

Robert W. Bertram, “Time for Confessing”-When Faith Hits the Road

Colleagues:

Richard H. Luecke reviews Bob Bertram’s book for us this week. Sixty years ago he and Bob Bertram and Jaroslav Pelikan were teaching philosophy at Valparaiso University. That field was my undergraduate major in 1948-50. So they were my teachers. Up until that time I was a pre-med student. These three were at the center of my “conversion” to the seminary track. Had it not been for them, you would not be reading this.

At age 23 Luecke was the youngest of the troika. Pelikan was 25 and Bertram 27. All three were U of Chicago Ph.D. students, Pelikan already having gotten his sheepskin. All three were Missouri Synod preacher’s kids, so they were kosher to be bringing egg-head philosophy into this “Missouri” university. Youngsters though they were, they were major players in then president O.P. Kretzmann’s mad dream to “link Athens and Jerusalem” at Valpo. As we students soon learned, these three guys knew BOTH cities—inside out. There weren’t multitudes who majored in philosophy, but we who did knew that—in all humility—we were where the action was.

Dick Luecke and Bob Bertram were buddies and co-conspirators from way back—as you’ll hear in this review. After those early years teaching at Valpo Dick succeeded his father as parish pastor in Norwood Park, Illinois. Then campus pastor in Princeton NJ. Then back to his native Chicago to be director of studies at the Urban Training Center in 1964—a think-tank with hands-on praxis for Christian ministry in the urban scene. In

the decades since then—with guest teaching stints here and abroad—Dick is still leading folks along “the Way” of Christ in the city. Past books of his are:

“New Meanings for New Beings,”

“Violent Sleep: Notes Toward the Development of Sermons for the Modern City,”

“Perchings: Reflections on Society and Ministry.”

All available at Amazon.com.

Currently in the hopper is another one on the city, this time toying with a famous malapropism of Chicago Mayor Richard J. Daley: “Sodom and Glockamora.”

I learned about St. Augustine—and his famous bon mot “tolle lege”—from Richard Luecke. For what Richard has to say about Bob, the same is good counsel: take and read.

Peace and Joy!

Ed Schroeder

A best of all possible Forewords by Edward Schroeder begins by saying that Robert Bertram “is perhaps the most unpublished major Lutheran theologian of the twentieth century.” He suggests this resulted from Bertram’s “perfectionism.” There was that. We all noted and sometimes lamented a lifelong reluctance on Bob’s part to let things he composed go out of his hands. Now, with this new book safely in our own hands, we are moved to say something more about why this was so.

A student tribute is cited that mentions the Socratic method. Every student knows that we have not a single written word from Socrates. When, in youthful days, we were doing philosophy with

Bob Bertram and undergraduates, we shared passages like this one in the Phaedrus dialog.

“Soc: Writing [graphee, in the original Greek], you know, Phaedrus, has this strange quality about it, which makes it really like painting [zoographia]: the painter’s products stand before us quite as though they were alive; but if you question them, they maintain a solemn silence. So, too, with written words: you might think they spoke as though they made sense, but if you ask them anything about what they are saying, if you wish an explanation, they go on telling you the same thing, over and over forever. Once a thing is put in writing, it rolls about all over the place, falling into the hands of those who have no concern with it just as easily as under the notice of those who comprehend it; it has no notion of whom to address or whom to avoid. And when it is ill-treated or abused as illegitimate, it always needs its father to help it, being quite unable to protect or help itself.” (275 D-E)

We are all grateful and relieved that teachings we drank from father Bertram are at last available in print. We are thankful at the same time that its specially attuned Foreword writer, its devoted editor, and the face-to-face Crossings Community who went on enjoying those teachings at first hand are here to protect them. Bertram would insist on this. Plato wrote only dialogues, real ones with no “last words.” He said why in Epistle VII.

“For this reason no serious man [or woman] will ever think of writing about serious realities for the general public so as to make them a prey to envy and perplexity... When anyone sees anywhere the written work of anyone ... the subject cannot have been his most serious concern... Serious interests have their abode somewhere in the noblest region of the field of his activity. If, however, he really was seriously concerned with

these matters and put them in writing, 'then surely' [paraphrasing Homer] not the gods but mortals 'have utterly blasted his wits.'" (344 C-D)

There are way too many "seriouses" in that translation, but we understand this concern. Schroeder notes how 100+ papers in Bertram's computer were prepared for live consultations, assemblies, and disquisitions. (They are listed in Michael Hoy's bibliography and on the Crossings website.) Happily, these still wear the marks of that "viva vox." But no one present in a St. Louis ceremony honoring Bob will ever forget how he referred to himself as a teacher of people who were out there actually DOING it. Those "living letters," as he called them, will know how to consult and enjoy these papers now that they are out-of-the-box. They will also know how the lack until now of any available publication was of a piece with their central theme: "Confession." Many other modern utterances are also best taken as "oral, particular, local, and timely" (Stephen Toulmin's phrase in COSMOPOLIS 1990:186-192). But "confession" is a special case of this, as is signaled by the title A TIME FOR CONFESSING. "Time" and "confessing" are partly redundant. They go together.

