

Some Essential “Crossings” Theology in Plain English. (Part One of a Keynote Presentation)

Colleagues,

A week and a day have gone by since the party broke up in Belleville, Illinois. I refer as you might guess to the Seventh International Crossings Conference that was held there on the last three days of January. The group of 60 or so who gathered included a wonderful mix of both new and veteran attendees. Three had traveled all the way from Singapore. A few others spend their days near America's extremities. Most inhabit the so-called fly-over regions of the Midwest. As is true of too many Lutheran gatherings, the majority were showing gray hair and wrinkles. Still, two were in their twenties, with a sprinkling of others likewise on the underside of 45. To gather from evaluations post-event, most all were very glad they came. And why not? As the company was good, so was the fare, for which those of us who organized the event this time are bound to thank both God and those splendid servants of his who delivered it: Steve Turnbull, Kit Kleinhans, Matt Becker, Francisco Herrera, David Zahl, and Lori Cornell, to say nothing of a homily by Candice Wassell. An evening of reminiscences by Crossings' globe-trotting founder, Ed Schroeder, provided a special treat.

In recent years we've tried in Thursday Theology to pass along the substance of what was said at the conferences. This has happened to the extent that we've been able to secure copies of the presentations and permission to share them. We'll do the same this year. A few of the speakers seemed to be working

chiefly from notes and PowerPoint slides, so texts might not be available. We'll see.

In the meantime, we'll get you started with what is available, i.e. the keynote address by the undersigned. It comes to you in two parts. The first concentrates on introducing Crossings to first-time attendees, with a particular focus on a few of the essential ideas that run through the body of our theological work and were bound to be featured at the conference: what is Gospel, what is Law, why the constant attention to Luther's concept of *deus absconditus*, an idea that much of mainline theology finds repellent today. Those of you who have been at home with these matters for decades might pay attention here to the presentation's secondary objective, which was to slip said matters across in plain, down-to-earth English, accessible to any thoughtful person, including those who aren't schooled in theological shorthand of any kind, let alone its Latin versions. Did it work? Maybe, maybe not. Decide for yourself.

A week from now we'll send you Part Two of the address, where the foci are two: first, introducing the speakers mentioned above; second, launching the discussion we had gathered to undertake, about the power of the Gospel for the times we face in 2018.

I can't quit without a note about the fascinating coincidence of the coming week, when Valentine's Day and Ash Wednesday will overlap. Might I urge that all who honor the latter, whether as preachers or hearers, will focus their attention on what Love at its richest, darkest, deepest, and best is finally about, and on the Life it leads to.

Peace and Joy,
Jerry Burce

The Lion and the Lamb: God's Underused Gospel for the Weak-Kneed Church; with an Assortment of Introductions

Keynote Address at the Seventh International Crossings Conference (Part One)

by Jerome Burce

Explanatory note: the conference theme was "Up Weak Knees: The Power of the Gospel for Times like These." Immediately prior to this opening address, poster-sized papers were delivered to each table, with participants were asked to write down one or two things that most troubled them about either the church or the world as they faced it at the beginning of 2018. These papers were later displayed for reference as the conference proceedings unfolded.

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Romans 1:16-17, our text for the next two and a half days:

I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith; as it is written, 'The one who is righteous will live by faith.'

In the name of the Father, and of the +Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

When I was boy my mother told me more than once—many, many times more than once—to mind how much I piled on my fork before I shoved it in my mouth. I was, yes, a slow learner, though eventually I got it, at least where mashed potatoes are concerned. Later I nagged my own sons, of course. What I didn't

learn—and at this point never will, I suppose—is how to transfer that lesson to the preparation of a presentation like this, or to the organization of a conference, for that matter. The forks are piled high, folks, and not just this hour's, but for the rest of our time together too. If you find the helpings excessive—for sure my mother would—may they at least be tasty.

There are three things, or rather four, that I hope to cram your ears with over the next hour and a bit.

First, I want to introduce some of you to Crossings. It's your first time ever at one of these events. You're wondering, perhaps, what makes this mob tick. So I'll tell you briefly about our driving passions, and I'll talk too about some core ideas behind a method we use to help us hear what God is both saying and doing to us this very day through the texts of Holy Scripture. These ideas will be in play throughout our time together.

Second, I want to introduce everybody to the theme of our conference, and to the splendid group of speakers who will help us pick through it. I will touch as well on the rationale behind the schedule you may have glanced through already. It's heavy on discussion time. Suffice it for now to say that we're here to work—all of us, together.

