

Steve Turnbull on “The New Humanity,” Part 2.

Colleagues,

Today we pass along the second half of the paper Steve Turnbull delivered at the Crossings conference in January. Again you’ll find observations that are sure to prove helpful when Holy Week gets here. I’m thanking Steve right now for focusing my attention on “governance” as a central issue, if not *the* central issue, in all four Passion accounts. I also hear him edging toward a persuasive argument that it’s the dominant theme of New Testament gospel taken as a whole. Talk about timely! Given the jaw-dropping dismay that’s attending the current contest for U.S. President, I can imagine lots of people being better primed than usual this year for the good news that Jesus reigns. With that in mind, a word of special thanks to Steve for his concluding thoughts on how to slip that news across these days.

Peace and Joy,

Jerry Burce

Nicodemus and the New Humanity (*continued*)

When Jesus claims the title and vocation of the Danielic Son of Man, we see that He is the one in whom humanity is restored. But it is another topic in the Gospels that tells us how this rehumanizing reign comes to us. For this we must hear the

announcement that the Reign of God has come among us. In the words of the Synoptists, we must hear the Gospel.

Now, I know that mixing Kingdom and Gospel can make some Lutherans nervous. We've seen it done poorly. But this need not be so. In fact, Gospel has been a Kingdom word from the very beginning. And everyone who heard the Gospel from Jesus or from his scattered apostles knew this.

The Jews among them who knew their Scriptures would have learned it from Isaiah. Here it is in Isaiah 40, "You who bring *good news* to Zion, go up on a high mountain. You who bring *good news* to Jerusalem, lift up your voice with a shout, lift it up, do not be afraid; say to the towns of Judah, "Here is your God!" See, the Sovereign Lord comes with power, and he rules with a mighty arm." Or again, Isaiah 52.7, "How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of those who bring *good news*, who proclaim peace, who bring good tidings, who proclaim salvation, who say to Zion, 'Your God reigns!'" For Isaiah, the Gospel was the good news of the restoration of the reign of Yahweh.

But the Gentiles who heard the Gospel would have known this too. For *them euangelion* could be roughly translated as something like "good news about the king." Allow me to spin a little story, something to help us imagine how this term was used in Jesus' world.

Imagine an average Joe who lived in the 1st Christian century, long before anybody thought to call it that. Let's say his name was Alexander. Alexander was a humble guy. He farmed the land that had been in his family since before anyone could remember. And it was good land too, a little hilly, he noticed more and more as he got older and his knees began to remind him of how hard he was working. But he grew figs and olives on that land, which his family ate with special pleasure. They

believed they were the best figs and olives grown anywhere nearby. And Alexander sold and bartered his crop at the market. In exchange for his produce he brought home milk to drink and cloth that his wife Livia made into clothes and blankets. They never had too much, but they only rarely had too little. They lived their life quietly and didn't want trouble.

But their lives were not without scars. When Alexander and Livia were younger, they had known mostly peace. But the minor kings of local tribes had grown bolder in recent years. The peacekeeping powers of Rome were preoccupied with their own affairs. The assassination of Julius Caesar brought chaos to the realm. His adopted son Octavian, the heir to the throne had been betrayed by his friend and ally Marc Antony, and Octavian and Antony were spending all their energies – and the resources of the Republic – trying to outmaneuver one another seize control for themselves. Luxuries like providing security for farmers on the borderlands weren't getting much attention.

It was because of this Alexander and Livia had lost their oldest son two years ago. He was 14. He'd have been 16 now. He had the body of a man but the head of boy, brimming with courage, still lacking in wisdom. When some lieutenants of a nearby tribal king were threatening to steal the produce from Alexander's fields, the boy threatened them right back. "You touch this field and you might not live to regret it." The fight that resulted from those words caused enough pain and injury to the men that they decided to pick on easier targets next time, but the boy paid for that reputation with his life. And Alexander cursed the olives that had been traded for the life of son, and he'd trade them back in a minute if he could. But, of course, he couldn't.

And in addition to his grief, now Alexander lived with a

constant low grade fear. When would the next threats come? Today, next week, next month? What about his other kids? His wife? Would he lose them *and* his livelihood next time? And, although he couldn't prove it, he was sure that people were damaging his crops at night while he slept. Life was a struggle every day now.