This title MIGHT be taken by dear but self-engrossed or wit-blasted worldlings to mean we have a lot of sins to confess at this time. That is no doubt true, but this more private meaning prompted Garry Wills to rescue Augustine's CONFESSIONS by calling them "The Testimony." Augustine is sometimes said to have contributed to a privatized conscience in the West. So is Luther. Both may in fact have had such an effect; somebody did. But both also contributed to a more positive and public sense of confession, one that both speaks and demonstrates, that safeguards the one thing needful while relying at the same time on its truth and power. Bertram, too, focused not on "grace alone" or on lonely grace, but on the "sine qua non" of faith

with its redirected hands and voices. "Confession" in this sense is where faith hits the road. Christians, no less than modern philosophers, can speak of "cash value" in what they say -though this is not to be confused with any "gospel of prosperity."

It is scary to think that Bob Bertram is no longer with us to clarify and help form this more positive, constructive, and open "confessing." A very large continuing task remains with the Crossings Community.

Along my own less focused and less tutored way, I learned two New Testament words for "confess." "Martyria" meant "witness," which Bertram makes real by describing the Augsburg confessors as on a witness stand facing threatened reprisals. They sought recognition or at least restraint from imperial and churchly prosecutors for their practice of the Gospel-though why this should put them in the dock, even put goods, fame, child, and wife at risk, seemed a miscarriage or misuse of authority. The Seminex protagonists learned for themselves how confession in self-defense can be viewed as subversive, and how more than verbal consequences can ensue. This brought them to use not only their tongues and pens but their shoe leather. After one of his many forays explaining Seminex to established assemblies of "the firm," I recall asking Bob whether he had brought back any scalps. He said he was lucky to come back with his own.

Not the least discovery awaiting perfunctory readers of the Lutheran confessions is a revelation in this new book concerning the Formula of Concord, Article X. We always thought of "adiaphora" as things you could have or not have, you could do or not do, which scarcely seemed matters for confession at all. Here we learn that FC X was a much more telling article about worldly authorities, who by enforcing "add-ons" to the gospel may actually subvert it, leaving adherents subject to complacency or despair. Such worldly authorities include both

civil magistrates and church administrators, whose provisions and rulings may be very, very important but are never all-important. Add-ons from either of these sides can compromise the gospel, the one and only thing that is in no sense an adiaphoron but the gift and mandate of the Church's Head. On the 400th anniversary of the Formula of Concord, Bertram came from the Seminex experience to deliver an utterly surprising, eye-opening, and liberating address on FC X about the sufficiency, the "satus est," of the gospel-and-sacraments. Dietrich Bonhoeffer had done the same thing from an underground seminary at Finkenwalde.

My other word was "homologia," which means "saying the same thing." What is said in a time for confessing is always presented as a common confession, even if it is uttered by an isolated protagonist. Bertram cites Martin King's "Letter from a Birmingham Jail," which called on confessors throughout the land to affirm the Black churches in their way of nonviolence with worldly powers-some of them churchly-who were enforcing legal restraints and exclusions that compromised the gospel by (in a word) confining God's image-bearing children to "nobodiness." Similarly, resistance to apartheid in South Africa confronted Christian councils in many other lands with their need to say a right word in unison, and perhaps perform a right deed of disinvestment.

Seminex did not move out without appealing to the churches to come along. Richard Caemmerer reminded Seminex marchers how "exile" in the Bible, beginning with Abraham, entailed more than standing alone or waiting to go back where you came from. It meant looking and moving forward together toward a City that is to come. Even the Babylonian exile proved creative and productive in many ways-also for the Bible itself. Important texts came together there. As in a familiar folk story of the young Martin Luther, people found the Bible and its singular

Good News unchained by the “here we stand” and the “going out” of Semtex.

Bertram exposes characteristics of confession beyond my two of witness and solidarity. The Barmen Declaration, issued by reformed and Lutheran parties during the Third Reich of Hitler's Germany, did more than to resist unacceptable add-ons to the gospel imposed by leaders of both church and state. It reset those authorities. Bertram's key to doing this was, predictably, “law and gos pel.” His grandfather and father had translated, respectively, C.F.W. Walther's PROPER DISTINCTION BETWEEN LAW AND GOSPEL and the dogmatics of Werner Elert, a theologian at the university of Erlangen. Elert seems a mentoring presence throughout this book. He took historic issue on law-gospel grounds not only with Nazi-conforming “German Christians,” but also with “ecclesiastical theocrats” who affirmed gospel in such a way as to omit respect for secular powers and authorities as such. The law-gospel distinction affirms BOTH the gracious reign of God in the gospel AND an indispensable restraining (perhaps also achieving) reign of God through law. These are not “separate spheres.” This is a distinction without separation. Remember Bonhoeffer's perduring commitment not only to the church but to the German people. Remember his famous letter from prison asking us to live not only in a confessing church but in a world come of age.

