

The 2011 Crossings Conference and President Obama's Address.

Colleagues,

President Obama concluded his message to the nation two days ago with the standard mantra for such occasions: "God bless the United States of America." Sad to say, it ain't gonna happen. Curmudgeon though I may be, that conclusion is not original with me.

If the Bible is any kind of yardstick for God's blessing business, it ain't gonna happen. Claus Westermann (Biblical super-scholar of my younger years) showed us that God's blessing-business is—in Lutheran lingo—God's left-hand operation. It's a consequence of good behavior, good performance. It's getting your just deserts. It happens because God sees to it that in God's old creation righteousness is rewarded and wickedness punished. Both individuals and nations. [Remember the ancient meaning of "nation" (Latin) is not a governing state, but the "tribe, race, people" being governed]. So if a nation is getting clobbered, God has closed down the blessing-business. Once a nation becomes an empire, it's super-grim. There's no Biblical example of God ever blessing empires. They always get "weighed, and found wanting."

As if that's not bad enough . . . Sadder still is that neither the American president, nor the American people seem to have any clue that God is not blessing America right now and that there are no grounds for expecting God to stop non-blessing America. Also clueless are they—are we—to the fact that if God's not doing the blessing business, then there's just one alternative. And it is not that God has taken a holiday from doing any business at all. That never happens.

[Isn't this what that madman Jeremiah Wright, the president's one-time pastor, told him—yes, told the nation—before Obama was elected? Obama said no, Wright was wrong, was misreading the data. The American people agreed with Obama. How could God ever stop blessing America and revert to cursing instead? Nonsense. Other nations perhaps, but not America. We're different from "the nations"—even if the Bible does put us in that column.]

In last Tuesday's address Obama was not only speaking TO us Americans, but even more FOR us. Despite the Republican/Democratic gridlock in the very room where he was speaking, both factions agree (as do the constituencies they represent) that these words of his are true:

- We share a common creed [Ah, but just what is it? Listen to the items below.]
- That creed sets us apart as a nation. [Does the judge of creeds (and nations) agree? Why then all our troubles?]
- We have broken the back of the recession. The worst of the recession is over.
- THE FUTURE IS OURS TO WIN.[a mantra throughout the address]
- We can out-educate, out-innovate, out-build the rest of the world.
- We Americans do big things.
- In America anything is possible.
- The Iraq war is coming to an end.
- [al Qaeda,] we will not relent, nor waver; we will defeat you.

Sobering notes were there, but the irony in them ignored.

We need to rebuild our people's faith in government.

How do you bring back faith when it has faded away? Rebuild faded faith in anything? That's fundamental theology. That's mission work. Obama didn't give any details that got below the

surface for fixing this faith-fadeout.

And then this one, not disconnected to the one above:

We should have no illusions (about what it will take to get us out of our troubles).

But how many of those points above are not just that: illusions? Not just the president's illusions, but the illusions of the people (the nation), both Republican and Democrat. He did indeed not only speak TO the nation, but also FOR us. Those illusions ARE "the common creed we all share." Jesus once said something about what happens when the blind lead the blind.

Many of you know that we've just held the fourth Crossings international conference here in St. Louis. It concluded Tuesday at noon. Too bad we didn't have Obama's Tuesday evening speech on hand for our final Tuesday morning session. Not that those final hours were dull. They were super.

- Jerry Burce showed us God's "economics" (sic!) of salvation running through the entire Gospel of Matthew.
- Steve Albertin took the NT text we'd been working with throughout the whole conference—Matthew 4:12-25, the gospel appointed for last Sunday—and "crossed" it over to his own life experience when folks in the congregation he was pastoring asked him to depart.
- Marcus Felde waltzed us through his current pattern—sometimes subtle—of Crossings-conscious parish education with a men's group and a women's group in the congregation where he is pastor.

You can see all these three presentations on the Crossings website soon. Also the other conference papers. Maybe they're already there now.

In the conference program as planned, these three Tuesday morning offerings were the icing on the cake. And yummy it was. But the cake (Sunday evening and all day Monday) was yummy too. Did we get done with the full baking thereof? No. Closure came too soon. Participants said so in their evaluations, yet they did enjoy snitching spoonfuls of batter as we were mixing it and also taking bites of the three layers that did get into and out of the oven.

