

# Cruciger's Hymn Revisited, A Preaching Course, A Birthday

Co-missioners,

Our editor sends three notes today, two brief, one longer.

Peace and Joy,  
The Crossings Community

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## Assorted Notes:

**Cruciger's Hymn Revisited, A Preaching Course, A Birthday**

by Jerome Burce

### 1. Cruciger's Hymn Revisited



Timothy J. Wengert

I got an altogether unexpected note from Timothy Wengert three Thursdays ago.

For those not in the know, Dr. Wengert is one of America's leading Reformation scholars, with particular expertise in the work of Luther and Melanchthon. He taught for twenty-four years at the Lutheran Theological Seminary at Philadelphia, where he continues to be recognized as Professor Emeritus of Reformation History. He has written a score of books. Along the way he was tapped to serve with Robert Kolb as coeditor of what is now the standard English translation of the Book of Concord.

Professor Wengert was responding to [our post of January 19](#) about Elisabeth Cruciger and her remarkable hymn, *Herr Christ, der einig Gotts Sohn*. It included a lament that American Lutherans are deprived of the chance to sing the hymn's brilliant closing stanza. English translators of the 19<sup>th</sup> century had opted to ignore it. It can't be found in the version of the hymn that appears in our current hymnbooks.

Comes a delightful surprise. It turns out that Professor Wengert produced his own translation of the hymn a while back. He says it was often sung at the Philadelphia seminary in the 1990s and 2000s. Blessed be the students who got to sing it. Here is his turning of the striking German in that final fifth stanza:

0, slay us through your goodness, awaken us through grace;  
bring to the old such sickness that we new life embrace.  
Then we on earth now dwelling  
your praises will be telling  
with mind and sense and tongue.

Somewhere in this post you'll find a photo of the entire translation and the tune it's set to. My thanks indeed to Dr. Wengert for sharing this with me and granting permission to share it with you too. If you're tempted to share it still further—with your pastor, perhaps? your organist?—be sure that Timothy J. Wengert gets credit as translator.

Meanwhile, preachers and hearers alike will do well to keep the above stanza in mind as they wrestle with the gospel appointed for this coming Sunday, Matthew 5:21-37. "O, slay us through your goodness...." [Isn't that what Christ is doing here?](#)

On another note: if, like me, you want to learn more about Elisabeth (von Meseritz) Cruciger, Dr. Wengert points us to the [Dictionary of Luther and the Lutheran Traditions](#) (Baker Academic, 2017) and to Mary Jane Haemig of Luther Seminary who, he says, has written several articles about her.

Christ comes from God for - ev - er, the Fa - ther's on - ly Son; from  
Now, at the end of a - ges, Christ comes a hu - man born. The  
Let us, from your love drink - ing, of Wis - dom take our fill, re -  
O Ma - ker of all crea - tures, come with a pa - rent's hand; for -  
O, slay us through your good - ness, a - wak - en us through grace; bring  
God's heart, ceas - ing ne - ver, as pro - phets long have sung; "He  
poor re - ceive God's wa - ges, sin's judg - ment from us torn. Now  
main in faith, ne'er shrink - ing, and serve the Spi - rit's will; Our  
ev - er rule o'er na - ture, in strength, come take your stand. Our  
to the old such sick - ness, that we new life em - brace. Then  
is the Star of Morn - ing, whose beams a - far are  
death for us is bro - ken, and hea - ven's por - tals  
hearts, now hav - ing tas - ted your sweet - ness, ne - ver  
hearts you will be mov - ing, your love our sen - ses  
we, on earth now dwel - ling, your prai - ses will be  
soar - ing a - bove all o - ther lights."  
o - pen; life blos - soms forth a - gain.  
was - ted, will thirst a - lone for you.  
pro - ving that from you we not stray.  
tel - ling with mind and sense and tongue."

