

The Benefits of Christ for a Fractured America (Initial Thoughts)

Co-missioners,

This is the fifth and final installment in a sequence of posts addressing the riot in Washington D.C. on January 6. An unintended sequence, we add. One post led to the other which led to the next, all with little or no planning along the way. We babbled, as it were—so much to be said. There comes a time, of course, to quit and move on; though not, in this case, before grappling with what for Crossings is the question of questions: what use are the benefits of Christ for the angry, fractured country that America has been, still is, and will likely continue to be for a very long time?

And that's today's topic, addressed through the lens of a specific case study involving our editor who is also our writer. By way of setting the stage, he recommends a quick glance at our posts of [January 14th](#) and [January 21st](#), especially if you haven't seen them yet or forgot what they said.

Peace and Joy,
The Crossings Community

The Benefits of Christ for a Fractured America

(Initial Thoughts)

by Jerome Burce



So what has changed in America since the Capitol riot? Not much. And by now I'm much too jaded to call that surprising.

I say this from the perspective of someone who five years ago was surprised –the better word is shocked–when Donald Trump began emerging as a viable candidate for the Republican Party's presidential nomination. He was not a good man. He mocked, he bullied, he bragged. He had a deep, thick track record of treating people badly. He scoffed at the rules that other candidates were held to (Think tax returns.) He peddled

demonstrable lies. He was the middle-school bully in the body of a seventy-year-old. He had no business coming within a thousand miles of the Oval Office.

This, I thought, must be laughably obvious to anyone who cares about the country, no matter their party affiliation. Republicans and Democrats alike had a baseline standard for the behavior and morals of a presidential candidate. If anything, the Republicans' standard would be higher, buttressed as it was by the expectations of its Christian wing. Who but sloppy Democrats would excuse the marital wanderings of a Bill Clinton? Again, so I thought.

Then came the shocks, one after the other, month upon month, year upon year. Tellingly, the first one happened at the Crossings conference in January, 2016, when I concluded a keynote presentation by inviting some discussion-time reflection on the problem of Donald Trump. There was an immediate shift of sorts in the room. I surmised that not everyone present regarded the man as a problem and were dismayed that I should. I couldn't grasp why. I still don't.



Came the subsequent race and election, during which the biggest shock for me was the fervent embrace that Mr. Trump received from half the Christians in America, lots of Lutherans among them, and ELCA no less. How else could the Dakotas have turned so red? [I wrote about this](#) in the days after the election as I struggled to account for it, though omitting the bit about the Dakota Lutherans, then too painful to contemplate. The struggling continued

as the years went by and I saw unfolding what I had expected to

see, though not to the degree with which I was seeing it: a president behaving in ways that in any other president would have been deemed beyond the pale, and, if done by a Democrat, would have had every Republican in Congress screaming for his scalp—rightly so. Imagine Obama fawning over Putin, or being credibly charged with paying hush money to a porn star, or tweeting insults from the White House day after day instead of doing the homework that comes with the job. And this is by far the least of it. Again, imagine Obama holding up congressionally authorized aid to a hard-pressed ally for the sake of securing some dirt on his Republican opponent. I'd have screamed for his scalp too. Not so that host of God-and-country pastors and congregants when it came to their guy, Mr. Trump. Do as he might—do as he did—he was always and only a gift raised up by God for the salvation of America.

And so it largely remains these six weeks after the wickedness that stained our country on January 6, fomented by the only presidential contestant in my lifetime who hasn't had the integrity to face the facts and say, "I lost." Yet Donald Trump is still their guy.

And the same is true, as it happens, for at least one worthy and honorable member of our own Crossings community. There are likely more.

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I got a note from the one a week or so ago. I wouldn't think for a second to write him off as a God-and-country type. He's far too good a theologian. Still, he's all for Donald Trump, and he took me to task for saying bluntly in my previous post that the man's assertion of a stolen election was a lie. I had sabotaged my credibility, he said. I had also insulted him and the 75 million other people who had voted for Mr. Trump and were sure

that there were irregularities in either the casting or tallying of votes.

