

# Setting the Foundation: How Distinguishing God's Law and God's Gospel brings Jesus' Full Benefits to Bear on Real Lives in the Real World.

Opening remarks by Jerome Burce at a Crossings Seminar 23  
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+ In Nomine Jesu +

My job in these next 45 minutes or so is to get you suspecting that your trip here today was probably worth it. We want you, after all, to be in a good frame of mind when we move on to the better part of the evening, the one that features Two Buck Chuck and the *gemuetlichkeit* he helps to induce among relative strangers. Better still, we want you to wake up tomorrow with your loins happily girded for a day-long slog through some exercises in what, for pastors at least, might be described as remedial hermeneutics. We aim, that is, to fix what should have been taught in seminaries and parish Bible classes and probably wasn't; or if it was it may have been forgotten; the thing to be fixed being both the principle and the process by which you extract what St. Peter calls the pure milk of the Word from a crusty old Biblical text. This pure milk is something fresh and rich and sweet, designed by the Spirit to nourish the inner babe of those crusty old Christians who sit there on Sunday with the glassy stare that says "I expect to be bored and to go home unchanged, untouched, by the living Word of God."

We aim to prove tomorrow that we at Crossings can help you do better with the Word of God than you've been doing, or were taught to do. My aim tonight is to demonstrate that there's some substance to this boast, if that's what it is, a boast; and that come tomorrow we won't be wasting your time.

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I speak of boasting. So does St. Paul, many times. It's one of his favorite themes, in fact. The word is *καυχῆμα* in Greek, *καυχασμαι* or *καυχῆσις* are forms of it too. In one or other of the forms it pops up at least 50 times in Paul's letters, even more if you count Ephesians and 2 Timothy as letters Paul wrote. So to get us properly started this evening—properly grounded, as we like to say in Crossings—I offer you a classic instance of it. It will serve more or less as our text for the evening. 1 Corinthians 1, beginning at verse 26:

26 Consider your own call, brothers and sisters: not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. 27 But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; 28 God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, 29 so that no one [no "flesh", no *sarx* in the Greek] might boast in the presence of God. 30 He is the source of your life in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification and redemption, 31 in order that, as it is written, 'Let the one who boasts, boast in [or of] the Lord.'

Or as Philip Melanchthon, Luther's remarkable colleague, will put it 1500 years later, let the glory go to Christ. That, says Melanchthon, is one of two prongs of the testing device that a person should use to find out if what she's hearing peddled as

God's core message to us human beings is in fact the core message and not something else. By core message I mean the message that God wants people finally to hear and to hang their hearts on to the exclusion of all other messages, including the other messages that come at us relentlessly from none other than God. In church talk, of course, the standard term for the core message is Gospel, Gospel as in the great joy that the angel "good-newsed" to those shepherds abiding in the field, and when they heard it, all those other messages they'd listened to for years—yes, messages from God; messages transmitted via polite society and doubtless in their own conversation around the campfire, true messages, not false; messages about the gross, disgusting, dirty, sinful, going-nowhere no-hopers they truly were—all *these* messages melt away in an instant and are remembered by these shepherds no more; and in rushing off to see this thing which has come to pass, which the Lord hath made known unto them, the only thing they can hear is the new and out-of-nowhere message that the messenger has brought, "unto *you* is born this day a Savior," this spoken against the background of a sky filled with heavenly messengers who are boasting the way Paul will later boast of God *in* Christ, God through Christ, God on account of Christ. God-in-the-baby. That's who gets the glory that night, and nobody else. After all, who or what except this baby could pull off the true astonishment of Christmas night, and no, it's not the sky filled with angels; rather, it's that little knot of dirty shepherds clustered around Almighty God lying in a manger, and in the presence of God in this form, this person, they are not chattering with fear and waiting to die. Instead they're cooing, they're going "ooh" and "ah", they're feeling suddenly alive as if for the first time; and as they stand there not a person in the place is bothered by their stink, least of all the baby, or to be precise, God in the baby. If he smells it at all it's only in his capacity as Odor-Eater par excellence, the one born to absorb their stench and to kill

it in his own dying to their everlasting sweet-smelling benefit.