Cruciger's hymn: "Herr Christ, der einig Gotts Sohn", translation by Dr. Timothy Wengert

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## 2. A Preaching Course



Dr. Fred Niedner

[Last week's post](#) featured a sermon by Fred Niedner. I have since learned that Fred will be teaching an online class on the Gospel texts for this coming Lent, Series A in the Revised Common Lectionary. It starts on February 20, a week from this coming Monday. I assume there's room for last-minute registrants. Zoom allows for such flexibility. I assume all the more that whoever takes the class will get far more return on the forty-five dollars involved than one usually does. I commend it to you.

The class is available through the [Lutheran School of Theology in St. Louis](#). Bob Bertram set this up in the 1990's as an extension of the Lutheran School of Theology in Chicago. While that connection has since dissolved, LST St. Louis continues to operate as a stand-alone institution, offering upwards of a dozen courses per year in serious theology for clergy and laity alike. We understand that the ELCA's Central/Southern Synod directs its synodically authorized lay ministers there for some

of their essential training. All courses are not-for-credit. This is hardly to say that they're not of value. Quite the contrary, as you'll discover immediately [if you sign up for Fred's class.](#)

A reminder that Fred continues to serve in retirement as a Senior Research Professor at Valparaiso University. His ongoing contributions to our work at Crossings have been invaluable, as we trust you've been noticing.

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### **3. A Birthday**

Today is the 99<sup>th</sup> birthday of one Willard Burce, known to friends and colleagues through the years as Bill. I call him Dad. Presumptive as this may seem, I invite you to join me now in thanking God for him.

Bill spent a career of forty years in Papua New Guinea as a Lutheran missionary. How he got there from a rural upbringing near Eau Claire, Wisconsin is one of those deliciously implausible stories that more or less comprise the entire history of the church. His father was vaguely Methodist, his mother a Norwegian Lutheran. He landed even so in the Missouri Synod system that piped him through Concordia College, St. Paul to Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, where he earned an S.T.M (Master of Sacred Theology) in addition to the B.D (Bachelor of Divinity) that was standard in that era. In 1948 the Missouri Synod dispatched him and another new graduate to New Guinea, a vast island which even now is more or less unknown to Americans. Their task was to establish Lutheran mission work in some

highland valleys previously closed to missionaries of any kind. They were to do so in cooperation with workers from that segment of the Australian Lutheran Church with which Missouri was in fellowship.

Be it said that Lutherans had been working in New Guinea since 1886. The first of them arrived from Germany. Others came later from Australian and American churches with historical connections to Wilhelm Loehe and the Neundettelsau Mission Society. When Bill and his colleague landed in the country, representatives of these groups welcomed them warmly and offered their cooperation too. Among much else, they helped connect them to indigenous Lutherans who were eager to serve as frontline evangelists in the new venture.

Bill was all of twenty-four when he reached New Guinea. His recently wedded wife (my mother) was already carrying her first child (not me). Adventures loomed. When I came on the scene a mere four years later the family was thoroughly settled and very much at home. So were the other young missionaries involved in the early stages of that enterprise. I find this astonishing as I think on it today.

Bill and his ordained colleagues concentrated in those initial years on basic evangelism, on learning two new languages, on translating Bible stories and the Church's essential liturgy; on exploring the culture of the people they sought to serve, and on wrestling with how best to communicate the Gospel to people embedded in that culture. They devised teaching materials and got help from their spouses in teaching newly recruited co-workers how to read and write. Other lay colleagues established schools and clinics. They built and staffed a hospital. They constructed and furnished houses for Westerners to live in with a measure of comfort. Bill quickly emerged as a leader of this entire group. With that came a heap of administrative duties.



The first Lutheran baptisms in those valleys took place in 1957. Many more followed. In 1960 Bill was assigned to set up a formal training school for evangelists and future church leaders. Meanwhile he had begun working on a translation of the Gospel of Mark into a language called Enga. This became the topic of his thesis for a Th.D in New Testament studies. He earned this at Concordia, St. Louis in the early 60's. He would soon be playing a key editorial role in an inter-denominational project to translate the entire New Testament into New Guinea Pidgin English–Tok Pisin, as it's called these days.