Finally I want to lob a grenade or two to get the talking started. That's an extreme way of putting it, of course; and it may well be that what I think of as a grenade will strike the rest of you as, at worst, a water balloon; though if all it does is get your attention and provoke some kind of disturbed response, however mild, I'll be happy enough. God designed the Gospel of Christ Jesus to shake up the daughters of Adam and sons of Eve that all of us continue to be, baptized though we are; the aim being that once the dust settles, once we see how

yet another old assumption lies suddenly in ruins, once we hear and grasp the wild Promise that takes the old assumption's place, we will each of us and all of us together taste joy. God grant that taste in profuse abundance as the hours we spend here unfold.

I spoke of a fourth goal for this hour. That would be some talking time, the first bout thereof. I do hope it happens. Complain loudly if it doesn't.

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So first, about Crossings for those of you who don't know it. I could, I suppose, tell you our story: how most of us in this community, as we call it, have roots in a Lutheran Church Missouri Synod that we no longer belong to; how we share a connection with a pair of teachers named Bob Bertram and Ed Schroeder, one of whom is with the Lord these days; how, through these teachers we've been graced and shaped by the mid-20th century work of a stunning German theologian named Werner Elert that no one else in America, Lutherans included, has bothered to pay attention to.

Or again, I could chatter on about a website, or weekly text studies, or sporadic essays, or workshops that used to be; the handful of published books; the conferences and seminars we've been holding at this site since 2007; the experiment in online learning that one of our key players, Steven Kuhl, has been working on for the past many months.

But such reports I will spare you. At best they'd be superficial; at worst deadly dull. What matters most about this Crossings outfit is the diametric opposite of dull, and for it I refer you immediately to the text that sits at the heart of everything we'll be doing together for the next two and a half

days.

"I am not ashamed of the Gospel," Paul says. Neither, at Crossings, are we. In fact, we claim that lack of shame as our defining characteristic, being careful as we do to underscore that by "Gospel" we mean, or keep trying to mean, nothing less or other than Paul means when he uses the word. *Euaggelion* in Greek. In today's English, the good announcement, the good message, or as we more often say "the good news." All these, of course, are shorthand expressions, and the last of them is also a debased expression. Everybody has good news of one sort or another to peddle these days. Most all of it is trifling, and ever so parochial. For example: "While the Cleveland Browns lost all the games they played this year, the good news is, they get an extra draft pick." I tell you in all sincerity that not even those of us from Northeast Ohio are the least bit thrilled by that—and yes, we are ashamed that this is all we have to tout when it comes to our team—our oh-so-feckless and depressing team.

Paul, in the starkest of contrasts, touts Jesus Christ, the Son of God whose birth we celebrated a few weeks ago, whose resurrection from a death by crucifixion we will sing and shout about this year on—guess what—April Fool's Day, this by virtue of a coincidence of calendars that Paul would absolutely revel in. "We push Christ Crucified, an offense to Jews, the rant of blithering fools where Greeks are concerned, but to those called, whether Jew or Greek, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God." That's how Paul launches the first of his letters to the Corinthians, that little band of mid-first-century Christian types with whom his driving aim is the one that propels our work at Crossings. Those folks in Corinth have heard the story—the Jesus story, that is. Paul was the one who told it to them. What they haven't quite tumbled to a few years later is how this story of something that happened a while back

translates now into actual Gospel, a word of God that strikes both ear and heart as good news in the strictest sense of the term. First, it is good. Inexpressibly good. Exclusively good. Poke and prod as you might, you won't find it tainted with the slightest speck of either information or implication that will cause your nose to wrinkle and your mouth to say, "Yes, but..."

Second, it is news, as in genuine news. You haven't heard it before, or at least not in the way you're hearing it now. It adds to the store of information you've been using to process the world around you and respond to the moment you presently occupy. "Unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, which is Christ the Lord." For 1st century shepherds abiding in fields, that's news. They jump. They move. They go with haste, no less. They find. They gawk. They ooh, they ahh. They babble with their story. After that they wake up sleeping Bethlehem with the ruckus that the unfettered praise of God is bound to create. So tell me: since when has that statement drawn a similar reaction from 21st century suburbanites abiding in church pews? Answer: it hasn't. It doesn't. It can't. For these folks it isn't news, you see, but only the umpteenth repetition of a story they heard when they were kids. So on hearing it again they yawn. They fidget. They wish so hard there wasn't a sermon to suffer through between now and going home. Though perhaps for once a preacher will surprise them. She'll do, that is, what preachers are supposed to do and too often don't. She'll study. She'll pray. She'll focus her mind and summon her nerve. She'll dare to translate; she will make the scary jump from then to now. In other words, she will use that original statement to identify and authorize a fresh assertion of something God is saying to people today—this Christmas Eve, A.D. 2017, say. For example: "To you is given this very night the boundless love of God Almighty, embodied in the living presence, right here, right now, of the same Christ those shepherds found

in a manger, only you will find him in this bread and cup he so wants you to eat and drink from, and no he doesn't care how big a jerk you've been these past twelve months. That's *why* he's here, to save jerks. So come, check him out!"