If only the Church in its own angelic mission were as single-minded about the message it delivers to shepherds and their ilk today. It isn't. It never has been. Else Paul would not have written letters, or Melanchthon an Apology, his long and brilliant defense of the Augsburg Confession.

It's in the Apology, Article 4, that Melanchthon sets out and then repeats, over and over, that two-pronged test of his for real deal Gospel. Ed Schroeder, famously among his students, referred to it invariably as the double dipstick test. He still does. Dipstick prong one: again, Christ gets the glory—the boasting is of him, his deeds, his heart, above all the deeds done and the heart exhibited in his death on the cross.

Dipstick prong two: you know it's real deal Gospel when it comforts the troubled conscience; when, that is, somebody who somehow grasps, however strongly or weakly, that she's in major trouble with God is led by what she hears to gasp with relief and after that to cry or shout or sing with joy. "Not to worry," says the messenger, "you've got Christ: his birth, his cross, his grave, his Easter; and with this Christ and all his deeds you get to be right now, in God's evaluation, everything Christ is and you are not: wise and righteous and holy and forever free from the devil's claws, and here I'm paraphrasing Paul, of course. Christ and Christ alone as the measure of you, your worth, and your future with God. That's what his deeds have accomplished. So fear not—that's how real deal Gospellers always begin. Don't be afraid. Unto *you* is given this day in whatever corner of the world you inhabit a Savior, which is Christ the Lord. Cheer up. Trust Jesus. Yes, and then start bragging your head off: bragging, that is, about this Jesus and the astonishing way he delivers the goods that comfort you and all others like you at the very point where comfort is needed most

and there's nowhere else to find it.

Again, the double dipstick. a) Christ is our brag, to coin a phrase, and b) on his account our every fear is gone.

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Which brings us to the present pity. Melanchthon and his two-prong test are hardly known in the church today, and that includes vast swathes of the Lutheran church. If I asked colleagues in my ELCA conference about it I would get blank stares; and I can't imagine there's a call committee anywhere that refers to it when they send off their spies to check out the preaching of the people on the call list.

No wonder then that real deal Gospel is in short supply, certainly in American churches. What we hear instead is partial-deal Gospel of the sort that ruled at Corinth, or else there's other gospel, un-gospel, a message that with the slightest poking turns out to be not good news but horrible news, the kind that in Galatia set Paul's teeth on edge.

There is, I think, a difference between the two, partial-Gospel and un-Gospel, and to judge by the tones St. Paul adopts in addressing each it seems he thinks so too. With the Corinthians he's gently corrective, more or less. At Galatia he's ready to tear some heads off. For what it's worth, this will greatly astonish the average U.S. Lutheran parishioner the minute you point out that given a choice between a Corinthian or a Galatian for a neighbor they'd pick the Galatian any day of the week—so very much better behaved, don't you know, no raucous communion parties, no husbands sneaking off at night to keep the local streetwalkers in business. Galatians are cleaner too. They take baths and keep kosher. I'll bet their lawns are trimly mowed.

That said, would it trouble our average Lutheran parishioner to

hear the Galatian neighbor, in a chat across the fence, describing baths and kosher and the trimly mowed lawn as a precondition for being a Christian, or in Melanchthon's sharper terms, for enjoying Christ and his benefits? Among the people I serve it would; and if the neighbor pushed the point they'd start tasting some of Paul's bile themselves. I'd like to think—just a gut feeling, no hard evidence—that the same would be true in most U.S. Lutheran congregations, ELCA and LCMS, Wisconsin Synod too; though in each instance the question to be asked would be whether something has taken the place of circumcision—acquiescence to doctrine; no drinking, no dancing; speaking in tongues; lately the blessing of gay unions, whether for or against—this, that, or the other as essential step one on the path toward enjoying God's favor and rightly wearing the Christian label. That's the Galatian un-gospel. Lutherans, I think, are not there as a rule.