Willard "Bill" Burce (on the right), from the personal collection of Jerome Burce.

In 1967, Bill was reassigned to the faculty of a newly established pan-Lutheran seminary in the coastal city of Lae. English was the language of instruction here. He would serve at Martin Luther Seminary for twenty-one years, twenty of them as Principal. In that role he was instrumental in establishing the Melanesian Association of Theological Schools as an accrediting

institution for seminaries throughout Papua New Guinea, both Protestant and Catholic.

Over the years Bill came to be regarded as one of the foremost Lutheran theologians in Papua New Guinea. In what for him were the very busy '60s—no wonder his son didn't see much of him—he served on an inter-Lutheran committee charged with developing a statement of faith that all Lutheran groups in the country could subscribe to. To him fell the task of drafting the opening chapters that laid out the key Lutheran essentials, the distinction between Law and Gospel in particular.

The eventual statement, issued in official English and Tok Pisin versions, was indeed adopted by all Lutheran groups in PNG, whether LCMS or ELCA-related. I used it when I taught basic theology at a second-tier Tok Pisin seminary in the 1980's. I was struck then, and still am, by the clear, limpid language of those opening sections, and by how well they connected confessional theology with the cultural realities of Papua New Guinea. Here are a couple of passages from the official English version.

*On the reception Christ receives from sinners—*

“When Christ came into the world, men crucified Him. And that is what [people] still do today.... They have no liking for Christ's glory. They blaspheme His name and despise His work.... They make no use of Him to draw near to God. They have no use for Him as Mediator and Redeemer.

“It is like a rich man who does not use his money to buy worthwhile things. Instead he buries most of it in a hole in the ground and hangs the rest around his neck for decoration.”

“This is what sinners do with Christ.”



[Note the second paragraph in particular. My students resonated to it.]

*On a preaching issue, as relevant to American Lutherans today as it was to Papua New Guinean Lutherans fifty years ago—*

“Many pastors, evangelists, and elders stand up in the worship services and exalt the Law along. They preach the Law at great length and roast their hearers. But they say nothing about the Gospel of Jesus Christ. In this way they conceal the glory of the Lord and dishonor his name.

“There are also many church members who sit on the benches and, when they hear the Law, think: Now we are hearing the real thing. But when the elder preaches the Gospel of Christ, they fall asleep, or they say, ‘We have heard enough of this before.’”

[“Aargh,” say we who have been there, seen that. Fallen for it, perhaps.]

*On the difference between Law and Gospel—*

“The Law issues commands to us sinners concerning what we must do and what we must not do. But the Gospel tells us what the Triune God has already done for us.

“The Law makes us sinners happy. But if we repent and are sorrowful over our sins, the Gospel makes us happy.

“The Law strikes us sinners down. But the Gospel raises us up and strengthens us.

“The Law accuses us and threatens us with punishment. But the Gospel says, ‘Your sins are taken away.’ And it gives us the righteousness of Christ.

“The Law punishes our sins and kills us. But the Gospel frees us from the prison house of sin and gives us life.”

[Yes, this is English designed for people who speak it as a second language. It’s also clear, effective English with a rhythmic bounce that catches most any ear.]

For me the greatest gift in the Statement’s section on Law and Gospel was to find it speaking not of the Law’s *uses*, but of the Law’s *actions*—two of them, the first maintaining order in the world, the second exposing our sin. The problem with “use” is that it tempts us to imagine ourselves as the users. Hence the endless Lutheran argument about the Law’s so-called “third use.” “Action” puts God alone in the driver’s seat. You and I can only be on the receiving end of what the Law of God does to every human being.

