

The Crossings Method for Studying Biblical Texts

Colleagues,

At the annual meeting of the Crossings Board of Directions – now two weeks ago – I got an assignment. But before talking about that, listen to this more important news from that meeting.

LOOK WHO'S COMING TO THE CROSSINGS CONFERENCE NEXT TIME!

Three Significant Others – friends of Crossings but not (yet) insiders – want to join us at the upcoming Crossings Conference in January 2010, to talk shop with us about “God’s Promise – Our Mission.”

BILL BURROWS, major voice in Roman Catholic mission theology. A Roman Catholic? A Crossings conference? How so? In his presidential address at this year’s meeting of the American Society of Missiology, Bill challenged the membership – from across the ecumenical spectrum: Roman Catholics, mainline protestants, evangelicals and pentecostals – to rally round this common ground: “Mission in Relation to the Gospel as Promise and the Forgiveness of Sin.” I got teary as I listened. For others, jaws dropped. You can see why the Crossings conference committee went after him to get him to talk with us. He said yes.

FRED DANKER, the world’s #1 New Testament lexicographer and life-long New Testament teacher, wants us to walk with him through the Gospel of Luke checking out Luke’s own mission theology. Heading for 90 on his next birthday, Fred’s still practicing his craft. His “concise” Greek-English lexicon (one-third the weight of his “big” one from the year 2000) is due any day from the University of Chicago Press. As I write this, he’s

still in Europe having just attended the international meeting of NT scholars in Vienna where he garnered kudos for his decades of NT scholarship—and, of course, presented a paper.

ART SIMON, founder of Bread for the World, is coming to talk with us about his life's work in "crossing" world hunger with God's law and promise. ThTh 582, three weeks ago, was Karl Boehmke's review of Art's just-published book: THE RISING OF BREAD FOR THE WORLD. It's a double autobiography, of Art Simon and of Bread for the World. If you need another teaser re-read that review on the Crossings website.

So register now, before it's too late.

January 25-27, 2010, here in St. Louis.

Call the Crossings office @ 314-576-7357.

Or register on the Crossings Website <https://crossings.org/conference/default.shtml>

Yes, some of us goldie-oldies and new-crop younger folks are also on the conference program. But conversing with that trio of superstars is once-in-a-lifetime. Spread the word around.

Now back to my assignment from the Crossings board of directors. Here's what they said:

"While you're still around, Ed, spell out for us once more the six steps of diagnosis and prognosis. Use nickel words." Before I send it to all of them, I'd like to field test it with all of you. Here's what I came up with. Does it make sense? Do you have any nickel words to suggest for places where I slipped in a ten-cent piece?

Peace and Joy!

Ed Schroeder

One way of teaching the Crossings six steps for Bible study.

Getting started.

It's not easy to read the Bible and get the message. That is true even though we now have the Bible in many easy-to-read English versions. Most difficult of all is to read the Bible and get its main message. That's the message from God that makes the difference between what the Bible calls Life and Death—both of those words with CAPITAL letters.

Many of the squabbles in the church today – and in the church of the past – have been about how to read the Bible and read it “right.” The time in church history called the “Reformation” – now almost 500 years ago – was such a time. At the center of that squabble was this same debate: How to read the Bible and read it “right,” so God's message intended for us gets through to us when we read it.

Those Reformers had an insight about why people often read the Bible “wrong.” None of us comes to the Bible neutral, they said (and this idea they got from the Bible itself). Right from the git-go we all come to the Bible with an “opinion” already stuck in our head. They called it the “legalist opinion.” We expect the Bible to tell us what to believe, how to behave, how to worship and pray – stuff we “ought” to do – because we have this idea in our heads that if and when we do the “right stuff, ” the stuff that God tells us to do, then we will be “right” people. That seems to make perfect sense. Do the right stuff and we will be OK with God and with ourselves.

But that “legalist opinion” is actually a barricade. It blocks us – right from the start – from hearing what God's word really is saying in the Bible. Well then, if this is not what's really

in the Bible, what is? And how can we get away from that “legalist opinion”? For both questions the Reformers had specific answers. When you follow their lead as they answer the first question, you get help for the second question.