We're much more Corinthian, not some of us but all of us. To one degree or another, lesser or greater, we're sold on semi-Gospel too. As at Corinth, what gives us away is the bragging that goes on as we continue endlessly to sort ourselves out in factions and parties. He belongs to Walther, she to Schmucker, and I, of course, belong to Christ. (Thank God I went to Seminex, you know.) In comparison with that other crowd we're wiser and smarter, we're better justified in our reading of God's will and truth, we're better dosed by the Holy Spirit, we're free of the chains that hold them down—doctrinal rigidity, say, or captivation to the zeitgeist. More specifically, we worship better, we believe better, we do mission better, we do church better (whatever that phrase means), we rock at peace and justice where they do not. Unlike them we'll never vote Republican, or is that Democrat? We're the real Lutherans, the real Christians, the real God-fearers, the genuine followers of Jesus. *Et cetera ad nauseum*, the point being that what we

habitually hold up before others (to say nothing of ourselves) as our defining characteristic and therefore our pride and glory (Melanchthon's dipstick, prong 1) is not Christ—Christ *per se*, that is—but something else. At best it's our particular spin on Christ. More often we join hordes of other Christians and Christian congregations in thumping our chests over things that have nothing intrinsically to do with the death and resurrection of the Son of God. So we're the friendly church, the liturgical church, the Bible-believing church, the Missouri Synod church—or not, thank God. We're the rainbow church—or not, thank God. Or if we live in Minnesota we're the church of shy polite people who don't like to brag except about not bragging.

Trifles like these do nothing, dipstick prong 2, for a person who has serious questions about his or her standing with God. She wants to know, for example, why she got terminal cancer, or what that cancer may mean. At this point our own attitudes, stances, affiliations, predilections and all the rest of it are worth spit. Christ will soothe and satisfy, and only Christ; God for her in Christ, dramatically, irrevocably; God in Christ upending the message of God against her in her cancer. She hears that message, you know, and though it's a true message—she senses that—she hardly ever finds anyone with the nerve and honesty to confirm what she's hearing. What this person requires above all right now in a church, any church, are people stuffed through and through with real deal Gospel and therefore waving the Jesus flag, people filling her ears with their bragging about Christ, the way football players will brag when the team captain has the ball five yards from the end zone and the touchdown is certain. But how can this happen when the people around her are trained by force of habit to brag about trifles, and only trifles? When was the last time you heard one parishioner tell another parishioner not to be afraid because Jesus is Lord? If that should happen, by the way, in Bitzko

Bible Church, then God be praised.

This forces a second question. Why the addiction in our churches to trifling boasts in lieu of the Jesus brag? Melanchthon's blunt answer, scattered here and there throughout Apology 4, is that real-deal Gospel isn't for everybody. Truth be told, there are lots of folks who want nothing to do with it. It's not, as we'd say these days, their cup of tea.

Smug hypocrites. That's Melanchthon's pet term for these people. That's in the Tappert translation of 1959. The Kolb/Wengert translation of 2000 reads "complacent hypocrites." I like "smug" better. It speaks to the self-satisfaction that's at the heart of their addiction to semi-gospel.

"Their addiction," I said. I need to be honest. It's my addiction too.

The smug hypocrite is that healthy, well-fed person with a nice car, a nice house, a nice job, and a pretty nice wife who puts up him with nicely enough, a bit of money in the bank, that too, who is pretty sure he doesn't need Jesus; not all of Jesus, that's for sure. He and God are getting along just fine, he thinks, God keeping his distance and from that distance noticing as God ought to, as God indeed is obliged to, how he, the smug hypocrite, is pretty dang good. Morally good, aesthetically good, good in spirit as well; a good dad, a good employee, a pretty good husband, and a good, good pal and neighbor. *And* he contributes to the community, with gusto. He deserves at least a B+ on the heavenly report card. And the goodies, the bennies. He deserves them too.