The Statement likewise speaks of two actions of the Gospel, one perfect and complete, the other a work in progress. The first adorns us with the righteousness of Christ. The second delivers the Holy Spirit who leads believing sinners through daily approximations of the holy life. Any who studied under Ed Schroeder will recall him speaking this way too.

Bill told me once that he got this “action” language from Edmund Schlink’s *Theology of the Lutheran Confessions*. I didn’t look for it there at the time. I still haven’t.

My mother died four years ago on this same day, February 9. When the day comes to bury Bill as well, I will describe him to his grandchildren as a conservative Lutheran theologian in the best and most faithful sense. From that conservatism—that insistence on reading the Scriptures through the lens of the confessions—came a radical grasp of the Gospel that few people I’ve known have been able to match. His was an immensely generous spirit. For now it still is. When next I visit, I’ll

find that servant of Christ still looking at others, whoever they be, through the eyes of Christ. It took this son of his far too long to understand that this is how he operates.

I daresay each of you knows someone who also operates this way. They're all around us. God pops them up wherever the Gospel gets rightly told. Theirs too will be one of those implausible stories the Spirit specializes in producing. There are many more that I could tell.

So think of them. Thank God for them. If so inclined, give me a chance to thank God for them too. Surprise me with a note as Professor Wengert did three weeks ago.

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**Thursday Theology: that the benefits of Christ be put to use**  
A publication of the Crossings Community

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# **“Kill Me, Jesus!” Notes on a Hymn and the Woman who Wrote It**



Workshop of Lucas Cranach the younger: Christ blessing the Children, w. Caspar Cruciger in black, next to Elisabeth and second wife Apollonia Günterode in background.

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This week's offering comes from our editor.

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**"Kill Me, Jesus!" Notes on a Hymn and the Woman who Wrote It**  
by Jerome Burce

I met Elisabeth Cruciger last week. I want you to meet her too. I think she merits our high regard as the first woman theologian

of the Lutheran movement.

My encounter with Ms. Cruciger was altogether accidental. Late one evening I was listening to one of Bach's cantatas with an eye on the text as the music unfolded. When we got to the inevitable closing chorale, here's what I read and heard:

*Ertöt uns durch dein Güte / Erweck uns durch dein Gnad.* Or, in equally blunt English, "Kill us through your goodness / Wake us through your grace."

My eyes popped. In seventy years of English-speaking Lutheran experience, I can't recall anyone anywhere praying a prayer so honest and direct—so true, one might say, to the ways of the God we have and need in Christ Jesus. Until last week, I hadn't prayed this way myself. From now on I will. The God of the Gospel invites nothing less than a prayer this bold.

I promptly searched—how could I not?—for the prayer's source. This led me quickly to Ms. Cruciger, whose name is also given as Creutziger, or even Kreutziger. English references like to spell her first name with a "z." [Wikipedia tells us](#) that her maiden name was Elisabeth von Meseritz. She was born in 1500 to an aristocratic family in Eastern Pomerania—these days part of Poland—and was packed off to a cloister while still a child. She was all of seventeen or eighteen when Luther posted his 95 Theses. Not long after, Johann Bugenhagen popped up in her vicinity as an apostle of the Reformation. She caught the bug. At age twenty-two she somehow left her cloister and headed for Wittenberg, where she joined the Bugenhagen household. (The website [hymnary.org](#) has an alternative account whereby her whole family skedaddled from Poland and brought her with them.)