The Reformers of five hundred years ago (with Martin Luther as a major figure) urged the people of their day – and now us too many centuries later – to read the Bible in this way: Use the picture of a medical doctor when you think of God. Then think of the Bible as words from God the doctor. OK, words about what? Words that come from doctors are words that diagnose people’s sickness and then offer treatment to heal what’s wrong. The Bible presents God’s diagnosis, and then God’s treatment, for what’s wrong, what’s “sick,” with human beings – beginning with people of the past and finally also you and me. What you hear from your own medical doctor about your sickness and health is the same sort of thing you hear in the Bible. The only difference is that in the Bible it is God diagnosing what’s wrong with people (that’s us) and God offering healing for what ails the patients (us again).

Of course, with God-the-doctor the examination goes deeper than what happens when you visit your medical doctor. God’s examination of us, his patients, goes all the way down to the bottom, to the roots of our problems. The Reformers learned from the Bible that the deepest “sickness” people have is a “God-problem.” The God-problem is always at the root of all the other problems, ailments, “ouches” that people suffer. These problems, ailments, ouches actually grow from the root problem. They are symptoms, not the problem itself, but signals that there is such a problem farther down. It is easy to see that if you could heal that root problem, all the bad stuff that grows from that root, all those symptoms, would be healed too.

Because that problem is “deep” and way at the root, you have got

to work your way down to get it out in the open. In the medical doctor's office, that's not always easy. Same is true in God's "doctor office." It takes work, but it's definitely worth doing. God's diagnosis in the Bible regularly follows a three-step pattern as it moves to find the root of the problem. Finding the root problem is good to know, but that doesn't heal it. So in the Bible, God-the-doctor doesn't stop there, but then becomes a really "good" doctor by offering help and healing at all three steps – from the root at the bottom all the way back up to the first level, the symptoms that we noticed when the Doctor's diagnosis began.

So there are three steps "down" in diagnosis and three steps "up" with healing.

When you start with this picture of the Bible as listening to your doctor, talking with your doctor, you can study any Bible story, any Bible text, using this six-step method (three down and three up). In our Crossings community we use this all the time for our Bible study. On our website we've been doing this for years with the different Bible readings that come every Sunday in what's called the Revised Common Lectionary. This RSL gives specific Bible readings for Sunday worship throughout the church year. It is "common" in most of the Christian denominations in the English-speaking world.

Here's how it goes. Pick any one of those readings, or a favorite Bible story or text of your own (more than just one verse). Start with the three-step Diagnosis.

STEP ONE

Start by asking the question: What is the problem – right on the surface – that someone (or some group) has as you read this text?

In some Bible texts you may notice that more than one person (or

group) “has a problem.” So you may have to choose to focus on just one of the problem-people. When you do that, then stick with this problem-person all the way through the six steps. Stay on the case.

“First level” diagnosis focuses on people’s behavior, the bad stuff people do to themselves or to each other, or even the bad situation they find themselves in. Level one diagnosis pinpoints what usually can be seen “from the outside,” often in public view – bad stuff happening to someone, or bad stuff that someone is doing. You might call this level-one first step the “external” diagnosis. Something visible, even obvious, on the outside, regularly not hard to see. Maybe even quite easy to notice.

So for step one, write down what this first-level problem is according to this Bible text.

But, of course, such “external” problems always signal some “internal” problem, something deeper, lying beneath the surface. So we go back to the text and see what it offers for a deeper diagnosis.

THAT IS STEP TWO,

asking the text what the deeper, inside, problem is. You might compare it to the X-ray machine in your doctor’s office. The X-ray shows what’s going on, what’s wrong, on the inside. In Biblical language that’s often what is going on in the “heart” or in the “mind.” Step Two asks: What’s going on inside folks that produces the bad stuff you identified at level one? What are these people fearing, loving or trusting that produces the “bad” fruit we saw in step one? What are the “sick” attitudes, ideas, prejudices, commitments in people’s hearts down deep from which such stuff comes? In step two we are simply following Jesus’s own diagnosis formula in Mark 7:21: “For it is from

within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come" (and then comes a list of 13 such evil things coming from the heart and showing up on the outside!).

Write down what the Bible text's deeper X-ray identifies as the deeper internal problem.