We live in a land of smug hypocrites. America teems with them. Smug hypocrisy is the cornerstone of our national religion. To suggest that we of all people should need a Christ to be crucified for us is an insult.



God grant that I'm wrong, but I'm pretty sure I can spot some serious struggles with smug hypocrisy going on in the pews I preach toward on Sundays. I'll bet you can too. It's not that we don't have any use for Jesus. It's rather that we can do without the full package of benefits he offers. The forgiveness of sins, for example, seems a bit on the extreme side. I may not be perfect, but surely it's over the top to call me a sinner, and mean it.

Certainly that's the attitude outside the church among the great pool of people that congregations with survival on their minds are trying to attract. You too will have noticed, perhaps, how the word "sin" has fallen into disrepute in everyday secular conversation, so much so that the daily paper I read will surround it with quotation marks whenever it appears there, which isn't very often. God is doubtless not amused by this, but then the paper's business is to please not God but the readers it depends on for its own survival, and canny editors are well aware that sin as a concept doesn't fly any more, at least not in America; not among a people so adoring of the self, that they defy anyone, Almighty God included, to suggest that the "pretty good" of their self-evaluation is not yet good enough. Why seek forgiveness when a fatal lack of righteousness is not among their felt needs, so called? So if they turn at all to churches and to the Christ those churches embody it will be for other and lesser things, a need for which they do feel: friendship; direction; a sense of greater purpose; some help in moving beyond pretty good to very good or even really, really good, so I can feel extremely good about myself and expect God's greater blessing for having honored him and gotten better. There are contradictions in the logic here, of course, but then illogic is to hypocrisy as wood is to fire. Do the hypocrites notice it? Not at all. They're much too busy being smug.

Back then to recruiting congregations, faced with the challenge

of bringing such people through their doors. The word is “pander.” We wave those lesser flags—the friendliness, the worship style, the groups to join, the mission trips to go on, the spiffy building, the sociopolitical stance we happen to fancy and underwrite in our prayers, our causes, in the twists we apply to our reading of the Bible. The message, boiled down, is simple: “Come brag with us. We-all feel great about ourselves and you will too.”

Parenthetically: I’d love some day to drive past a massive modern cruciform edifice with a sign that says “Take Up Your Cross Community Church.” “Losers’ Lutheran” would tickle me too. I’m not holding my breath.

Back on track: Once through the doors and staying for a spell the newcomers are sure to hear “Amazing Grace” sung often and with gusto. Face it, it’s America. And when the last measure dies mercifully away what they’ll hear about is something else, taught in preaching and steady practice, a hoary old message of grace not amazing but rather enabling. That’s what Melanchthon confronted in the 16th century, and Paul before him in the 1st. By Melanchthon’s time the theory had been honed and refined into something roughly like the following. God who demands an awful lot of us is nice enough to give us a big hand toward achieving it. For one thing he sends Jesus to plug the hole to hell so you don’t fall in it. Then he gives you the Church with its sacraments for every day maintenance and repairs and a dose of pep besides. That way you can knuckle down to the job of turning the scoundrel you are into the saint you’ve got to be if you want to get to heaven. For that you need to tot up merits to cancel out your demerits, and if that takes longer than a lifetime then God is nice enough to give you purgatory to fry the rubbish out of you. And being really, really gracious he also authorizes the Church to transfer the excess merits of the super-good to your balance sheet, assuming, that is, that you

jump through specified hoops, like heading off to slaughter Saracens so that Grandma can go on pilgrimage to the Holy Land and slice some years of purgatory from *her* future. Etc.

