

Thoughts occasioned by reading Robert Bertram, A TIME FOR CONFESSING, by William R Burrows.

Colleagues,

Here is the second of four reviews of Bob Bertram's book that will, deo volente, eventually show up on ThTh posts. [One is yet to come from Rudolf Keller, German Lutheran pastor-theologian in Bavaria, one of the keynote speakers at the 2007 Crossings "Honest to God" conference. And then one by Bishop Francisco Claver, S.J., from the Philippines. Claver was a personal friend of Bob's and is a key confessor in Bob's chapter 6.]

Now to William R. Burrows. Bill Burrows will this very weekend at the annual meeting of the American Society of Missiology (Techny Towers, Chicago) take the gavel as newly-elected ASM president. For decades he and I have been arm-wrestling mission theology at these get-togethers—occasionally over beers—and often via cyberspace when we get back home. Bill has been managing editor of Orbis Books, Maryknoll, New York, since 1989. Under his aegis Orbis has become—far and away—the world's major publisher of mission theology. A former member of the Roman Catholic Society of the Divine Word, he was ordained in Rome in 1971 where he was pursuing a licentiate in theology (STL = Sacrae Theologiae Licentia. Literally, the license, aka permission, to teach sacred theology) at the Gregorian University. He worked as a theology teacher and rural missionary in Papua New Guinea from 1972 – 1977 and obtained a doctorate in theology from the University of Chicago Divinity School in 1987, where he worked with Langdon Gilkey, David Tracy, Anne Carr, and

Joseph Kitagawa on the Roman Catholic doctrine on other religious Ways.

I sang a Te Deum on first reading of his “thoughts” about Bob’s book. Don’t be surprised if the same thing happens to you.

Peace and Joy!

Ed Schroeder

Thoughts occasioned by reading Robert Bertram, A TIME FOR CONFESSING, edited by Michael Hoy (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008).

By William R Burrows.

Driving down I-95 to a conference in Princeton, New Jersey, on a Sunday morning, I pushed the button to get “Weekend Edition” on the New York public radio station. I was too early, so I switched from WNYC to WQXR, the classical music station of The New York Times. Instead of Verdi or Bach, I got The Lutheran Hour. Snared by the stirring anthem, I stayed tuned and was then seduced by the sonorous voice of Pastor Kenneth Klaus speaking on the lectionary text for the day, Matthew 9: 9-13, the story of Jesus and Matthew the tax collector. Later the same morning, quite a different sermon on the same text was delivered from Trinity Episcopal Church on Wall Street. The evening before, attending the confirmation of my Godson Charlie McNellis in Liberty, New York, I heard quite another version of the same parable from Bishop Dennis Sullivan, an auxiliary bishop of the Catholic Archdiocese of New York.

In the back of my mind, as I listened to all three sermons, was the article you are now reading. It was not coming together.

Why? The key to why Robert Bertram's A TIME FOR CONFESSING is important, I had concluded, was in a short passage near the end of the book, where Bertram catches the dynamic at play in the story of Jesus and the tax collector brilliantly when he writes of the needed reconciliation (in the sense of making "at one", overcoming estrangement) of God and humanity as follows:

The opposites are, on the one hand, "the world," which in all honesty God finds infuriating. On the other hand is God "himself" who, though he yearns to love this world, yearns to love it not cheaply or permissively but in all honesty. That is a quandary. How to reconcile these opposites? (Bertram, p. 167)

In Bishop Sullivan's sermon, the story is used to illustrate the sort of person Jesus was and the effect he had on people. He says to Matthew, "Follow me," and Matthew follows. Similarly, the confirmandi were advised to model their lives on Matthew's by following Jesus and reaching out to outcasts. The lesson is fundamentally a moral one. Sitting among the confirmandi, as Charlie's sponsor, I could see that the good bishop's sermon wasn't quite working.

