

The 2011 Crossings Conference and President Obama's Address. Part III

Colleagues,

Here are a few more responses that have come in on the topic above.

Peace and Joy!
Ed Schroeder

ONE

Ed – I don't think the problem is praying "God bless America". I think the issue is that the phrase has become so hackneyed it is no longer prayer. And, perhaps worse, we have forgotten that, as prayer, we are really asking God to bless us so that God will use us to be blessings for others. Instead, the mantra seems to be that we are reminding God that we deserve His blessing because we are the exceptional ones. John Munding

TWO

I'm very grateful you continue to edit and write Thursday Theology. The substance is almost always enlightening, and the form – a message from you – always generates memories of the more than 40 years you have taught, scolded, and inspired me. I do read the postings – after converting them to a Word document

and printing them out on paper. And I think about them. Here are my thoughts about Matthew 4:12-23 and President Obama's "God bless America."

As I've been studying Matthew's Gospel the last few months, I've come to see that the writer is reminding his audience that God is creating a New People (as evident in the genealogy – a genesis, if you will) with a New King, a servant king who gives up his life as a ransom for many. This new servant king is leading a new exodus (Matthew 2) and is God's "fresh growth" or new branch from the tree cut down.

Perhaps this is good news that could lift the spirits of at least some Americans, a promise of a different kind of blessing for ourselves and others.

With Matthew's first readers, we Americans share a sense of dislocation. The Twin Towers – and other versions of our Jerusalem temple – have been destroyed. Like Matthew's leaders, many have been forced to move to Galilee and other physical and emotional places. Lost jobs, lost homes, and lost friends. Some of us feel oppressed by Pharisaic "Tea Party-ers." The shadow of death – especially as our entire population ages – casts a pall over our society.

But in Matthew's Gospel, it's exactly in Galilee where Jesus does his teaching and healing. Those regions that, in Isaiah's time, first experienced God's abandonment are now the first to participate in God's new reign of mercy and forgiveness. Isn't it possible that such mercy and forgiveness – Jesus' promise from the cross to his fellow criminal and the promise of Jesus at the very end of Matthew's Gospel, "I am with you until the end of the age" – would be enough to make us a "great people" however the global economy shakes out?

Thanks for encouraging me to put these thoughts on paper.

Stephen Hitchcock
Senior Manager of Special Projects
Bread for the World

THREE

[Jim Squire, you readers may remember, was the guy at last month's Crossings conference who volunteered to engage in TRACKING his daily work at Boeing Aircraft on their F-16 fighter project. When the conversation moved to CROSSING Jim's slice-of-life at Boeing with the GROUNDING text from Matthew 4, Jerry Burce jolted all of us a bit by asking whether the F-16s weren't after all God's F-16s. Jerry later expanded on what was behind that question. I passed his words on to you in last week's ThTh. After reading Jerry's addendum Jim has sent me additional thoughtful reflection of his own self-tracking and self-crossing. I have his permission to pass them on to you. I'll first reprint Jerry's text—then Jim's]

BURCE

Ed, I fear you may have misinterpreted the question I shouted out during your probing of Jim about whether the F-16s he helps to fashion are God's F-16s. The point was not at all to spring him from a D-3 morass [=the Biblical text's deepest diagnosis] but rather to exacerbate it. (I should have clarified on the spot, yes.) For doesn't the terror and wrath of D-3 arise precisely from understanding that there's no out whatsoever, not even the one that says "OK, I'll quit my high-paying instrument-of-death job and go work in a soup kitchen instead?" Time was when the guys most to be pitied were the ones who churned out chariots for Nineveh and Babylon.

On the one hand they're making the very tools God will use to

carry out his judgment, so that in making them they're serving God. On the other hand they'll catch it in the neck for the devastation and murder that their chariots cause, woe being unto Nineveh and Babylon for their pride and cruelty. In other words, judgment if you do, judgment if you don't, with wrath and gnashing of teeth at God for the bind he puts you in.

Isn't that what Jim and his co-workers face, and not just them but all of us who are caught up in the empire's service these days, if only as taxpayers? Judgment if the army you help to underwrite gets used. Judgment too if it doesn't get used.

It would have been interesting indeed to hear Jim ruminate along such lines.

Jerry Burce

SQUIRE

Ed, I don't know if I caught either what Jerry's meaning was that day, but his clarification makes sense to me. In a way, he did capture my dilemma – a dilemma I haven't been all that aware of. I think my stated lack of pacifism lends itself to this. Those F-16s may well be God's F-16s. That is not at all inconceivable to me. There is evil in the world, and while the war machine is not the solution to evil, it conceivably is God's method for restraining evil.

The other horn of the dilemma of course, as Jerry pointed out, is that it is extremely hard for us to use God's F-16s and other weapons without doing evil ourselves. I have no illusion that the F-16s will never, in the hands of those whose training my software expertise contributes to, be used to flatten villages or suppress dissent. It pains me deeply to confess

that if any of these F-16s fall into the hands of Israel, innocent Palestinian lives will probably suffer at some point in time. It pains me not only on behalf of those Palestinian lives (and livelihoods), but also on behalf of Israel, a country I fear is plunging into an abyss. You want to see a people with a terrible dilemma on their hands, it's Israel.

My dilemma seems like a walk in the park by comparison. God's chosen people feeling a sense of duty to protect what Yahweh gave to them feeling that they have to do so by killing their bitter enemies, the descendants of Ishmael – between a rock and hard place is what I would call it. A people participating in their own moral destruction, feeling like they have no choice in the matter, having to rationalize it in order to sleep at night.

I guess in a small way I have to do the same. As I think I stated to you during an intermission that day, as much as I hate the destruction of war, the last thing I'm interested in is building powerfully destructive flying machines and then failing to train those who fly them properly. Either F-16s are purely instruments of evil, completely abhorrent to God and he will send people to destroy them, or else he calls people to fly those F-16s, and he calls people like me to support those who train pilots to fly them, so that they know how to fly them safely – perhaps even to fly and operate them so that only those who deserve it feel their "godly" wrath.

It's a muddle. I definitely feel that this world contains people and organizations that need to be restrained physically, else the world shall fall into the abyss (I think I'm grabbing that word from Bonhoeffer's Ethics, but I'm not sure). I'm definitely thinking of his reference to 2nd Thessalonians and Paul's explanation of "the one who now restrains" the mystery of lawlessness. I think this world is still haunted by that

scenario, and while I have little faith in any government's (including our own) integrity to use that restraining power properly, I don't feel that taking that power away is going to make things better, unless there is a godly force to give it to (and that kind of talk conjures up all kinds of ugly, perverted images of the Christian paramilitary variety anyway).

What is worrisome to me – now that you've got me dwelling on this – is that I don't really have much confidence that this divine authority (Paul called it the sword in Romans 13, I believe) is in the hands of faithful servants. Bonhoeffer teaches us that such authority can be abdicated, at which point it becomes the responsibility of those called to try their best to take it from the government. The only example I'm aware of, as you may recall, still involved the participation of military types leading duplicitous lives – and of course they were ultimately unsuccessful.

So, while I cannot support fashioning an ideological opposition to F-16s, neither can I offer a feeling of confidence that F-16s will keep the world safe. They *can* keep the world safe, but will they? And I'm not simply asking if F-16s are "enough." I'm afraid they might be subverted into instruments of evil. I also cannot offer any assurances that I am equipped to assess these possibilities and know whether or not to act. It is frankly easier to just blindly do my job responsibly and "trust" that the F-16s will be put to noble use, though the object of that "trust" is not necessarily worthy of it.

Yours in Christ,
Jim Squire