We are not so rococo in our Christian worldview these days. For sure we Protestants have shucked that excess of saintly merits and purgatory. Even so, we've left the Holy Spirit having still to pry our collective fingers from the underlying principle. Old Adam's principle, Melanchthon would say, and Luther says it all the more. In a word, it's up to you. With some help from God and his grace that enables, but still, it's up to you. Could be that God's grace gives you a vastly higher leg up than Aquinas imagined, could be the step remaining measures two inches instead of two miles, but still it's up to you. Up to you to accept Jesus as personal Lord and Savior. Up to you, after you've done that, not to fornicate or play cards. Up to you to avoid doctrinal error. Up to you to dodge the devil's clutches or to bring heaven to earth through your dedication to peace and justice. Up to you, post-Jesus, to save yourselves or save the world, or maybe both. Here I can't help but think of that pious left-leaning lay person who led the devotion some 20 years ago at a Lutheran meeting of sorts in Connecticut. The text was Matthew 25, the sheep and the goats. She made sure we got the point that we had better feed the hungry and clothe the naked, or else we were toast. Up to you. I went home that day feeling smug because I knew I knew the Gospel so much better than she did, bennies for me. (We hypocrites will latch onto anything to puff ourselves up.) Did anybody at that devotion go home with a throbbing conscience? May it be the Holy Spirit pushed him sometime later into the arms of Christ where he belonged.

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Time out amid the torrent of words for a quick recap of what they amount to so far.

1. Christ for us *in toto* is God's core message.
  2. There's a test, the double dipstick, to check for that message. a) Is Christ our sole brag? b) Is the troubled conscience soothed?
  3. American Christians, ourselves included, insist like Paul's Corinthians on having other things to brag about.
  4. Melanchthon puts his finger on the attitude behind this. He calls it smug hypocrisy.
  5. We continue in 21st American church life to pander to the hypocrites, both inside our doors and beyond them.
  6. The platform for our pandering is a theory, as old as Adam, of enabling grace and the cardinal principle it supports, namely, It's Up To You.
- On we go.

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In Apology 4 Melanchthon attributes the staying power of "enabling grace"—my term, not his— as official church teaching in large part to a faulty reading of the Scriptures. We in the Crossings enterprise join others, mostly Lutheran, in arguing that bad Bible-reading remains a major culprit in the endurance of "up-to-you" as de facto doctrine in the Church, most every church, and almost every congregation.

In the Bible, says Melanchthon, are two prevailing threads running through and through from beginning to end, two core themes, or "chief doctrines" (Tappert) or "main topics" (Kolb/Wengert) into which "all Scripture should be divided" (Ap. 4:5). One is the Law and the other the Gospel, though there we're following Luther. Melanchthon prefers to say "the promises."

So what's the difference? Most of you, I'm sure, are like pigs with mud in your joy and familiarity with the distinction, but

let's rehearse it anyway against the backdrop of the discussion so far.

God's law lays out what we must do for God. God's promises lay out what God will do for us.

The law, not content with good or better, demands the best. The promises, no less content with good or better, deliver the best in such a way that the only thing to say is "thank you."

The law binds, the promises release. The law chafes, the promises soothe. The law puts us and God on opposing sides. The promises put God astoundingly on our side. The law calls on us to account for ourselves. The promises show us Christ with holes in his hands and side accounting for us, and accounting all the more for his own outrageous nerve in daring to bring us home.

In other words, the law forces us to state our accomplishments, to write out the resume, to unroll the curriculum vitae. It forces us, that is, to brag. Then it leaves us writhing with shame or bristling with anger as God observes how pathetic we are.

By stark contrast the promises unroll the vitae of Christ, known otherwise as the book of life, and they show us where our names are written, some columns to the left or right of the one that names those Bethlehem shepherds. Showing this, they leave us bragging with the angels about the glory of God in the highest, who for Jesus' sake delights in us beyond all understanding.

Would you like all this in its briefest form? Here goes. The law says "It's up to you." The Gospel says "It's up to Christ. Completely."

Comes the crucial observation. These two messages, both from God, God the one and only, are not complementary. They're

antithetical. Few passages show that antithesis more vividly than our present text from Corinthians with its echo of the Magnificat and the Song of Hannah that preceded that. God shames the wise and strong, God brings to nothing things that are. That's law. God goes out of God's way to choose the weak and the foolish and make them into what they are not. That's Gospel. The law is God's finger in our chest, pushing us back and shoving us down. It always accuses, as Melancthon famously puts it. The Gospel in complete contrast is the hand of God in Christ grabbing the wrist of drowning Peter and pulling him up, and toward him.