In the Episcopal church version, the story showed God's unconditional love to humankind and invited listeners to do likewise. I don't recall all the details, but the underlying theme in a very well-delivered, cogent homily was that we could find within us the power to reach out to the suffering, and release the power of love. The lesson is again a moral one. For me the problem is not God's love, but the fact that deep down I know I don't deserve it and all those I know who think they deserve unconditional love don't know themselves as others know them. I just do not see human beings as all that lovable. I really don't. Attractive objects of desire? But many are not attractive as objects of desire. We tend to reject them and in

that very rejection one sees the gulf between God's love and the desire we often mistake for love in its fullness. Eros is good in and of itself. Let us not be distracted by that red herring. But it is not the agape that is modeled in the drama leading up to, on, and away from Golgotha to the resurrection. Yes, many are attractive and often so. But deserving of unconditional love if they're not working at becoming more authentic? Not really. And when I read both the Hebrew Bible and the Christian Bible, it doesn't seem to me that God feels that way either. Love, truth, and justice belong together.

At least both the Catholic and the Anglican resisted the impulse to talk about the problem whether the Matthew of the story is the author of Matthew's Gospel. I have lost track of how many times I have heard that one discussed. I have long tired of hearing tours through textual commentaries masquerading as preaching.

In pastor Klaus's version, the church is a community of forgiven sinners, many of whom find it hard to break with their pasts, sometimes unable to admit into their midst "unrespectable" people, even after they've turned to Christ. The church itself is too often too respectable, a far cry from a community that knows we are all and remain sinners. But the ultimate point of Klaus's story was to help people understand how God accepts us, in spite of our remaining unlovable.

In the language of Robert Bertram, God finds us as individuals and as a world "infuriating." Because of Jesus, he stays his anger. For the Lutheran version of the story, in the strand that holds Bertram's book together, human beings need to reconcile themselves with God, align themselves with Jesus the Christ, to become a "new creation," and to make a break with the side of their lives that God finds infuriating. There is a moral component to the message, but even deeper are three theological

points, all rooted in the biblical narratives:

1. The world as a whole and each of us as an individual is off the track, infuriating the author of life by our refusal to obey the law of life. That is to say we violate the order of creation, which, if respected, would make the world a paradise. Disobedience to that law or deceiving oneself by thinking that one's adherence to that law – either in its “natural” form in the structure of creation or in its legal form in the Scriptures of Israel – will make it right with God makes us, instead, part of what infuriates God.
2. Jesus comes into the world to show and embody for humanity the way to turn to God with our whole being. In the process he infuriates those who have a stake in the present order. As a result, the leaders of both the Roman imperial and the Jewish religious authority execute him. The masses who acclaimed him scatter, thus revealing their fickleness and inability to commit themselves to the way of Jesus. And these scattering followers of Jesus – both Jews and non-Jews – represent the inconstancy of human beings. In narrative form they embody what Lonergan, using philosophical language, terms “our incapacity for sustained development,” [Bernard Lonergan, *INSIGHT: A STUDY OF HUMAN UNDERSTANDING* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1958), p. 630] despite our best resolutions. In Lonergan's analysis of human being and history, recognition of this radical incapacity sets up the possibility of embracing a “supernatural” solution to our problem.
3. The New Testament proposes Jesus as this solution and in its account sees the life, teaching, indeed the very person of Jesus and the manner of his death as that which, in Bertram's words, “unveil” human unrighteousness and

absorb the wrath of God, for our sake (2 Cor 5: 21) (pp. 163-64), a Pauline text that is central to the interpretation of the Biblical narratives of Jesus in their totality.

To see things this way, it should be said, one needs to acknowledge that the letters of the Apostle Paul are prior to the rest of the New Testament and provide the key for interpreting the narrative strands of the four gospels. Bertram does not argue that case at length, but his writing presupposes it. Neither will I argue it here, but if Saul was not given a special vocation in the manner narrated in Acts 9: 1-31 and in Galatians 1: 13-24, then all that follows will make no sense.

The appendix of A TIME FOR CONFESSING may be the best place for someone who is not an expert in the intricacies of Lutheran attempts to bring this dimension of the gospel to the church. Although I am a Catholic, a number of years ago I came to the conclusion that Brother Martin was right about this in the sixteenth century and that only by making this case convincingly to contemporary Christians could the church retrieve its authentic identity.

But we have a problem. And a short citation from Bertram illustrates it perfectly. Bertram observes that:

It is in the history of Jesus the Christ, says Paul, that this infuriating world at last becomes honestly lovable to God, "a new creation." How so? By God's "not counting [sinners'] trespasses against them" but instead "for our sake" making Christ "to be sin who knew no sin" (2 Cor 5: 17, 19, 21) (p.167).