**JEyn Enchiridion oder  
Handbüchlein. eynem ytz-  
lichen Christen fast nützlich bey sich  
zuhaben/ zur stetter vbung vnd  
trachtung geystlicher gesenge  
vnd Psalmen/ Recht-  
schaffen vnd kunst-  
lich vertentscht.**

**IN. CCCCC. xxxij**

**Am ende dieses Büchleins wirt  
du synden eyn Register/ yn wil-  
chem clerlich angezeigt ist/ was  
vnd wie vill Gesenge hieryn be-  
gryffen synd.**

**Mit dyßen vnd der gleichen Gesenge solt man bil-  
lylich die jungen yugent außzuehen.**

Title page of the Loersfeld  
edition of the Erfurt  
Enchiridion, 1524

1522 was a heady time to be arriving in Wittenberg. At the beginning of March, Luther had quit his confinement at the Wartburg Castle, thrown off his Junker Georg disguise, and strode openly into town to what one guesses was the astonishment of all. He promptly preached his famous *Invocavit* sermons (*Luther's Works* 51:67-100) as a crucial first step toward reinvigorating the Reformation. The task of reshaping church life to reflect the distinction between Law and Gospel was now underway in earnest.

Two years later this Law-and-Gospel distinction surfaced in what could loosely be called the [first Lutheran hymnal](#). Printed in Wittenberg, it amounted to a twelve-page pamphlet entitled "Some Christian Songs." It contained all of eight hymns, four by Luther, three by Paul Speratus, and one by a person unnamed.

That same year, 1524, a second hymnal appeared from a printshop in Erfurt. Hence (in part) its name: the [Erfurt Enchiridion](#). This one reprinted the eight Wittenberg hymns and added eighteen more, fourteen by Luther, one each by Justus Jonas and Erhard Hegenwald, another by our friend Anonymous, and one by—you guessed it—Elisabeth Cruciger. Such had become her name that very year when she married one of Luther's star pupils, Casper Cruciger.

In that Erfurt lineup of twenty-six hymns, Cruciger's is positioned at number ten, sandwiched between two of Luther's on one side and three more of Luther's on the other side. This is quite the company to be keeping when you're a mere twenty-four years old, and a woman, and the setting you're stuck in is early sixteenth century Germany. As it happens, Cruciger belongs in this company. This is obvious when you read her hymn. Kudos to Luther *et al.* for spotting her talent and letting it shine. Later Lutherans of an older male persuasion would not have done this, I think. Shame on them. Shame, perhaps, on some of us.

Cruciger's hymn is entitled "*Herr Christ, der einig Gotts Sohn*"—"Lord Christ, the only Son of God." It comprises five stanzas of seven lines each. The prayer that stunned me launches the last of these stanzas. That's where she flashes her theological and poetic chops at their most brilliant, tugging us into Luther's new and sudden insight about the twice-created creatures that born-and-baptized Christians happen to be. What's more, she does this in fewer words than Luther himself was capable of, or so one guesses.

Here is the whole stanza in unsatisfactory English prose:

"Kill us through your goodness; wake us through your grace. Sicken the old creature, that the new one might live well on this earth, our minds, desires, and thoughts fixed wholly on



you.”

+ + +

Five hundred years have gone by since these lines were penned. Lutherans these days don't think this deeply, at least not as a rule. Still less do we dare to trust God with the fierce outrageous confidence that Cruciger exhibits. Too many of us—most all of us, perhaps—are still mired in what Gerhard Forde once lampooned as “ladder theology.” God is up. We are down. Between us stands a ladder that we're to climb to get to God's level. Even those of us who still recall bits of the Small Catechism we once memorized are prone to this nonsense. We get to the part about the implications of baptism for daily living, how “the old person in us is to be drowned and die through daily sorrow for sin and through repentance,” and this we take to be *our* job, Rung Number One on today's “to do” list. Like that's going to happen.

Cruciger's prayer is the only alternative here. We start the day by begging God to push our heads under the water and hold them there for a while even as Christ barks the strong word that brings us shuffling like Lazarus into a semblance of Easter life all over again. God kills, God makes alive, as Hannah once sang. It takes a God *that* good, *that* gracious—a God so incessantly active—to pull off the life we *get* to have and enjoy in Christ Jesus. This life is *bound* to unfold in us as the day's hours fly by. Why? Because the only One who is able to make it happen has promised to do just that. He'll do it for me. He'll do it for the Jesus-trusting folks I'll encounter during the day.