That's not to say that everyone wants Christ to pull them up. Too many of us are still sold on the notion that we'll make it to the shore on our own, thank you very much, though granted with Jesus walking beside to provide rest breaks along the way. That much we'll take from him by way of his benefits, again enabling grace, though please, not saving grace; because the aim remains to find ourselves at length on the beach thumping our chests in concert with lots of other braggarts who made it too. Problem is, the beach is posted. "No bragging allowed," the sign says. And below in smaller letters, "Depart from me you evildoers." Again, the finger in the chest, shoving us down, pushing us away.

And that's the pickle that churches and preachers threaten people with when they don't divide the Scriptures into its antithetical themes; when instead they commingle law and promise and present the Word of God as if it were a single message. Whenever that happens the law wins out, as it does in a fairly recent discussion of Matthew by a megachurch pastor who blithely asserts that the key to unlocking Matthew is 22:37-40. That's where Jesus shoves Moses' double-barreled love commandment down the throat of a hostile Sadducee—"eat *this* and live, if you can." On Tuesday morning I will show you why this fellow is

utterly mistaken, and on exegetical as well as theological grounds. In the meantime pity the poor people who read him and believe him. Pity too the poor Lutherans whose churches trumpet the Great Commission *and* the Great Commandment as their reason for existence. They're left to sit or stand there on Sunday morning facing a God who tells them that they aren't existing well enough. No bragging about your mission trips, he says, or your soup kitchens. I won't stand for it.

And some other things that happen when law and Gospel are commingled.

First, the law gets mocked and diminished. This happens because without the Gospel as distinct, alternative, and subsequent word, people can't bear to listen to the law in its full majesty and lofty expectation. Moses' face has got to be veiled, as Paul will write in his second letter to the Corinthian crowd. How come? Because in the gut I know that I cannot love the LORD my God nor even my neighbor to the degree that God expects; so I ask him, for example, what the rules are for divorcing my wife, Mark 10, assuming that if God were really good as in realistic there have got to be those rule; and I bridle at Jesus' rejoinder that no, there aren't any except as they apply to my hardness of heart and serve to expose it. At which point, of course, almost all America these days stops listening; and the church in response starts to mumble about how God didn't really mean it after all. "He can't be *that* hard on us, you know."

Second, commingling the two messages leaves the Gospel mocked and diminished. For example, the Gospel promises peace. It asserts that God has made his peace with us already and irrevocably in the death of Christ. Now this is precisely the kind of assertion that has got to be pure and untainted if it's to mean what it says. The slightest hint of "it's still up to you" will ruin it. Think about that. If something is still up to

me I'm not at peace, I can't be, not until I know that the thing resting on my neck has been achieved to the satisfaction of the person who put it there, in this case God, or so I'm being told. Jeremiah rants about the wretches who "treat the wounds of my people carelessly, saying peace, peace, when there is no peace" (8:11). That's the wretch I am if as preacher my account of Christ and his benefits includes even a speck of commingled "up to you."

Third. Law and Gospel commingled diminishes Christ. We've touched on this already. It turns him from Savior and Lord into friend and helper, the enabler of people who are stuck to one degree or another with saving themselves. It reduces him to Maintenance Jesus, the guy who fixes and softens the current up-to-you system. By contrast the Gospel promises not Maintenance Jesus, but Revolutionary Jesus, the Son of God who overthrows up-to-you as the operating principle of life and replaces it with God-for-us, for all of us. We'll hear more about that one too on Tuesday if I don't run out of time.

Fourth: God per se gets mocked and diminished when Law and Gospel are commingled. You've all heard it said, "I can't believe in a God who would. . . ." Not that my believing or not believing does anything to change the facts about God and what God does or doesn't do—who am I kidding? Still, this not believing does something to me. It turns me into the ultimate rebel, one who dares to fashion his own image of God according to my own liking. In America, the land of rebels, we've turned God into Mr. Nicey, Nicey. He wouldn't hurt a fly because good gods don't swat flies. Or smug and stiff-necked sinners—he wouldn't swat them either.