Sometimes, in salad days with Bertram, we speculated about the “noble pagans.” We asked whether the “virtues” and the “honestum” they practiced could be of any interest to Christians who say “by grace alone.” Detailed treatment of those human habits, as well as admirable exemplars, were to be found in worldly exponents. Aristotle's fifty pages on the virtue of “friendship” and Cicero's treatise on that topic appeared eminently educative. We recognized, to be sure, that those virtues were “still under the law”—perhaps the rule about acting

in accordance with a mean between extremes. We noted the restrictions pagans themselves professed. Aristotle said, on the basis of his own description, that no one could have MANY friends. Neither "charity" nor "humility" ever made any of the classic lists. These qualities CAN become dangerous or sticky (pace Nietzsche). Do-gooder sympathy is regarded in some Chicago neighborhoods as "welfare colonialism." When New Testament epistles came in the end to commend such qualities, they did so with a view to the Redeemer and the gift of the Spirit. These were fostered along with the best gifts of faith, hope, and love. Noble pagans, exactly because they were noble, did not count suffering all joy. That came to healthy acceptance only in the company of one who rejoiced in travail because a new kind of human was being born into the world.

Confession on the German scene during World War II confirmed distinctive ethical responses. Beginning with THE COST OF DISCIPLESHIP, but continuing in his much interrupted ETHICS, Bonhoeffer distinguished between Gospel "formation" and the "conformity" for which Germans are famous. An official add-on was now requiring exclusion of non-Aryans from worship-which could no more be accepted than pinching incense to an emperor. Bonhoeffer wrote about "taking on guilt" in performance of an AVOIDABLE deed. "The structure of responsible action involves both willingness to become guilty [Bereitschaft zur Schuldübernahme] and freedom" (ETHICS 1955:54ff.). In fact, such acceptance of guilt and freedom implied each other. This choice could become inescapable for any responsible person. Bonhoeffer's participation in an assassination plot, after attempts to recruit the churches for speaking truth to Adolf Hitler, is sometimes cited as a precedent for the just war theory. Bonhoeffer preferred not to speak of this unique act either as a "precedent" or as a "theory" or as "just."

Bertram traces his sensitivity to these various "times for

confessing" to the Seminex experience itself-without which we might have none of this from him. Coming to Seminex's own confession, Bob sets down yet another common characteristic: "ambiguous certitude." "We didn't always know what we were doing" (Schroeder, p. xii). Risk is entailed in confessional moments and movements. This does not lead to quietistic withdrawal, however, without incurring an even greater risk. Sitting-out this opportunity can amount to a deterioration, even denial. Always to be remembered is the greatest of all risks taken and repeatedly taught by Jesus in the Gospels.

The question with which we look up from this book (though not for long) is the one with which it began: When is it "a time for confessing"? Schroeder cites Bertram's FC X lecture: these are "crunch moments in church history, not just everyday occasions for Christian witness" (p. xi). Valid confession takes place when, but only when, the one gospel-and-sacraments are at stake. All other questions are matters for political argument, perhaps church politics. Yet the question "When is the church a confessional movement?" needs to be asked afresh nowadays, Bertram says, "if only because of the dilemmas [modern] movements are posing" (p. 132).

Civil Rights, apartheid, and poverty are all obvious matters of public responsibility. Bob agrees, yet he interprets King's "Letter" as a "martyria" insisting on Gospel freedom and responsibility. He finds confession in the very middle of this very public contention; he sees it as needed to disencumber the gospel. He even compares the opposition in Birmingham to the circumcision party in Galatia, who so insisted on an adiaphoron that it amounted to "another gospel."

After a rigged election in the Philippines of 1986, unarmed men and women carried crucifixes to the streets between the drawn up tanks of Marcos loyalists and defectors who supported Corazon

Aquino, the rightful winner. In the middle of this worldly contention, Bertram sees the poor of the Lord claiming a proper people power with "a vulnerability born of faith." The demonstration had been nurtured by Basic Christian Communities after Vatican II, which called for standing and moving with the oppressed. This was "protest" in the traditional sense of "confession." Here the poor were not mere objects of charitable concern but agents of the future. Their action placed great store in faith-faith that was not only IN something but ABOUT something. The result was remembered as "the miracle of EDSA" (Epifanio de los Santos Avenue).