Blessed is the person who looks for signs of Easter life bubbling away in the ones that he or she is rubbing shoulders with. Imagine the improvement in church life were all of us busy doing just that and thanking God for the signs of liveliness we

spot beneath each other's tawdry exteriors.

Comes the rub in all this. The old creature gasps on despite its daily drowning. Being as it is, it wants nothing to do with a God whose goodness will kill it. If it's a pious old creature, then it promptly aligns with others of its ilk to construct a god more to its liking, a deity stripped of genuine goodness and draped instead in a feeble niceness that operates from a comfortable distance. Oddly, it expects less of this god than it does of the doctors it seeks out when it comes down with cancer. This god is forbidden by definition to kill the poison of sin and rebellion that lurks within. (How mean would that be?) Its job at best is to inspire us all to try harder and do better until we somehow heal ourselves.

Such is the feckless religiosity of a dying church. As its exiting children keep saying these days, "Who needs it?"

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More's the pity, then, that we're unable in English-speaking churches to give our children a monthly dose of Cruciger in our hymn selections. Not that her hymn is altogether absent in English. A partial translation by Catherine Winkworth, "O Thou of God the Father," showed up in a hymnal published for Ohio Synod Lutherans in 1880. A second translation, "The Only Son from Heaven," appeared in one or two Lutheran hymnals of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, resurfaced in the Missouri Synod's *Worship Supplement* of 1969, and thereafter was included in *Lutheran Book of Worship* (1978), *Lutheran Worship* (1982), *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* (2006), and *Lutheran Service Book* (also 2006). Arthur T. Russell, a 19<sup>th</sup> century Church of England divine, is responsible for this translation. It too is partial, presenting a close approximation of Cruciger's first three stanzas, omitting the last two, and tacking on a doxology that someone else may have

written. Winkworth's version limited itself to stanzas one, three and four. One can't help but guess—yes, with an old-creaturely measure of Lutheran snark—that Cruciger's stanza five was simply too much for weak English stomachs.



Johann\_Sebastian\_Bach, by Elias Gottlob Haussmann – Public Domain.

Again, more's the pity. We would all profit these days from a regular dose of "full Cruciger." How better to handle the question that pops incessantly in our church meetings: "What is God doing?" Answer: "Killing us. Making us alive. *That's* what God is up to, day in and day out, whether we want it or not. Alleluia!"

German-speaking Lutherans have it better than we do. Cruciger's entire hymn continues to appear in hymnbooks they use. And then there's Bach. He anchored a whole cantata (BWV 96) on the hymn. The chorus launches it with stanza one and wraps it up with stanza five. Bach had already used the fifth stanza to conclude an earlier cantata (BWV 22). That's where I encountered it. This one is based on Luke's account of Jesus' third passion prediction (Lk. 18: 31, 34). It opens with a marvelous rendering

of Luke's text that features the choir sputtering "what? what?" as they deliver the line about the disciples not knowing *what* Jesus said. (Yes. That's us.) Comes a reflection on Jesus' passion and extended prayers for the faith that faces it, embraces it, and allows our crucified Lord to do his work in us. And with that we get to Cruciger. Again, *Ertöt uns durch dein Güte / Erweck uns durch dein Gnad / Etc.* As the choir sing this in chorale form, its lines are interwoven by an orchestral accompaniment that radiates joy. "God has promised. God will do it!" So preaches Bach through the music he writes.

To crib from later preachers: "Can I hear an 'Amen'?" God tug this from us all.

Cruciger's life was brief. She died at age thirty-five. Her daughter would later marry one of Luther's sons. I'm somehow not surprised. Whether she published anything besides this hymn, I do not know. Perhaps I'll find out, though it's enough already now to thank God for the bracing jolt she gave me last week. You'll do the same, I pray.

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