And then one day Alexander got news that changed all of that. He was sitting down to eat with his family when a young man came running by the house. Out of breath from having done this all day, half panting with no energy for polish or explanation, he blurts out that Octavian had finally secured the front. His rivalry with Antony had actually settled down last fall when Antony died in Egypt. And since that time, Octavian had returned to Rome and solidified his power. The armies were under his unified command, and the Senate was giving him more and more authority. Soon they would even begin to call him "Caesar Augustus."

The local chieftains and the bands of raiders would have to learn their place as security returned to the region. Alexander noted silently to himself that the recent decrease in threatening activity must have been no coincidence. There was a new sheriff in town, and the criminals had known it even before he did.

There was still some mopping up to do in that area, but this was beginning to feel like a whole new day, like the long night of waiting was over. And Alexander's life began to improve dramatically. The crops on the edges of the field were mysteriously staying much healthier. So his family ate better and took better crops to market. The scars of his loss remained, but his heart began to lighten considerably. The constant fear for the safety of his family began to recede, and soon he would wake up without a pit in his stomach for the

first time in two years.

Alexander had been the victim of strong and wicked powers for a long time. He was no match for them, and they were stealing his life right out from underneath him. But now a stronger and better power had risen. Augustus would have his own detractors, of course, but for Alexander he was a savior. And his arrival to power was a whole new day for Alexander and for his world. And the people of Alexander's world had a word for that news, for the report that was brought to them by the young man running from town to town with the report of good king Octavian. They called it *good news*. They called it the gospel. And the herald who brought it was a *euangelistes*, an evangelist.

An ancient Greek stone carving from about that time celebrates the salvation of the world accomplished by Caesar Augustus. The inscription in a town called Priene says, "The birthday of the god Augustus was the beginning of the *good news* for the world, which came through him." They revered Augustus as a god, and sometimes as the son of God because he was the adopted son of Julius Caesar. Similar "gospels" or pronouncements of "good news" are recorded by other ancient sources. At the end of a bloody war, the good news of victory and peace would be carried by sailors to distant lands. When the emperor Vespasian's reign was secured, very close to the time of Mark's writing, a "gospel" message was delivered to him while he was in Alexandria in Egypt, reporting that his opponents had finally succumbed. The historian Josephus writes, "On reaching Alexandria, Vespasian was greeted by the *good news* from Rome...The whole empire being now secured and the Roman state now saved beyond expectation."

So it should come as no surprise that Jesus' gospel was a word about Kingship. The Kingdom of God is here. Not the Kingdom of

Augustus or Vespasian, or Jupiter or Zeus, or wealth or violence, or me. And a gospel declaration of *anyone's* kingship puts its hearer in a position of no neutrality. You bow the knee and rejoice at the saving reign of the king or you are in rebellion. And what do we say when we receive and acknowledge the kingship of Jesus? We say "Jesus is Lord," *kurios Ieysous*. We confess in faith the very first Christian creed. Before there was Nicea or Chalcedon, there was this New Testament confession, "Jesus is Lord." Which no one can say, except by the power of the Holy Spirit, Paul says in 1 Corinthians 12. Or as Paul explained in Romans 10, "If you declare with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, then you shall be saved."

And when the Spirit delivers this life-giving gospel to us, by whatever herald the Spirit chooses, and we are emboldened to bow the knee and confess that Jesus is God's living Lord of heaven and earth, then we are rehumanized. We give up our dehumanizing rebellion, our complicity in the sinful project of running God's world wrong, and our collusion with Satan's attempted coup, in which we were guilty pawns. And finally we begin to fulfill our human vocation to reflect and enact the rightful reign of God over his world.

And, moreover, we will know *how* to reflect it. Because we will have seen it in the truly human one. We will reflect cruciformity. We will reflect the reign of God in sacrificial love of neighbor, like Jesus. We will know how to do it, and we will be able to do it. Not because we've found the strength or the power inside us somewhere. But because the power of the Holy Spirit found us and gave us life and conformed us to the image of the son, that he might be the firstborn of many brothers and sisters, all of whom reflect the image of our heavenly father, chips off the old divine block.