Some readers are sure to ask whether such faithful expressions within modern controversial movements actually rise to confessional status. How many confessions can be received by the churches? Seminex, we are told, treated systematic theology as "Christian Confession: Classical" and "Christian Confession: Contemporary"-this suggests a continuing receptivity and task of clarification. The question we wish to ask is what FORM our response should take to events and testimony bearing the marks of confession. King's letter, the South African appeal, and the Epiphany on the Avenue of the Saints were all crunches calling out for wider affirmation. Did they also entail, along with assent, something with respect to our own complicity in the fruits of unpaid labor and the growing plight of the poor?

Slavery in America enriched both North and South in ways exceeding the profits of railroads and stock exchanges. Stock holders and their families still gain from corporations in South Africa and the Philippines. Is some follow-up required on our own scene with respect to the lingering-in fact growing-income disparities in working America (no longer 4:1 but 400:1), at a time when one-fifth of the world's population have lost the ground beneath their feet and try to survive on less than two dollars a day? It seems no great step from this to

criminalization of drugs, three-strike sentencing, bursting prisons, capital executions, and weaponry in the U.S. that now surpass all precedents and tend to keep things exactly the way they are. Entire towns depend on the prison industry-some not far from St. Louis.

A long Appendix to the Bertram book announces itself with a revealing pun (like those ever-present in Crossings literature): "Postmodernity's CRUX." (Get it?) A primary biblical text is 2 Corinthians 2-7, to which Bertram brought a lifetime of reflection, including 15 years honing a dissertation at the University of Chicago on "the grammar of theological predication." There Bob confronted a charge by Karl Barth that Luther had shifted theological interest from God who is "wholly other" to "what God is for humans" -and stayed with Luther. The Holy Trinity provided warrant for this. These last sections of Bob's book actually bear the marks of an intended publication. Even so, they are presented in the form of theses which (like Luther's) issue challenges and invite discourse.

In the "R" section of CRUX (acronyms are a Crossings device), Bertram confronts what he calls the "revelationist fallacy" in modern churches and perhaps in us. We treat Christ as a "revealer" rather than "redeemer." This makes for "cheap grace." It "trivializes not only divine wrath but Christ as well," and "disemploys the Holying Spirit" (p.166). In the Corinthian letter Jesus Christ is said to have done more than to "SHOW God's love"-more even than to bear the world's rejection as a way of staying with it, in hopes of changing human minds. Something happened with God in Christ. The "theological predication" at issue, as Schroeder neatly summarizes it, 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" (p. ix). Such a transaction puzzles and offends many contemporaries. A

much published modern churchman speaks of "child abuse."

Bertram speaks, rather, of recovering an all but forgotten "fear of God." He will not let us skip over divine wrath and judgment for something divinely pleasant. While he does not explicitly say so, would this "wrath" not include white hot vehemence for dispossession and neglect of the Lord's poor, exclusion of the stranger, assigning "nobodiness" to race and gender? Jesus' story of the judgment focused plainly and simply on action with the poor, hungry, thirsty, naked, sick, and imprisoned-all very present in newly qualified circumstances.

Who shall stand? Bob remembers how Moses, having glimpsed the glory of God on the Mount of the Law, thereafter wore a veil to shield that "glowry" from humans who could not see it and live-yet for whom it was really there. The "happy exchange" (Luther's phrase for the predications, rephrased as "sweet swap" by Bertram) is not only made "happier" by this glory; it is made awesome and efficient. The result is not mere "grace alone" but a responsive faith that confronts blasphemous rulers, challenges complacent citizens, maintains solidarity with the poor, and keeps administrators in their proper place-that of facilitating us all.

Was this not exactly the point of the New Testament Letter of James- that "faith alone" is never in fact alone? Was calling this a "straw epistle" a lapse on Luther's part, and a very consequential one? Do current apologists tend to neglect some dear warts? Luther's counsels during the peasants' revolt are ascribed to "restraint of violence." Have we read his unrestrained words? Or considered the wars of religion that followed? The 16th century Luther relied, to be sure, on divine preservation of order through the rule of princes. What about the public responsibility of citizens since, say, the 18th century? Does this account for the many new dilemmas modern

movements are posing?

Crossings is immediate heir to Seminex with its concentration on confession. It was formed, after earnest discussion and repeated votes, by participants who resisted the blandishments of deployment to (and absorption by) mainline seminaries-depicted as flesh pots, career building, and rest after burnout. Those who deployed, we are pleased to hear, still enjoy the singing. On publication of this new book, we save our cheers for the Crossings Community. Here people begin by tracking their own personal and social text in daily callings, including that of citizenship. They introduce a current biblical text, finding its lively import on both sides of law-gospel. They do not stop until that text becomes flesh in the CRUX of the matter, and their own flesh becomes text in timely and costly confession.