Instead he coddles them. He gives them space to strut their stuff and sow their oats, both tame and wild. Like an eager, pathetic, neglected spouse, he leaps at our beck and call, known otherwise as prayer, and he suffers our contempt and abuse if he



doesn't. Far be it from us, on the other hand, to think on him with any regularity or the slightest affection. In churches it's somewhat better, I suppose, but even in churches, even in our own churches, we hear too often of a positive God who acts always and only in ways that we like or desire. "What is God doing in your lives," asks the ELCA churchwide rep at the local synod assembly, and as the delegates chat about this around their tables not a one dares or even thinks to suggest that God is busy killing me so that God in his mercy beyond all thought can make me alive with Christ. We just don't talk like that anymore. It's as if in our churches we've forgotten how.

And here, I submit, is what comes of that. More and more God is scorned as an ineffective and abject fool, by no means good or strong or fierce enough to insist on genuine righteousness or to rescue us from evil, above all the evil that festers within. As for Christ, is he not becoming the greater fool who died in vain, no benefit of any present use to us accruing from his crucifixion? "I don't know what to do with Good Friday," says a colleague in my neck of the woods. "I don't believe that business of atonement. It smacks of child abuse." She says this blithely, and she counts on God, I think, to nod his approval. So do other pastors as seen on TV, the ones who prattle winsomely of the Bible's tips for self-improvement and God's will to see you prosper. On the stage behind them is nary a cross lest the would-be braggarts they're talking to should see it and be annoyed.

Fifth and final consequence of commingling law and gospel: God who is not mocked and will not suffer braggarts declares that we are toast.

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We 40-some souls who are here tonight are going to spend the

next 36 hours in large part on the art of distinguishing law and gospel and dividing Scriptural texts into those great themes with a view to seeing how the Holy Spirit is working through those texts on people today, starting with ourselves, both to kill and to make alive.

In this work we do let all boasting be of Christ, the one who authorizes us to work on this not only for our own sakes, or for the congregations we belong or preach to, but for the wider Church as well, and indeed for the world. Already that sounds more than overweening, as if we're stuffed far too full of ourselves; but if it's Christ who stuffs us, then by all means let's think and talk big. Remember that in the kingdom, or shall I say the operating system, where the controlling principles are God-for-Us and Up-to-Christ—in that system enormous things come of a tiny seed, and that's what this Crossings venture is, nothing more.

The overriding aim in what we do together is to practice talking about Christ and his benefits in such a way that a) we don't underplay them, b) that people listening might be able to say "I get it." "I hear" they say, "how Christ brings everything that's required to spring me from the particular pickle I happen to be in.'

For example: I've talked at length so far about a problem afflicting churches from Paul's day to ours. People brag and puff themselves up over trifles, and in doing so they disrespect Christ to say nothing of each other.

What's the reason for this behavior? Answer: their hearts are fixed on the age-old system that runs the world. They happen to like it for now. They believe they can beat it for now. I called the system "It's Up to You."

Comes the problem, the real problem. God hates bragging. He

shuts braggarts up by shaming them and tearing them down. That in turn enrages them and leaves them loathing God.