And with such as this we've made the move from stodgy story to bona fide news. Ears will perk up, especially those attached to persons for whom Christianity these days is mostly a matter of unpleasant rumor, filled with tales of prudes and killjoys and pious hypocrites telling people what to do. Talk as I've imagined it just now will be for them a fresh experience, news indeed. But even those who know better, the ones whose experience includes encounters with Gospel-tellers who have a clue about their business, even they will respond when you tell it again as real-deal good news, a stunning word of God, impossibly excellent, addressed to the specificity of their circumstances now.

That's what Paul is doing in that letter to the Corinthians. Again and again he grabs hold of the essential pieces of Jesus' story—his crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension in particular—and he uses these to authorize astonishing assertions that speak directly to matters the Corinthians are wrestling with: issues of leadership; of morality; of communal behavior; of endless competition. Who is the better Christian, the real Christian, the Christian with a clue or with a stronger dose of Holy Spirit? Who is graced with grown up wisdom—sophistication, as we say today—in contrast to the rubes? Who is the righteous Christian, as in the one who gets it right, whatever "it" may be—who therefore basks in God's approval as the rest of you do not?

A comment in passing, anticipating too what seems to me a central issue that our conference here will grapple with these next few days: how Corinthian we Christians are in 2018, and

dare I say, we Lutherans in particular, Lutherans who have long since out-Corinthianed the Corinthians by entrenching ourselves in hostile camps, from which we stare at the other with withering contempt; and all our Christian platitudes—all our parroting of hoary phrases like “the forgiveness of sins” or “the love of God” or “the precious blood of Jesus” if that’s how you still talk—does little if anything to mitigate that. And of even less use are the slogans on the banners that wave above our tents. “Bible-believing” here. “Peace and justice” over there.

So our ears too are bound to perk up when Paul rolls up his sleeves and starts pitching Gospel at Corinth. Listen: “All things are yours.” Verb: present tense. Pronoun: second person plural, all-encompassing—these are both essential features of God’s good news, genuine Gospel verses the wannabe stuff we’re used to hearing. Again, “All things are yours, whether Paul, Apollos, Cephas—the ELCA, the LCMS—the universe, life, death, the present, the future—all are yours, and you are Christ’s and Christ is God’s.” Put that in your pipe and smoke it for a while, and then let’s see what happens.

Crossings exists to push this kind of Gospel. We learned it from our teachers who helped us taste it, as if for the first time. I have vivid memories of that, as do others. You might say we’re addicted. We think others in the Church need to get hooked too. Lots of others. It would please Christ no end to find his people startling pockets of a grim, despondent America with the inexplicable sound of their joy in God. “Up weak knees and spirit bowed in sorrow / no tomorrow / shall arrive to beat you down. / God goes before you / and angels all around. / On your head a crown.” That’s a Bohemian Christ-confessor responding to the ring of real-deal Gospel in the 18th year of the 30 Years War, no end in sight. Our goal these next few days is to find out if God’s Good News can get the 60 people here making noise

like that, no matter what you may have written on the poster paper just now. 60 isn't much, you say. The Holy Spirit, responding, reminds us all that God is used to getting great things started with far fewer people.

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A quick timeout so I can introduce Lori Cornell to those of you who don't know her. Lori is one of Crossings' key editors. She manages the production of weekly text studies that have flowed for almost two decades, without pause or interruption. into the inboxes of whoever subscribes to them. They're available on our website too. The goal of these studies is to tap into the wellspring of Gospel that lurks beneath every text one encounters of a Sunday via the Revised Common Lectionary. That includes the dark, obscure and stony texts—a passage from Amos, say, on one of his cranky days. All Scripture, Luther said, drives us to Christ, even Amos, or on some days, especially Amos.

On Wednesday morning Lori is going to walk us through the methodology that she and her corps of writers follow to tap this Gospel and let it gush [or try to, at any rate]. I have no intention now of stealing her thunder, nor the time to do it either; but since you'll hear the methodology in play as discussions unfold these next few days, let me at least identify some key assumptions that undergird it. These come directly from the theological tradition, at once very deep and all too thin, that we try our best to channel. Tomorrow's speakers, Kit Kleinhans and Matt Becker, will dunk us in it. [Look forward to that.] Of relevance for now—

First: genuine Gospel is always and necessarily anchored in the death and resurrection of Jesus. The incarnation is a secondary doctrine, which is not to say it isn't essential. How does God

get to Golgotha if not through Mary's womb? But for the action that matters most to the people here this very morning, Golgotha is the place you go. May I never boast of anything, Paul says, except the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ. To which Paul's disciple, Crossings' own Bob Bertram, adds this thought: the theologian's essential task is to necessitate Christ; to demonstrate why this Christ and him crucified is the only thing in all the world worth hanging your heart on.