STEP THREE

You may think that we could stop here with the diagnosis, but don't stop yet. God's own X-ray goes one step deeper. It probes to find the cause of this inner sickness of the heart. In Biblical language that is always the "sick" God-connection that lies even deeper beneath these "sick" human hearts and the "sick" stuff that then shows up on the outside. What is the God-problem underlying the two previous steps, the surface examination and the inner examination? What are these patients doing in their own God-connection, or God-DISconnection? And what is God doing to them as all this is going on? The God-problem arises at people's God-relationship. So there are two things to look for: what's happening in this relationship from our side and what's coming from God's side. Since this is diagnosis of human sickness at the deepest level, what the X-ray will show is bad news from BOTH sides.

Sample: in the Garden of Eden story Adam and Eve's God-problem is that they have stopped listening only to God's voice in the Garden and are following this "other" voice that makes such tempting offers. In their hearts and minds they have stopped trusting God's message and have started to trust a message coming from some other messenger. That's what's going on at the human side at this deepest level. But something also comes from God's side in the relationship: "Get out of my Garden! No more Paradise for you!" If that's not a "God-problem," what is?

Step Three gets to the root problem, the most deadly aspect of

the diagnosis. Since it is a God-problem, only God can fix it. One way to check if you have really gotten to this rock-bottom level is to ask: "Is this the sort of problem, the sort of sickness, that can only be solved, can only be healed, by God's own action?" Expressed in other words: "Can this mess only be healed by the Rescuer God sent, Jesus, the crucified and risen Messiah?" If the answer to that question is "yes," then you have identified the "final" diagnosis. It goes no deeper than that.

It is important to set your diagnostic X-ray for this deepest level. For if you never get to this deepest level, this "God-problem" level, then the crucified and risen Jesus is not really necessary to "fix" what's wrong. He might be helpful as a counselor, an advisor, for Level One and Level Two problems, but human counselors, even a wise grandmother, can often do that. You don't "need" (=necessary) Jesus. When you stop the diagnosis at the second level (bad attitudes or bad things going on in the heart)–or even worse, just stop at that first level, the behavior level, as what needs to be fixed–then you have not yet identified a "God-problem." If you are not confronting a God-problem, then you don't need God's beloved Son, Jesus, God's own "Good News" for healing whatever the problem is – even serious "problems of the heart."

One piece of advice from the Reformation time was this: "Necessitate Christ." Applied here it points to this: Keep asking the Biblical text for its own deepest X-ray, where Christ is "necessary"– and Christ alone can do it – to bring healing for the root sickness.

That sets you up for moving to the Good News in the Bible text. Here too as we look for God's healing – starting from the bottom, this God-problem deepest X-ray – we proceed in three steps. We ask the text for healing, for Good News, at each of the three levels of "bad news" that we have just identified.

SO FOR STEP FOUR

we ask the text for the Good News it has to offer to bring healing to the STEP THREE God-problem that we have just uncovered. In different Bible texts that Good News will be expressed in a wide variety of words and word-pictures, images and metaphors, but they will always be pointing to Christ crucified and risen as their content. It is the core confession of the Christian faith that Christ, and Christ alone, is the healer whom God himself has offered—and offers us over and over again—to rescue humankind from the deep bad news of our God-problems.

[With texts from the Old Testament this takes extra work, for the simple reason that Jesus is not (yet) on the scene in any OT text. The Christmas event at Bethlehem doesn't show up in the OT. Not until then is Jesus on the scene. So there will be no "explicit" Jesus material in those OT texts. What to do?

Here Christians follow the lead of New Testament writers, the very first Christians, when they draw on OT texts in their preaching and teaching. The rule is: In Jesus God is fulfilling both the law and the promises he spoke in the OT to his ancient people. How to apply this rule for Bible study is an "advanced course," you might say, after you learn the six-step sequence. It takes some practice. Anyone can learn it. The OT text studies on the Crossings website show how we use that rule with OT Bible material.]

In Step Four we scour the text for these Christ-signals, these pointers to Christ, to God's own "final" solution to our "final" diagnosis. In any specific Bible text, there may not be enough verses present to put your finger on specific "Christ-content" terms. What to do? Answer: Look around at the context – the material coming before and after the verses in the text at hand. Blessed Bob Bertram often told us in such situations to "go to

the neighbors and borrow a cup of sugar”— or whatever is needed – to get the one or two ingredients that may not be present in the particular text you are studying. But it is present in the full-scale diagnosis and treatment of the Biblical book that your text comes from. That applies not only to this first step of Good News – step four in the whole sequence – but the other steps as well, since any one Bible text (of just a few verses or many verses) may not have all six “ingredients” easily available in its pantry.