And that is what Jesus told Nicodemus already in John 3. Y'all humans have loved the dark, and you're less human because of it. Y'all've been born into one kind of life, but it has become a human life only in the most pessimistic sense of that term. If y'all are going to see the Kingdom of God, you're going to need to be given new birth and new life. You will need rehumanization. The water of a hot shower will probably not do it. You must be born of water...and the Spirit.

Appendix

I think there are some practical benefits that accrue when we recentralize the Lordship of Jesus in the Gospel and recognize the Spirit's rehumanization project in making us his disciples. Here's a few suggestions for our collective consideration:

1. I think this has the potential to reintegrate our practices of evangelism and discipleship. These have gotten separated. We have separate committees for evangelism and discipleship. We have separate churches...evangelism churches that reach the lost and grow in numbers and discipleship churches that focus on doctrine, prayer, and "spiritual maturity." And too often we think about separate phases of ministry, one where you receive the Savior and another one where you obey the Lord, one where you receive eternal life and one where you clean up this life. The trick with the Lutheran habit of "distinguishing" things is that we sometimes fall into the bad habit of separating them entirely from one another when they still belong together. Instead of all this separating, we may declare to all people the Gospel that Jesus is Lord and invite them to trust it. In fact, we will find that Jesus is Savior precisely because he is Lord. Satan has tried to run a dehumanizing, life-stealing, death-dealing Kingdom. But Jesus has come to

bring the Kingdom of God that is humanizing and life-giving, and even we rebels are invited to lay down our arms and receive new citizenship. And, in response to that Gospel, one of the “yes’s” we say to the Lord Jesus will be the first one, but the rest of our lives will be the same response to the same Spirit of Jesus, making the same cheerful reply, with Thomas. “Yes, my Lord and my God.”

2. Second, in doing so, I think we can better fulfill that great Lutheran dipstick, *was Christum treibt*, what drives Christ. Right now too much of what we call evangelism is about what drives me. “Yes, I’d love to go to heaven when I die. What do I need to do to make that happen for me?” And too much of what we call discipleship is also about me or about the law. “These are tips for a better, more fulfilling life for you or this is what you must do now if you really mean it.” Instead, we can make them both about the Spirit driving Christ, actualizing the truth, goodness, and beauty of Jesus in us and our world.
3. Third, I think this understanding of Christian discipleship to Jesus as the Spirit-driven process of rehumanization might open up new doors for evangelistic conversation. Too many of us are handcuffed in our evangelistic imagination. We only know how to share the benefits of Christ with someone who is trapped by their own guilt or tortured in their conscience or in whom we can manage to conjure up that feeling. What if you could talk to people who have an imagination, however incomplete or distorted it might be, for a better, more humane world, people in whom that original human vocation to steward the world well is sputtering and coughing and stumbling in hungry frustration. Could we engage them in conversation about the truly human one, who is full of grace for the failures and shame they do experience and full of the Spirit’s power for the enactment of the calling they

properly feel but are impotent to fulfill.

4. And, I think, this vision for Christian discipleship as a process of rehumanization can enrich our teaching on vocation. Too many Christians still struggle to answer the question "How do I connect my faith with the stuff I do every day?" If being a disciple of Jesus is being made fully human, then our vocation is to reflect the reign of God when we promote humane workplaces, humane learning, humane relationships, et cetera. We will contribute to the running of the world as if God were the one in charge. (This is entirely consistent with traditional Lutheran two kingdoms theology, but it saves us from the temptation to which we sometimes succumb to think of the Kingdom on the Left as a God-free zone or a theology-free zone.) As one of my tablemates at this conference said last night, "Sometimes in our jobs we have to fire people. There must be a difference in how we do that as Christians, right?" There's no difference in how God expects us to do it, but we'll do it with the knowledge and power that comes from the humanizing Spirit of God. And perhaps that too can be a witness, that other *anthrohoi*, not yet newly born, will recognize a better way of being human. Perhaps they'll see Jesus in his followers and ask us what they asked him, "Why do you do this?" And God grant that our testimony may reach them as Gospel and lead them too to the new birth.

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