

The Confounding Gospel (Part One of a Keynote Address)

Colleagues,

My turn.

Yes, doubtless you're weary of hearing about the Crossings conference in Belleville last January, and of course the papers delivered there are available for perusing on the [Crossings website](#). But why would you think to go looking for them? And why, when what we heard was such good stuff, should I deprive you of the chance to hear it too?

So bear with me, especially now, when I dare to start passing along my own work for the conference. Good stuff? I won't presume to call it that, or to rank it with the five other papers I've sent you so far. Still, I'd like to think that some of you might find in it a certain freshness of approach to a few key ideas that conscientious Lutherans take for granted, and yet struggle to convey in ways their friends and neighbors can grab hold of.

My job at the conference was to get things launched with a keynote address. The overall topic for our time together was "Discerning the Spirit in the Double Life of the Christian." I know, who but Lutherans thinking way too hard would concoct something so convoluted? Still, there it was, and there was I, tasked with whetting appetites for a day and a half of digging into it. So I started with a preview of the hours to come and the people we'd be hearing from. Then I swiveled and stuck my own spade into the matters before us. The Holy Spirit. The twice-born person. The challenge of "living the Gospel." I put this last phrase in quotes, because we often talk that way. I

wish we didn't. However sweet and earnest it sounds, it's opaque, a sort of verbal frosting spread over the half-baked cake of our confusions.

Here, then, is my stab at penetrating a few of those confusions. I'll deliver it in three parts, each running to about 2,000 words. As I opined some weeks ago, that's enough for one post.

Peace and Joy,
Jerry Burce

The Spirit-given Challenge of the Double-Life

Keynote Address for the Sixth International Crossings Conference
at Belleville, Illinois, on 25 January 2016

by Jerome Burce

I. Gospel

First: my own word of warm welcome to this Sixth International Conference of the Crossings Community, where we'll continue an exploration that began in 2007, at our first conference, when the topic was the Gospel itself—Honest-to-God Gospel, as we billed it that year. Honest-to-God as opposed to dishonest-to-God. Gospel so good, so strong so fresh—good news so deeply anchored in the apostolic witness to the impossible astonishment of God Almighty draped for our sake today in the crucified flesh of Jesus of Nazareth—that even the silliest of sinners, yours truly, for example, is suddenly free to laugh at himself, or to deplore himself, and even so to trust this God with a glad and cheerful heart in life and in death; and yes, he does this now without pretense—without succumbing, that is, to the sinner's standard folly of hanging one's hopes on the supposition, both

arrogant and baseless, that God is really not so good and fierce and righteous and demanding as God claims to be. "He's sure to let me slide," the stupid sinner keeps saying, "if indeed he's even there to worry about at all."

Honest-to-God Gospel is the death of such drivel, thank God—God who replaces the compulsion to spout it with the joy some shepherds celebrated one night in Bethlehem as they headed back to their fields, no longer fretting as they long had over the fact that they stank to high heaven the way shepherds are wont to do. Once there, of course, they knuckled down to the rest of the night's work and tended their smelly sheep, this being the first and best of ways to keep glorifying and praising God for the sweet aroma of that baby in the manger they had just been drenched in. Above them the skies still echoed absurdly with the sound of God's delight in them, and in us all—or so we dared in Christ to assume this past Christmas Eve.

II. Explorations Thus Far

I hope you'll pardon me for the length and thickness of this opening salvo. For those of you new to Crossings, it's essential that I underscore what this little band of misfits is all about. Our passion is the Gospel, nothing less, nothing other. Our mission—self-appointed, some might say—is to think about the Gospel, and argue for the Gospel in the life of the Church, for the sake of the world, and especially for the consolation and encouragement of down-to-earth Christian people as they go about their days. That's why, among much else, we organize these conferences, inviting old friends and new ones alike to share our joy, and even better to increase it as they bring their gifts of faith and thought to bear on the conversation. Thank God for them; thank God tonight for each of you.

So looking back, in 2008 we explored the importance, for the

sake of God's Gospel and the people it's meant for, of maintaining a sharp distinction between it and God's Law, that other great Word with its own set of tasks. Here, of course, we followed Luther and his colleagues, who all too rarely get the hearing they deserve these days.

In 2010 we tracked the implications of this Law/Gospel distinction for the mission of the Church. We did the same in 2012 around the hot-button topic of Christian discipleship. Two years ago, in 2014, we discussed the pluralistic assumptions of contemporary Western culture, and the challenges these pose both to the church's mission and to our calling as baptized people to keep trusting our Lord Jesus Christ day after day, this being what discipleship is finally all about.

I mention in passing that the key presentations at all these conferences are available on the Crossings website. Most all of them are well worth your time, and many offer insights that you won't find elsewhere. I encourage you to check them out, or to read them again, as the case may be.

III. The Topic This Year

Meanwhile, and all too suddenly, it's 2016. Again we come together with God's Gospel as our focus and our passion, and again we aim to build on work we've done already. Again our playground, so to speak—the factory floor, if you prefer things serious—is a conundrum, one that the Gospel itself creates; and the overriding question for our work together between now and Wednesday noon is how to use the Gospel to address the very mess it thrusts us into every day of our lives.