The recipe was Bob Bertram's original three-layer cake called "Grounding, Tracking, Crossing." From way back in 1974. You can find it on the website On that homepage click on "Works of RWB" and scroll down to "Crossings, Inc. (Saint Louis): A Proposal."

Ron Neustadt walked us through Bob's Magna Charta for Crossings reminding us that the word "crossings" gets used in family shoptalk in several ways:

- name of a not-for-profit corporation: The Crossings Community, Inc.
- name for a way to do Bible study (the six-step probing of a biblical text wherein the final three Good News steps "cross over and cross out" the trio of Bad News that the text has exposed),
- finally another meaning, the ancient one Bertram was using in that document from 37 years ago. Here "crossing" designates the third phase in a sequence, the final layer of Bertram's three-layer cake. Here's what the three are:

Layer one: "Grounding":(=getting our own groundings for the project by retrieving the Bad-news/Good-news in the pantry of a specific Bible text.)

Layer two: "Tracking" some slice-of life today with the same intensity for the bad-news/good-news that surfaces in people's

lived experience. Doing so either with a slice-of-life of some person, or of larger entities we encounter in today's world.

[Such "larger" turfs for tracking from Bob's 1974 list sound like today's front page:: main themes in present-day pop culture; new ideas on who ought to be educated and at whose expense; sex and the public mindset; current meanings of responsibility and authority; what health-care today understands by "health"; the new populism; secularity and American folk religion; the coming scarcity, frugality and asceticism; death and dying; contemporary emphasis on being oneself; consumerism and participatory democracy; the high premium on being critical; pluralism as a life-style; Eastern religions in the West; how corporations are seeking social responsibility; the modern technology of managing people; money; confrontation as a mode of therapy, of evangelism, of political action; youth and aging; overcoming middle-class rage; female and feminine; what is news; ethnicity; violence; the way people care; work; humor and the holy; how government is being "by the people"; liberalism and conservatism.]

Layer three: "Crossing." Linking the findings from the first two layers into each other, accent on THE cross as the connector. [Here you need to think of the layers not stacked one above the other, but the first two side-by-side and #3 placed a-cross (sic!) them at the touch-point binding them together.

LAYER ONE AT THE CONFERENCE: GROUNDING

Jerry Burce took us through the Grounding part of the recipe, ringing the changes on law-promise lenses for reading the Bible as they come to us in New Testament scriptures and Reformation theology. Steve Kuhl then walked us through the Sunday Gospel (Matt. 4:12-25) according to the recipe, retrieving for us how in this text Jesus himself is doing initial diagnosis, advanced

diagnosis, final diagnosis. And then retrieving (Steve liked that term) the text's own (Jesus' own) offer of a new prognosis to trump the dead end exposed in the final diagnosis. He concluded retrieving the wealth of good news offered by this text to cross over and cross out all three levels of bad news that the text had exposed.

His chosen terms for the sequence came from the text itself:

Problem: Business as Usual

1. Business as Usual: "Fishermen."
2. Obscurity: "A People Sitting in Darkness."
3. The Hold of the World: "Sitting in the Region of Death."

Solution: The Unusual Business of Christ

4. The Reign of Christ: "The Kingdom of Heaven" as the alternative to the "Reign of Death."
5. Repentance and Faith = the Miracle of Clarity: "A Great Light" as "Christ draws near."
6. "Follow Me. Fish for People."

Number 4 crosses over to #3, #5 over to #2 and #6 over to #1.

LAYER TWO AT THE CONFERENCE: TRACKING

Jim Squire, himself a long-term Crossings practitioner, volunteered to be the person for Tracking. Ron Neustadt was the tracker. He'd asked me to sit nearby "just in case." I did, but no "just in case" really showed up. Although this grey eminence, occasionally referred to as co-founder, didn't entirely hold his peace during the conference, the listed program leaders didn't need yours truly to extricate them from any sticky wickets. They are major league theologians.