I don't know how to respond to such a thing. Sarcasm is not an option, and still less is mockery. He and I were not created anew in Christ to indulge in that kind of wickedness. The temptation is there, of course. Christ-confessors fall for it incessantly. Luther, for one, could be absolutely vicious in his rhetorical treatment of people he deemed wrong. These days we sniff our contempt in less egregious ways but sniff it we do. The frequent result is a species of mutual murder by which the other becomes dead to me and I to the other. Congregations split. Communities are sundered. The crowd at the pre-covid Thanksgiving table is suddenly thinner than it was. We finally got fed up with Uncle Fred's bunch spouting their angry nonsense, and someone had the nerve to tell them. Umbrage got taken, of course. "See you next in kingdom come if indeed they let you in."

From this point of view I owe that brother of mine great thanks. He loathed what I wrote. Yet he took the trouble to tell me. He trusted me to listen, or so I'd like to think. I find that a wee bit cheering. I'm much more used to people I've offended slipping wordlessly into the night, never to be heard from again. Some former parishioners come quickly to mind.

I owe this brother my respect as well. I'm one of those slip-into-the-night types myself. Conflict is not my thing. I would hate to be confronted by the number of times I've let my Lord down because of that. Decent shepherds need to swing the cudgel now and then when the jackals encroach. I'm guilty more than once of having watched instead as they grabbed a sheep and carried it off. I'll bet the brother would have raised a hue and cry at least.

These praises said, I cannot begin to give the brother what I think he's looking for. An apology, perhaps. A recanting of my views about Mr. Trump or the integrity of the election. If nothing else, an openness to the notion, incessantly repeated in the deep red universe, that "those Democrats" behave just as badly as Mr. Trump has done, and, if you're talking about Hillary Clinton, then far worse. She committed treason in the Benghazi episode, as my correspondent sputtered, though not so (presumably) Mr. Trump when he egged on the mob that attacked the Capitol or kept his silence on Twitter as the attack unfolded.

To none of this do I or will I concede, and not because I'm one of those willful, stubborn, know-it-all lefties—I really am not—but because the Law binds me in all its subsections to stand firm. The law of facts requires it. So too the laws of reason and perspective; the law of honesty. Enter the lesser law of the land, anchored in the Constitution, by which the voters voted, the counters counted, the checkers checked and checked again. After that the judges judged, not once but sixty times. Enough already! And as warrant for this shriek of exasperation I turn to the ultimate Law for humankind, chiseled at Sinai. Section 8: "Thou shalt not twist what is there to suit thy desires." Section 1: "Bend not the knee to the golden calf of the outcome you want"—or, for that matter, to "the weird worship of one dude," as the certifiably conservative Ben Sasse of Nebraska put it in a video a week and a half ago; [see at minute 4.0](#). (As it happens, Sasse too is a sibling in Christ, certifiably baptized.)

I say all this with fear and trembling. Fear that the paragraph above will alienate the brother once and for all, and not just him, but other dear siblings who stand where he stands and see as he sees. Fear that my response to this would be "So be it." Christians in their unbelief are all too quick to say that.

Again a fear, this one amplified by expectation: that these siblings so dear are as rigid in their certainties as I am in mine. I can no more sway them than they can sway me. They too will cite the Law as they dig their heels in. And I, responding, will wonder how they can do that with a straight face. Ditto, say they in return, though how, I do not know and cannot know except to chalk it up to willful blindness. "And would the blind lead the blind?" they answer.

Enter the trembling as it sinks in that, bound as I am by my moral certainty, I cannot escape the pride and disdain that makes me noxious in the sight of God and insufferable to those sibling-neighbors. They in turn are mired in the same evil as they respond to me, or so I should think.

And this is but one instance among millions of the bind our whole country is in.

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Time for the theological lessons of this grim American day.

Lesson One: Concerning the Law

Paul nails it on the head when he talks about the Law increasing sin (Rom. 5:20). The closer we hew to it, or try to, the more the sin grows. The less I'm able to love my law-defying neighbor. I think suddenly of those psalmists whose lyrics combine praise for the Law with prayers that God will crush the wicked; and just as suddenly, I wonder if the God-given intent of those psalms isn't simply to expose the bloodlust lurking in our own smug hearts. There's no end of that bloodlust in Christian hearts today,



especially on those ends of the spectrum, whether right or left, where moral certainties are at their strongest. And there's a lot of it in the middle as well, of course. Too much.