When you identify the Christ material that is “necessary” to heal the deep diagnosis of Step Three, check and see if you have “good-news” terms that connect with “bad-news” language. For example, if the deep diagnosis is “Lost to God” (as in lost sheep) then the good news is “Found by Christ, God’s own Good Shepherd.” There are many such paired terms for bad news/good news – at the deepest level – in the Bible. Besides lost and found, there are enslaved and free, alienated and reconciled, guilty and forgiven, dead and made alive, possessed by demons and redeemed by God, orphans and adopted children, enemies of God and friends of God, not OK and made OK—and many more. Try to use the key terms presented by the Bible text you are studying for all six steps. The wide variety of words and images and metaphors is too good to let it go to waste. But remember, now and then you may have to “go to the neighbors to borrow”

Write down what the text offers for Step Four and then proceed to

STEP FIVE

If you do your diagnosis actually in three steps going down on a page of paper, you will now be going up. Our habit in the Crossings Community is to pattern these six steps as a big letter “U.” Three steps down on the left side of the U, then the big crossover to Christ, the Good News of Step Four. The Christ-

words and terms are the stuff, the first building block, at the base of the right side of the U, and from this cornerstone we go upward on this side of the U for Steps Five and Six. When you actually place your written findings in these locations, you can check back and forth at each level to see if you have “enough” good news on the right side to cross over (and cross out!) the bad news on the left side. If not, go back to the text (or the context) to get some more ingredients to finish the job.

After you place the Good News for the deepest diagnosis (Step Four) right across the way from the bad news of Step Three, you then proceed to the space alongside your earlier Step Two. Here you will be asking the text for Good News to counter the Bad News you recorded in Step Two, bad news on the inside, in the human heart and human mind. You now ask the text: Do you have any Good News for the inside diagnosis we identified earlier? Any Good News, any healing to replace the sickness we pinpointed in the human heart and mind? All of this “good news” for the human heart arises from the healing at the root that Christ offers. So look for such connections in the text itself.

Once more you sometimes have to go to the neighbors for that ingredient, but don’t do that until you have “squeezed” everything you can from the text you are studying. How are human hearts and minds changed when they get re-rooted in Christ as he was presented in Step Four at the deepest level? Here too you will look for “good news” terms that are the opposite of the “bad news” terms you found for second level diagnosis. If it was “hearts full of fear” there, then it might be “confidence” here, or “joy” or “courage” or “trusting Christ” or “following the Good Shepherd.” All these new things, this new heart and mind, grow from that root, Christ crucified and risen, spelled out in Step Four. Write down what you find, and move to the final Step Six.

STEP SIX.

Christ is God's own gift of healing for the God-problem. Christ is then the root for the internal healing of hearts and minds. That's Steps Four and Five. Now Step Six takes us back to the "outside" where we began with our original diagnosis, back out into the world where people live and work and interact – and where the bad stuff was going on that we started with in Step One. But now we have new people, with new hearts and minds – all coming from their new (good and new, as in Good News) Christ-connection.

So we ask the text one more time for signals of what these healed people look like in daily life, what their new behaviors are. How are they different from what they were when we started the diagnosis? If that difference isn't yet made clear, or is just beginning, how might they be living "good news" lives (instead of their previous "bad news" lives) now that they have new hearts and minds? To use a technical medical term that goes along with diagnosis, what is the new "prognosis" for people rooted in Christ and nourished by his mercy and forgiveness?

What new futures await folks who have their hearts now "hanging" on Christ (as Luther liked to say)? Hanging your heart, Luther said, is what faith is all about. Any faith is a matter of where you hang your heart. Christians hang their hearts on Christ. That's what the word Christian means.

A simple sample of the six steps, the first-ever published six-stepper, was Bob Bertram's doing it on the Christmas story from Luke 2. [For details on this GO to <https://crossings.org/archive/bob/default.shtml> and click on "A Christmas Crossing."] First question: Who has the problem in this text? Bob took the shepherds. How did he then work out the diagnosis? Like this:

SEPT ONE “By night”

External diagnosis. Doing their routine work but “in the dark.” Sure, here it actually was after the sun had gone down, but in Luke and throughout the Bible “darkness” often points to “deep darkness.” It’s a diagnosis word for people living their lives “in the dark” even when the sun is shining.