[As the conference came to closure, one participant told me: Ed,

you once spoke of the teachers during your student days by saying "There were giants in the earth in those days," and then you rattled off the names. Well, the age has returned. We have been hob-nobbing with giants again these three days. Even if their names do not yet (and may never) get international recognition.]

Ron got Jim to talk about his daily work.

What do you do all day there at Boeing?

What do you get for what you do?

Where does all that finally get you?

What's the best thing, the worst thing, about your daily work?

Jim gave straight answers, but because he knows the three-layer cake himself and bakes it often in his life and work, before long he and Ron were already baking the third layer: crossing his daily work with the Word of God, the specific text from Matthew 4 that had come out of the oven as layer one at the conference.

LAYER THREE AT THE CONFERENCE: CROSSING

1. Jim's life too is business as usual. Some of it rather exotic as he works in fine-tuning the training systems for F-16 military aircraft. Some of it exacerbating: hectic activities, big deadlines, de-bugging problems, pressures.
2. Sitting in darkness. Obscurity. "Sometimes it's kind of a blur." And then he unpacked that. Yes, the blur was not just his fast-paced daily work, but Jim's Christ-connection also encountered blurring amid all that hustle. Whose fisherman was he really? How could he be casting Christ's kind of nets for the people Christ was fishing for while working in all these networks and often being netted himself? Yes, Jesus in Matt. 4 was diagnosing disciple Jim too.

3. Did that leave Jim “sitting in the region of death”? Well, at that deep diagnosis level it got dicey. It regularly does. The audience got antsy too. You’ve got to trust someone to go to the depths with the diagnostic probe, even just one-on-one, let alone before an audience. But Jim is gutsy. He pressed on. Yes, Even as Christ-confessor Jim’s “old Adam” was still hanging around (sometimes around his neck)—and God was unrelenting in handing out “dead-lines” to that “old Jim” too. When someone pushed him about his actual work with death-dealing F-16 fighters, he paused. Was the region of death in his life really that big, that extensive, that it encompassed the very job itself? Audience participation joined in at this time. Possibly seeking to rescue Jim not only from the question, but from God the critic at that final diagnosis level. “We all pay taxes that pay Jim’s salary, so we’re all implicated.” “Those F-16s are God’s F-16s.” “Go slow on that one. Remember Eisenhower’s warning about the military-industrial complex becoming the destroyer of America. Destroyer is another name for God’s opponent in world history, the old evil foe.” We didn’t wrestle that one to the ground, but Jim acknowledged that it was a question that he himself wrestles with.
4. Crossing the good news of steps four, five, and six didn’t get equal time as the clock was running out. Yet Ron led the way in walking with Jim to #4, the good news of Christ’s “unusual business” with Jim to pull him out of the “reign of death” in whatever manifestations it showed up in his life and work. They then scampered through the last two steps: (#5) on repentance and faith as Jim constantly re-connects, day in day out, with Christ’s unusual business, and finally (#6) some specific instances where Jim can and already does “fish for people” out there at Boeing in, with and under all the business as usual

that goes on there.

In groups of two or three with a Crossings veteran the participants did hands-on Grounding with other Biblical texts. That went well. But we didn't have program time for hands-on practice of Tracking and Crossing, layer number two and layer number three. We all did see it get done with Jim, and then in Tuesday morning's final session we listened to Steve Albertin track himself and cross himself with Matthew 4 as he took us with him through his own slice-of-life (slice-of-death?) when his congregation leaders sought to get rid of him.

The folks went home nourished, but we didn't get everything done. Participants didn't get practice in mixing the last two layers, didn't get hold of the cake-mixer to do the full recipe on their own. But they have seen it done. Next time

Suppose we had had Obama's "tracking" of America, his Tuesday evening State of the Union message, in hand. How might the six steps of the Matthew 4 text cross over to that nationwide slice-of-life? That's too much for today's ThTh edition. But if it doesn't get out of my craw, which it probably won't, you may hear about it next week. Possibly, "Winning the Future. Two Different Proposals. Both Very Theological." Should one or more of you want to try your hand at it, I could have a workless Thursday. Remember Matthew's sextet: Business as usual. Sitting in darkness. Region of death. Kingdom of God. Repentance and faith. Fish for people.

Peace and Joy!

Ed Schroeder