The church has a problem getting this doctrine generally accepted, at least in the West. It is increasingly difficult to

make the case to people that unconverted humanity (i.e., humanity “not turned” to God through Christ) is so seriously flawed as to deserve God’s fury. When one talks of an originating sin that has us all in its grips, the theologically well informed mutter something about the Genesis story being a myth and St Augustine having gotten the church off on the wrong foot because of his hang-ups on sexuality. That is followed by the question of how non-Christians can be condemned. At about which point, the conversation peters out. (I resist here the temptation to follow the red herring question of how non-Christians are saved, although I have spent more of my life pondering that question than studying Lutheran theology.)

Throughout his book, Bertram wonderfully employs synonyms for off-putting (i.e., to “moderns”) biblical language that depicts a wrathful God. His rhetorical strategy is a skillful outflanking maneuver. Speaking of a God who finds the world “infuriating” is one of his most successful. Still, the teaching is hard to swallow. Nevertheless, Bertram will not give it up. He knows that the Scriptures give indicting testimony to warrant the charge that there is something fundamentally infuriating to God about the world, its individuals, and its cultures. They have slipped their moorings, and Jesus the Christ is the one who can help us find those moorings in recognizing the truth about ourselves and our personhood, which have been damaged by straying from God. Such has been the triumph of a curious blend of pessimism about structures that oppress and optimism that we’ll eventually get things right- whether through some form of therapy, pharmacology, social work, or politics – that the notion that the first step towards doing so is confession of sin and our powerlessness to make things right seems downright weird to “moderns.” Me? Guilty? Saying that the message that the embrace of Christ in trusting faith is the solution seems not so much wrong as irrelevant. The skeptic, seeing the bumper sticker

proclaiming that “Jesus is the answer” scoffs and asks, “What is the question?”

Having read Bertram’s book, I think he’s basically right about biblical anthropology. And then – knowing how we swim in a sea of relativism – I ask, “So what?”

In our age, the skepticism of educated elites in Western cultures about the reality of a transcendent universe has migrated downwards to comprise the intellectual furniture of large swathes of the ordinary citizenry. The question whether a church is “valid” has increasingly become the question of whether the church is on the right side of fundamental moral and ethical divides as societies rapidly change.

In 1520, when Pope Leo X issued “Exsurge Domine,” condemning 41 theses taken from Martin Luther’s works, the fundamental soteriological horizon was clearer. Luther was an easy target for the pope, because he seemed to attack the foundations on which the church was built as the sole mediator of the salvation that everyone desired. Luther, of course, was trying to show the church that all the accretions of centuries had obscured the soteriology of the gospel of and about Jesus and ourselves. In today’s world, at least in large swathes of the West, the notion that a “reign of God” is a deeper and transcending REALITY – the invisible but true marrow of the visible historical world – is a hard sell. Religion lives in the realm of opinion. Science and politics deal with facts. In this framework, the Christian church (and any other religious tradition) is judged useful only if it contributes to human well being in the here and now as defined in this-worldly terms.

Bertram knows this. The seven chapters that precede the appendix that I find more compelling than these chapters themselves show the ups and downs of what the gospel means within the church and

when the church tries to illuminate the world with the gospel. Indeed, Bertram's book is a marvelous "tour d'horizon" of the Reformers' attempts to confess / profess the gospel as the middle ages were drawing to a close. He relates that dynamic to the black church in the civil rights era in the U.S., to the confessing church of the Nazi era, the struggle against apartheid, and the people-power struggle of the Philippines. It all introduces the question in chapter 7, "When Is the Church a Confessional Movement?"

I detect a plaintive note when Bertram notes, "But the biggest dilemma of all in our confessional movements, I believe, is their relative rightness or wrongness" (p. 147). Exactly. And the problems of relativity and ambiguity bedevil every attempt to make any historical "tempus" an opportunity for a "confessio" that totally and unambiguously transcends history.