So how is Christ precisely what these braggarts need? The text's answer: he became for them exactly what they are not: wise, and just, and holy, and free. Let's think that through: what does Jesus do, above all in and through his crucifixion, that the braggarts don't and can't do? Answer: he shuts up about himself and stays that way. "Like a lamb before the shearers is dumb, so he opened not his mouth." (Is. 53). 100 years ago Albert Schweitzer tried to figure out the puzzle of the so-called Messianic secret in Mark, where Jesus is forever telling people to say nothing about him and what he's doing for them. Why is this? Schweitzer came up with a silly answer, the details of which I don't altogether recall. The real reason is that Jesus doesn't brag. Not about himself he doesn't. And in the context of his ministry he doesn't let other people brag about him either. How else can he be for the braggarts what the braggarts are not? Silent, that is. Modest and humble, the Son of Man who has nowhere to lay his head. And in the end he doesn't prove he's the Messiah by coming down from the cross, that is, he doesn't brag his way out of being reduced for the sake of braggarts to the nothing all braggarts are headed for. Instead he dares to let himself be destroyed by that fearsome combination of God's anger at the braggarts and the braggarts' frustration with the God they can't impress, all of it directed squarely at him. Does he vaunt his daring or the courage and prowess that attend it? Not at all, nor does he think to. This above all is why Christ is the wisdom and righteousness that we braggarts are not. It's why God raises Christ from the dead with authority to resurrect the braggarts too and to sanctify and redeem them from their own folly on the one hand and from God's disgust on the other. At this point the Holy Spirit takes over and starts bragging about Christ to us, and the brag is that he

did all this *for* us to give us a future beyond the nothing we're headed to, a future when our mouths will flap like crazy along with shepherds and angels, and everything that spills from them will be all about him and the God who sent him to death for our sins and who raised him for our justification.

And there's more. With that death and resurrection as a fact of history we now we have something else to pin our hearts to, not "Up-To-Us" but instead "Up-To- Christ-and-Only-Christ."

In other words, suddenly there's a new faith-engine inside, and it drives a new kind of behavior of the sort we find in Paul and Melanchthon and countless others before and since. Suddenly the future is now, and we're bragging already about Christ, not because we have to or else, as one last Up-To-You hurdle that must be jumped, but rather because we want to, our new hearts driving us into the Jesus brag, so to speak.

The Jesus brag. That's a bunch of unafraid if teary mourners singing their lungs out at a braggart's funeral. Torn down, he was, by age and disease, God's standard anti-braggart suppression devices. Yet the mourners sing anyway with confidence and joy because all the words in their mouths are about Jesus *for* the braggart.

The Jesus brag. That's one of you looking at a wretched, pathetic piece of human flotsam: the business failed, the marriage broke, the cancer struck, the kid went to jail, the bank foreclosed last week on the family home; God help her, a rapist attacked. So their eyes are dazed, the tears welling; they reek of shame. The things they bragged about are gone and the voice inside screams "you are nothing."

You get at that point to look in their eyes, and you say to them, echoing Paul, again to the Corinthians: "All things are yours, whether Paul, Apollos, Cephas, the world, life, death,

the present, the future, all are yours—not will be yours; are yours, right now, underscore that; all are yours—for you are Christ's and Christ is God's.

Say it like you mean it because it's absolutely true. You've got God's promise on that.

And in your saying add nothing on. Don't say, "if you believe this." For pity's sake don't say, "if you really believe this." Sure, objectively a promise, even God's promise, is worthless if it isn't trusted. But the moment you demand this trust you commingle the law's up-to-you with the Gospel's up-to-Christ and you ruin the promise.

So instead, you simply put the promise out there; and trusting yourself in that other great promise of the Spirit Christ sends, you wait for the Word of God most gracious to create the faith it seeks.

You'll know when it happens because eyes will start to shine. I've seen it myself from time to time, most recently a month or two ago. You've seen it too, I should think.

That's one great consequence of keeping God's Law and God's Gospel properly distinguished and the benefits of Jesus laid out in full. It's a gift wonderful to behold.

And another such gift is the sight that will fill our own sore eyes when as pastors or fellow members of Christian congregations we do as St. Paul does in the opening verses of the Corinthian correspondence. There he describes them not as they are in themselves, silly, fractious, puffed up, overweening, and in so many ways unpleasant. Instead, looking through the lens of Christ for them—that's the Promise—he calls them saints, and he means it, and he dares to love them. That too is the Jesus brag.

God grant us all Paul's joyful faith that trusts the promise,  
and boasts in the Lord, and by daring to see that which is not  
brings it into being.

+ + +

With that I've said my piece. Let's get to work with vigor and  
joy.

+ Soli Deo Gloria +

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