Here's the conundrum: where anything properly called Christian is concerned, there isn't one, there are two. Not that all Christians recognize this, but we-all are Lutheran Christians,

and so we do, this being the best gift we can offer to the conversation of the wider church.

So, for example, there isn't one creation we're all enmeshed in, there are two creations, the second launched on Easter Sunday, "when it was still dark," as St. John says in the first verse of chapter 20, where the allusion to Genesis 1 is beyond reasonable dispute.

There isn't one Word from God that defines, launches, shapes, and governs these two creations and requires our attention, there are two such Words from God, each asserting and exercising its distinct jurisdiction, each running its own kingdom, to use the older language that no one understands anymore. In any case, here is Law. There is Gospel, as many of us heard again last night, from Marcus Felde—two words, not one.

Because of that there isn't one way of being righteous, there are two ways of being righteous. So says Paul in Romans 3, and he says it emphatically, with a big fat "but" interposed between the two—in Greek, *alla*—so that we see each as an alternative to the other, not a supplement, an add-on for the other, as people keep wanting even so to treat them—thank you, John Calvin.

Again, there isn't one birth, but two births, not one me, one you, but two me's, two you's. I assume that Dr. Turnbull—Steve, as he'll want us to call him—will lay this out for us tomorrow, as he walks us through the consternation of Nicodemus, the first person in an endless stream of people who have found this idea befuddling, John 3.

So also in first-century Corinth there isn't one church to describe, but two churches, the one a rowdy pack of confused and quarrelsome people, the other a sacrosanct temple of God, 1 Corinthians 3. That this applies to churches today is something we'll also hear about tomorrow, or so I surmise, as we welcome

first Dr. Schiffrin and then Pastor Takamura to the podium.

And no, we're not done with this: because, as we saw in 2010, God charges baptized people not with one mission, but two missions; and when they get up in the morning and make the sign of the cross, they're reminded that their multiple callings—the fancy word here is “vocation”—are not of one sort, but two sorts. The first is immediately and often sharply defined by the agents of God you're working for—your boss, your spouse, your kids, your customers, the clown ahead of you on the freeway who keeps tapping his brakes in the blithe expectation that you're paying attention and won't rear-end him. Alongside that is vocation of the other sort, this one defined ever so vaguely by the Son of God when he tells you to let the light of your confidence in Him shine brightly, so that others, seeing its consequences, will get excited about God too. But whatever does this mean in practice today, when in fact you're out there on the freeway, for example, or up to your eyeballs in the demands and duties of the several jobs you wake up to every morning? Drs. Braaten and Baumgaertner will help us think about this vocational juggling act beginning tomorrow evening, spilling into Wednesday; and also on Wednesday—whatever you do, do *not* miss Wednesday—we'll think more closely about how to keep the act going when the rules of the turf you're juggling on make it plain that excitement about God of any kind isn't wanted here at all. Dr. Saler in particular will be our mentor when we get to that point.

IV. The Need for Conversation

Now let me suggest that all these speakers are going to be exploring the phenomenon that St. Paul will touch on in this coming Sunday's second lesson, Revised Common Lectionary: “Now we see, as in a copper mirror, dimly” (1 Cor. 13:12).

Or consider the photo that appeared last month in *The New York Times*, of a man all but lost in the brutal smog that had settled stubbornly on Beijing for a stretch of days. This strikes me too as a useful metaphor for the problem we're all here to think and talk about these next many hours.

I underscore the "all" in that last sentence. Yes, the caliber of the people we get to hear from is such that I, for one, would be more than happy to sit here mute tomorrow, merely soaking in the verbal bath of whatever they'll happen to gush with. Yet such is the problem, so grimy the smog, so tarnished the mirror, that soaking doesn't do these days. It never has. We need to scrub, each of us, God's two-edged Word serving as cleanser, and some back-and-forth conversation as the brush. The aim is for each of us to go home with a hard-earned thought or two as a gift for the people the Holy Spirit insists on sending us to. They're busy scrubbing as well, though often badly. Instead of polishing the mirror, they scratch it. Instead of thinning the haze, they thicken it. For their sake, please plan on asking, talking, poking, prodding, until you've grabbed hold of that useful thought—the sudden insight, perhaps—anchored in Christ crucified and nothing less, that you can pass along with confidence. And while you're at it, let the confidence include the bold thought that what you got here, you got from God. If others find that arrogant and unseemly, so be it.

Remember, after all, that St. Paul spent an entire apostolic career impressing others as arrogant and unseemly. That's what happens when you're so gripped in the Gospel that you run around insisting on all this infernal two-ness that characterizes our Christian experience; though if Paul himself were here and into English word play, he'd insist, I'm sure, that we call it a *supernal* two-ness. It's not, after all, as if he made it up, or got it from the devil; though lots of folks along the way have thought so.

Paul *spent* a career. Pay attention to the verb here. It's about to anchor one side of another two-ness that far too few of us baptized types have thought to pay attention to, even those of us in Lutheran dress. Or so I'm going to argue; and in that argument will be the main contribution I hope to make this very evening to the conversation we'll all be having.

—to be continued