STEP TWO “Fear”

Internal diagnosis. When the heavenly fireworks happen – brilliant light, heavenly messengers, all that noise – the shepherds are “sore afraid.” The actual Greek text says: they feared a “mega” fear. For Hebrew people this heavenly hoopla was judgment day stuff. And would these shepherds pass this “final examination”? Their mega fear in the heart gives their answer.

STEP THREE “Lost”

For the God-problem level Bob Bertram “goes to the neighbor to borrow something.” The first two diagnostic terms – night and fear – are in this Christmas text, but the word “lost” is not. It is, however, Luke’s favorite word for the God-problem, and he uses it often in other places in his Gospel. For example Luke 15 with three parables about getting lost as the deep God-problem. So Bob borrows from Luke 15. The connection is that if the shepherds are about to fail the “final exam” of judgment day, what are they? Lost. Lost to God. Lost period. Big Losers. A God-problem that needs (necessitates) a God-given solution.

STEP FOUR “Savior”

Good News to trump the deep bad news of Step Three. The good news term for losers is “Savior.” Which is exactly what the heavenly messengers announce to the mega-fearful shepherds: “A Savior who is Christ the Lord” to rescue them (us too) from the final judgment day, and from any other judgment days that come before that last one in your life. And where to find him? “In the city of David [=an Old Testament rescue signal] . . . in a manger wrapped in swaddling cloths.” All signals pointing

forward to Good Friday and then Easter's triumph.

STEP FIVE "Joy"

"Good tidings of great joy." In Greek that "great" is also the "mega" word. Note the big switch in the human heart. Mega joy replaces mega fear.

STEP SIX "Glorifying and Praising"

Back out in the world where our diagnosis began. But no longer "in the dark." The shepherds en-lightened, as you can see/hear from their actions. At the very end of the text the shepherds are glorifying and praising God, the very things the angels were doing during the opening judgment day drama. The simple meaning of the word angel is messenger. The shepherds take over the angels' job. They are now the messengers for the Savior and for the Joy replacing Fear. They are no longer "in the dark" about God and themselves, about the world. Note how the pairs (bad news and good news) fit together: Lost and Savior; Fear and Joy; Shrouded in Darkness and Glorifying & Praising.

Epilogue. Want to see how this six-step method works out with actual Bible texts? Go to the Crossings website <https://crossings.org> and click on "Text Study." There you will have hundreds of examples from the many years that Crossings people have been using the six-step sequence to get to the message of the Bible.

One more item. Way back at the beginning of this essay I referred to the "legalist opinion" as a blockade for hearing what God the doctor wants people to hear in the Bible. The legalist opinion thinks that God will be "nice" to us only if we perform according to God's rules and regulations. But that opinion is itself our problem. It's a Second Level affliction in the heart

and mind. But it's even worse than that. It points to a Level Three affliction that necessitates Christ for the answer.

Like this: if God were to relate to us only on the basis of our performance – doing the right things – we'd be losers on the very first day, even the first hour. Take just the first commandment: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your mind, all the time." Who among us has kept that commandment for even one whole day? So we're all first commandment-breakers right from the start – before you even look at the other nine. That's a God-problem diagnosis. The prognosis for commandment-breakers is not good news: "You shall surely die." So trying to find out "what we ought to be doing" when we read the Bible is not the "right" way to read the Bible.

Much better is to be listening to THE Doctor's diagnosis and the treatment he offers: And that treatment, that new prognosis for our deep sickness, is always a surprise.

Yes, we all fail to follow the "you ought to" commandments. But, but . . . then comes the big surprise. In the crucified and risen Jesus, God's special agent (that's what "Christ" means), God makes an offer, a promise, of mercy and forgiveness to commandment-breakers. Hooked to Christ, commandment-breakers – including breakers of the first BIG commandment – get a new prognosis. Life instead of death, joy replacing fear, freedom in place of slavery as we live our lives out in the world. Such a deal! The six-step method for studying the Bible is designed to get this Good News out of the Bible, into our lives, and out into the world.

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August 2009