to Finkenwalde since his own student days there. "Yes, once," he said, "at Seminex. Especially the singing, the singing!" Bob's chapter 5 shows what he learned about times for confessing from Bonhoeffer and from FC 10—and what he sought to show the rest of us.

Bob's paradigm, with its "six clues" for times for confessing, also got a boost in our core-course teaching in systematic theology at Seminex. In the final curriculum revision there were only two required courses in systematics. They were "Christian Confession: Classical," the ecumenical creeds and the confessing done at Augsburg, and "Christian Confession: Contemporary," 20th century movements beginning with the Confessing Church in Germany, our own experience in the Missouri Synod, and the confessing in liberation theology movements of our day. The "classical" and "contemporary"

confessing examined in those two courses parallel the table of contents of this book. Bob's six clues arise from these data.

The clue of "martyria" (chapters 1 and 2) comes from the classical confessions. "Adding items to the gospel"—Bob calls it "Gospel-plussing"—(chapter 3) took us to M.L. King's "Letter from Birmingham Jail." South African confessors contra apartheid (chapter 4) signalled the ecumenical clue, confessing as an appeal to the whole church. Mis-aligned church authority is the clue Bob unpacks in chapter 5, the Bonhoeffer chapter. The Philippine confessing movement (chapter 6) is clued to "an appeal for and to the oppressed."

Bob's final chapter on "ambiguous certitude" is about us Missouri confessors. It was probably the last of the half dozen to come into focus, as Bob (and we all) kept trying to explain our actions to our friends, our well-meaning supporters. Many of them were the dear Missourians who kept us financially alive with nearly one million dollars coming our way during each of our 10 years of seminary in exile. But even as generous patrons they kept asking why "giving up the seminary campus" and letting ourselves get sacked—"You wouldn't have had to do that!"—was being "faithful to our calling and faithful to our Lord." What was certitude to us was highly ambiguous to them—and sometimes to us as well. Bob concludes the sextet with that look at ourselves at the end—not a bang, but not a whimper either. We didn't always know what we were doing.

Over and over again in this text you will hear Bob zeroing in on "the one Gospel-and-sacraments." He's taking that term from the Augsburg Confession (1530) where this one Gospel-and-sacraments, spelled out with its native New Testament substance, becomes the criterion for the yea and nay of these Augsburg confessors—all of them laymen!—in their own time on the witness stand.

It might appear that Bob's life's work in theology was largely inside the walls of the seminary and the church. "Au contraire" (as he himself liked to say, when we didn't get it) he was regularly out beyond those borders in conversation with (another favored phrase) "God's dear worldlings." See that list of his works on the Crossings webpage for examples outside the churchy envelope: Ethical Implications of Military Leadership, Church and Economic Order, How to be Technological, though Theological: An Answer for "Fabricated Man."

The last of those three comes from his quarter century as co-chair of ITEST, the Institute for Theological Encounter with Science and Technology. His co-chair, Robert Brungs, SJ, was a boron-physicist. ITEST kept Bob constantly crossing his Lutheran theology not only with the Roman Catholic heritage of most of the ITEST members, but also with no-nonsense first-echelon international pros in science and technology.

Come to think about it, most of this book is really not confined to inner-churchly conversation, but unfolds out in the public arena, most often the conflictive public arena of politics—apartheid in South Africa, the Philippine revolution against Marcos, the struggle of the churches in Hitler's Third Reich, the American Civil Rights movement. And in every one Bob shows us Christians out there in the thick of it hearing and following Christ's call to take the witness stand.

In conclusion, two other items in this same genre of theology crossing the world "out there." The first was in-house in Seminex, but it addressed a strictly-speaking "secular" agenda: How to organize our communal life where "dear worldly" elements of finance, grades, hiring and firing, contracts, laws and municipal codes, responsibility and sanctions all are in play alongside (in, with, and under) the "one Gospel-and-sacraments" of our faith and worship life. Bob was chosen to compose our

“Internal Governance Document.” When Seminex began, there was no handbook; there wasn’t even a “mother church” to whom we belonged. So we started from scratch and—no surprise—Bob got the job. What he came up with was a tour-de-force of law-gospel architecture for our life together.