Second: Gospel at its best emerges only and always against the back drop of un-Gospel at its worst. Worst-ever un-Gospel is a shepherd's sudden discovery on an otherwise quiet night that the jig is up; that he and his pals are two seconds shy of meeting our universal human future as dust and ashes—or, in their specific case, as scraps of charred angelic toast. No wonder they fear a mega-fear, as Luke so deliciously puts it. No wonder, then, the joy, the gasping, gushing joy, when the angel says "Fear not," then backs that up with a jolt of good news at its best, a word from God to them that cannot be, and yet it is. "For to you is born this day," etc.

Un-Gospel at its worst is news of God not for us but against us. I call that news, because for most people it is, also in churches; especially these days in mainline churches. "I can't—I won't—believe in that kind of God," they say. They say it the way one ostrich says to the other, both with heads beneath the sand, that the lion isn't there.

We at Crossings confess the lion. We also confess that we've each spent a life annoying it, a habit none of us can shake. Truth be told, Jerome the Sinner doesn't much care for lions, least of all the Lion in Chief. Nor does any other human being, however much some will claim to the contrary. Said lion, after all, is both author and enforcer of the un-gospel for which the theologian's usual word is "law." Law constitutes the

skeleton that our lives in this world are built both on and around. It makes all things work, more or less. It keeps them in order, more or less. We often appreciate it, more or less. We're obliged always to thank God for it, and never less, but only and always more than we do. Such thanks are tough, or shall I say impossible, because the law also presses on us—to change the baby's diaper, say, or take out the trash, or do the homework, or earn an honest living; and behind the pressure is the weight of the lion's paw. Therein the trouble. When we do such things well we praise ourselves and expect God to chime in. When we do them poorly or not at all, we resent the consequences we're forced to suffer, and we're sure to find a way, as Adam did in the garden, to lay the fault for that at God's feet. "That woman you gave me..."

No wonder the lion develops an appetite for ostrich. These days he'll find heaps of them in churches where heads are buried both to mute the lion's roar and to foster the illusion that all it takes to placate the lion is for an ostrich to sing louder, try harder, and advance whatever sociopolitical agenda said ostrich thinks the lion prefers. I say this, of course, with tongue in cheek, but only partially. There are some deep and serious reasons for this illusion that I'll get to in a while. Suffice it for the moment to observe that the illusion is, in fact, an illusion. Remember Amos? That's his message, beginning to end. God is not safe. But who of a Sunday morning imagines that God is using Amos to roar directly at them? What Lutheran preacher is daring to say that these days?

But how, if such things are not said, can today's Lutherans taste the Easter joy that Sunday mornings are meant to advance? Eleven men huddle and cower behind a locked door for fear of the Jews—you know the story. Silly creatures, for fearing so small. Look: there's Jesus. John says nothing at this point of a mega fear like the one Luke's shepherds felt, but even so, I can't

imagine that Peter's heart, for one, hasn't frozen in mid-beat. This guy is so busted by the God he gave up on the other night, not that he deemed him God when he babbled the treason of that three-fold denial.

"Peace be with you," Jesus says. Then he shows them the wounds that authorize him to talk that crazy.

This is Gospel at its best and most gloriously impossible. Saul of Tarsus heard it too on the road to Damascus. It's the lion speaking with the lamb's voice. Or, better still, it's the lion and the lamb cavorting together the way Isaiah envisioned they would when the new age dawns, only it happens in a way even Isaiah couldn't begin to guess, in the astonishing person of Christ Jesus, the lamb laid low by the lion on the best and worst Friday ever, and this for committing the crime the lion sent him to commit. "He bore our sins," as we commonly say, rarely pausing as we do either to marvel at the wonder or to wallow in the riddle of what we've just confessed—how, for example, this lamb's obedience is to wear our disobedience, or how the very thing that makes him an eternally righteous lamb is the responsibility he takes for everything in me and you that drives the lion deadly crazy. Out come the claws that Friday. They pin him to the cross I belong on. So dies the only person ever to draw breath that a righteous lion can purr over, the purr erupting in earnest that first Easter Sunday and continuing this very morning to cheer the hearts of saints and angels. It does this even as Christ looks around at the flock of dopey ostriches huddled in this room, and says to us all, bar none, "Peace be with you." Peace, no matter that all of you are spending yet another day on earth irritating God, to say nothing of each other. Of course you are. That's what ostriches do. You can't keep from doing it, nor will you. Even so, peace be with you. I am (says Jesus) what finally matters to God where you are concerned. Let me also be the one who finally matters to you

where each other is concerned. In other words, love one other as I have loved you, and, finding each other in me, dare together to trust that the lion is purring even as you hear it roar. Oh, and while you're at it, don't forget to purr over each other, even when you're feeling cross and cranky with each other.

Or to put all this another way: don't simply hear the Gospel. Use the Gospel.