If I read Bertram right, Luther and his companions did everything possible to call the church to recognize the essential dynamics of the gospel. Coming at them from one direction, the gospel is a promise to be embraced "sola fide, sola gratia," and "sola scriptura." Coming at them from another direction, the gospel represents God's PROMISE to save those who embrace Christ, thereby acknowledging him as the one who has brought God's forgiveness to the world by accepting the death that humankind's sin deserved. The story of Matthew's call in Matthew 9 is a perfect illustration of what happens in the post-Easter church. No matter how bad your sins are (Matthew's were both social and individual), you need to answer the call, "Follow me," and when you do, you are on the way as someone right with God. You are forgiven in an instant but you will appropriate what that forgiveness MEANS through the rest of your life as you walk in the Spirit with Jesus. That is the way of sanctification in which one is led by the Spirit to embody Christ, to live in him, and to become one with God, as he was.

We can do nothing to merit that forgiveness nor the divine promise to be our future. Instead, the believer acknowledges the radical need to be reconciled with God (2 Cor 5: 20-21) and accepts the reconciliation offered in Jesus the Christ. The true church is the one that manifests and proclaims this promise in word and sacrament. That is the essential criterion. Other things MAY be compatible “adiaphora” that can help stir the heart of the sinners or help them trust themselves at ever deeper levels to the grace mediated by Christ, but they are only valid to the extent they bring one to God. When they occlude the basic dynamic of – or response to – the gospel, they need either to be eliminated or purified.

For the Roman authorities at the close of the middle ages and the beginning of the modern era, Luther’s challenge involved paring away a thousand years of customs, habits, and ways of expressing the earthly pilgrimage of humanity so dramatically encapsulated in Dante Alighieri’s *COMMEDIA DIVINA*. It seemed too great a price to pay. One suspects, though, that the part of the price that popes, cardinals, and bishops found too dear was the kind of re-shaping of the papal, episcopal, and sacerdotal orders necessary to make it clear that the forgiveness of sin accomplished by the cross of Christ could be accessed simply by trusting the promise mediated by the preached word and the two essential sacraments – baptism and eucharist. The entire system of mediation via the church was at stake, and with it the social order of Christendom. Leaders would be ejected from their positions of power and prestige as embodiments of God’s ordering of the cosmos.

Since the Enlightenment, the shift from judging which church authentically re-presented Christ has moved inexorably in the direction of seeing historical events and challenges as defining whether the church is worth keeping. If the challenge is the new conditions faced by industrialization and the rise of cities

with their impoverished workers, the criterion of authenticity becomes whether the church is on the side of the new proletariat. If the challenge is restructuring society in the light of new insights into gender and sexual identity, is the church on the side of the emancipation of women and homosexuals? Or, in Bertram's case, learning from the confessing movement in Hitlerite Germany, from the black church in the struggle against racism, learning from the African National Congress during the struggle against Apartheid.

In Bertram, one finds a finely tuned theological mind seeing how each of these represents a different and important sort of confessing moment. He uses discerningly the words of Paul Ricoeur, who speaks of the situation that occurs when history's currents bring us to see "the profound unity between testimony about facts and events, and the testimony about meaning and truth"(p. 58). Christians may not overcome the rule that every historical action is ambiguous, but neither can they deny that history presents us with situations where the genuinity of our embrace of Christ in his fullness and the realizing of the "new humanity" that faith is to create requires us to act decisively in history to make God's righteousness visible.

To that extent, the post-Enlightenment challenge to bear fruit flows from an inner-gospel imperative. Nevertheless, to accept the challenge on the grounds our cultures propose, rather than by acting from within the circle of faith leading us more deeply into the mystery of the Kingdom has risks. It is easy to avoid taking sufficiently into account the paradoxical nature of revelation of the human plight and the gospel's salvation from it in three areas: (a) the history of Israel, (b) the life and teaching of Jesus, and (c) the reversal of values both realized and symbolized in the crucifixion of Jesus. The history of both Israel and Jesus are lessons that – as important as historical challenges are – the reality of the Kingdom is far more elusive

and paradoxical than human liberation and progress.

The human situation mirrored in the parables involves, for example, Jesus speaking of noxious weeds and good grain growing together as history moves toward its denouement in the Kingdom (Matthew 13: 24-30). Augustine translates that parable into the image of an earthly and heavenly city existing together till the end of time. In the age immediately before Luther, the thought of Bonaventure represented yet another attempt to image the ambiguity of the intermingling of good and evil in the midst of history's vicissitudes, unifying his theology around the image of Francis of Assisi modeling the behavior of the disciple in the midst of this ambiguity.