Paul again: with sin comes death. The death of conversation, to start with; of association too. I refuse to tune into Fox News. I couldn't abide ten seconds of the smug and vile Sean Hannity. I'll bet the brother who wrote me avoids MSNBC like the plague—you know, that smug and vile Rachel Maddow. No wonder I can't understand him, or he me. I haven't asked him, but I'll bet he's as loath as I am to pursue that understanding. What's the point when you know in the deep-down God-fearing gut that you're already in the right? When the only hope for reconciliation is for the other to say "uncle" and bend the knee to God? When the Law itself insists that I push the other in that direction?

I was not much heartened by the soaring, aspirational rhetoric that attended Joe Biden's inauguration. Yes, I liked it. It was packed with the music of the Law as I hear it. But too many others tuning in—if indeed they tuned in—heard the sound not of music but of fingernails on a chalkboard. I don't think God is anywhere done with his project of laying proud America low (see my post of [January 14](#).) Here's why I think it: the Law always accuses. It always brings wrath. It always sets people at each other's throats. Calamity always ensues.

Lesson Two: Concerning the Gospel

"I lift up my eyes to the hills; from whence"—from which hill—"does my help come?"

Answer: from the Hill of the Skull on which hung "the Lord of heaven and earth" in the person of Christ Jesus.

Pitching this answer is the specialty of the Crossings

Community. Not that countless others don't pitch it too—of course they do. Still, we for our tiny part go overboard in identifying this as the one thing above all else that we're about. Call us the Christ-crucified nuts. I'm one of them. So is this brother of mine. Over the years he has pitched the Golgotha answer a bunch of times in our Crossings publications and has done it extremely well. I've been pitching it too, of course.

Comes the question for us, and not just us, but for the wider Crossings Community; for the Church as a whole wherever one finds it: will we pitch Christ Crucified in theory only, or will we pitch him in practice too?

Theory-only is the preferred mode out there. It always has been. See the New Testament epistles, almost all of which entail a strenuous effort to push hearers and readers into cloaking the bones of the Gospel proclaimed with the flesh of real-time deeds and attitudes. "You were bought with a price"—yes? So "glorify God with your bodies." Enough already with the tomcatting, and not because the Law says so, but because that's who you are in Christ (1 Cor. 6). And again "Have this mind among yourselves which is yours in Christ Jesus..." (Phil. 2:5). So did Euodia and Syntyche take this to heart or keep carping at each other (Phil. 4:2)? I'm guessing the latter.

Of all the things we hear and know of Christ, none stands out more—none is more essential to his identity as Savior and the attention he merits—than his death for sinners. All sinners, bar none. And prior to that he sits and talks and eats with sinners—not just the tax-collecting ones, as in the certifiably wicked, but also the Pharisaical ones, as in the would-be righteous who, try as they might, simply can't get to God's standard of righteousness because the younger brother's sojourn in the far country has gotten too deeply under their skin for them to join the welcome-home party.

“Come on in,” the Father pleads, using the Beloved Son both as mouthpiece and rationale for making that plea.

We who bear that Son’s name have no business holding each other at arm’s length, not even when the other’s views leave us speechless and appalled. Why did he become appalling in that crucifixion of his if not to render us lovely in each other’s eyes, if only for his sake? Why was he made speechless, if not to give us all the reason we could possibly need to talk to each other, and after that to hang onto each other?

But as ever, the question: do we believe this? Do I believe it? How about my brother?

Or to put that another way: can a few hardy Christ-confessors follow their Lord through the double wall of God’s righteous demands and their own moral certainties, and into the glorious freedom of the children of God by which we treasure each other regardless of our enduring disagreements, however grave and serious?

Can we model the only path forward for a fractured America that leads at length to peace and unity? More to the point, will we bother to try even if no one save Christ bothers to notice?

Come, Holy Spirit!