One plank in that Internal Governance actually came from the “regula” of the Dominican monastic order in the Middle Ages, to wit, their axiom that in the community “the decision-makers shall be the consequence-takers, and the consequence-takers shall be the decision-makers.” Our ancient tradition in Missouri had been “benign hierarchy.” Thus the governing board of Concordia Seminary were not trustees, but the “Board of Control.” But if you are sharing common life according to that axiom of the Dominican regula, especially in its Lutheran recasting, you can’t have hierarchy, even benign hierarchy.

Even more complex than political democracy which may have some affinity to the Dominican axiom, we were doing it with a Lutheran foundation. We were learning to march simultaneously to two drums, even though both sets of sticks were in the hands of one and the same Drummer, one set in his left hand and the other in the right. That was new for all of us. It had to be learned, and thus at the outset it was sometimes messy and not patently “efficient.” Besides that there are always slow learners, and some folks don’t like what they learn.

Bob’s Internal Governance document articulating our common life according to the hermeneutics of law and gospel was one of a kind. It probably still is. Bob worked hard to teach it to us, for it was really our own theology applied institutionally to our own selves. With the students the learning came easier. Little wonder, we had been “explaining” its theological infrastructure to the students in their courses in systematic theology. But with our fellow faculty, our track record was not

so good. Eventually it got modified out of existence. Bob occasionally referred to it as "Seminex's best-kept secret." Some day someone ought to do a doctoral dissertation on this blessed failure.

The second item where Bob palpably—and organizationally—crossed over to "God's dear worldlings" with his Lutheran theology was in the Crossings Community. Its roots go all the way back to that theology curriculum he pioneered along with a bunch of us at Valparaiso University in the late 1950s. Here the point of the law-and-gospel's relevance was the secular callings these students (scarcely any of them seminary-bound) were envisioning and preparing for. The curriculum made their own secular worlds part of the study program.

During the days of Seminex Bob re-visioned the paradigm into a theology venture for grown-ups, folks already working out in the world. The goal was for them to learn to practice "the Crossings matrix." The process is a three-step. First to have the dear worldlings do some "tracking" of their own personal "text" out there in the world of daily work. Second came using the law-gospel lenses for getting some "grounding" in a Biblical text that showed up regularly in the Sunday liturgy. The final step was "crossing" those two "texts" with each other, so that the law-gospel of the Biblical text took flesh in the text of the worldling's own life. If curious, you'll find a fuller treatment—Bob's own—on the Crossings webpage.

Summa. Among international Lutheran scholars Bob was not a voice crying in the wilderness. You'll see that in the chapters that follow. He was in conversation with theologians around the world. For his brand of Lutheranism he had theological allies in the Luther Research Congress where he was a regular attender and presenter beginning already in the 1960s. He was a major presenter at the 1971 congress gathering that took place in St.

Louis. His drum-beat for sola fide (faith alone)—and not sola gratia (grace alone), Barth's preference— as THE center of the 16th century Reformation debate was shared by others. Sola fide orbits the same solus Christus (Christ alone) center as does theology of the cross and law-gospel hermeneutics.

In drawing confessing movements to orbit this center, Bob offers us his life's work. Though each of these chapters shows how others were doing it on their own witness stands, Bob pulls them together to this center—even to the point where he will show us that the mostly Roman Catholic confessing movement in the Philippines was running on the fuel of "sola fide"! That may sound like a stretch, but he says the evidence is there. See for yourself.

Bob's discovery of the "six clues" for times for confessing and his mastery in using them to help us see these seemingly disparate movements as united, yes, even centered, in the "one Gospel and sacraments" is a feisty proposal. Yet it is typical of his theological chutzpah all through the years. Even more, if valid, it's a milestone in ecumenical—and evangelical—theology.

"A voice from heaven says: 'Blessed are the dead who from now on die in the Lord.' 'Yes,' says the Spirit, 'they will rest from their labors, and their works do follow them'"(Rev. 14:13). Blessed Bob's now at rest, and from his work that follows him, we too are blessed.

*Edward H. Schroeder
St. Louis, Missouri
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