Luther provides the touchstone of Bertram's book. The subtext is the story of an historical tragedy. A confessing movement aimed at bringing the whole Western church into the mission of proposing a sharpened vision of gospel to all humankind becomes – against the will of Luther – an alternate, separating church protesting the abuses of the “ecclesia mater” [mother church]. Had Catholics in the 16th century learned from the “confessio” of the Reformers “illius temporis” [of that time], the tragedies of mixing empire and the cross in Ibero-America might not have occurred. Had the Americans not taken up the Puritans' identification of its burgeoning colonizing of our continent in the terms of Christendom exclusivism, the crimes that the citizens of the United States committed against the Indians in the pursuit of the U.S.'s “Manifest Destiny” might not have occurred.

But they did. And there was no confessing church decrying those crimes. Both Ibero-America and Anglo-America failed to understand how encumbered with “adiaphora” their imperial and colonial mission projects were. They thought they were presenting the gospel, yet in both its Catholic and Protestant

versions, the message was so encumbered with the imbalance of power and Euro-American cultural assumptions that one suspects the gospel was not presented either in the Augustana version Bertram so clearly lays out or in interculturally appropriate terms that Native Americans could grasp.

The Lutheran confessional movement was and is an attempt to get the church to attend to the Gospel as a promise of forgiveness. It is based on the premise that unrepentant humanity deserves the fate meted out to Jesus for falling short of our nature and the fundamental law expressed in that nature and revealed in the history of Abraham's descendants, encapsulated in the Bible. Brother Martin's eureka moment, as he saw the relationship and distinction between gospel and law, was a gift to the whole church, which the larger part of the church spurned. That teaching is based conceptually in the Pauline portion of the New Testament, teaching that Jesus has absorbed God's anger for our sake, and it is a radical teaching.

Against that background and the high stakes drama portrayed in the gospel narratives, medieval Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy created an entire system of mediatory structures to give anxious people confidence that they would be saved. In effect, the visible church, in all its splendor and totality both communicated the notion that human beings were sinners who deserved the pains of hell and surrounded the faithful with sacraments and sacramentals that were testimonies of God's mercy. Brother Martin, however, realized that people had come to trust in the rituals while avoiding the biblical truth that what God truly desired was a loving faith and trust springing up from within the depths of the heart, a deeply personal embrace of the crucified one. Yet both the rituals and the sacerdotalization of the church's office holders, on which the rituals depended for validity, were occluding the gospel.

Bertram is clearly a transitional figure in American Christian life, and the electronic community he gave rise to in Thursday Theology and the insights of CRUX are clearly important. As I read this book, I realized that those he touched in the Crossings community are attempting to make confessional theology more than a denomination's distinct theology. The goal is to make it a confessing movement within the entire "oikumene" of Christ's followers.

The history of Christianity in America gives grounds for both hope and caution for assessing how that task is being accomplished. As a Roman Catholic who has been affected by writings coming from within the Crossings community, but also from the reflections of Popes John Paul II and Benedict XVI, as well as a new sort of postcritical exegesis modeled in N. T. Wright, Luke Timothy Johnson, and James D. G. Dunn, the crossroad we are at is very well summed up by the same Lonergan I quoted earlier. He says our crisis "is a crisis not of faith but of culture. There has been no new revelation from on high to replace the revelation through Christ Jesus. There has been written no new Bible, and there has been founded no new church to link us with him." [Bernard J. Lonergan, *COLLECTION* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1967), p. 266.]

Lonergan's view is that we are facing the collapse of the classical culture that nurtured both medieval Catholicism and Lutheran attempts to purify it. I agree. In the grey noise of information overload that the world suffers from today, perhaps the greatest challenge to the church's ability to confess the gospel in ways that the world will find relevant will be finding ways in which to make the possibility of transcendence plausible. And in meeting that challenge, I suspect there is no solution that falls short of embodying the task that Luther began. Darrell Gudorf calls the task one of nurturing the "continuing conversion of the church."

The Crossings Community, especially Michael Hoy and Ed Schroeder, should be commended for keeping the witness of Robert Bertram before us, for it is to the continuing conversion of the church that Bertram summons us in the name of Christ.