

Luke's Gospel Through a Systematician's Lens



Co-missioners,

This week we send you another a classic from the Crossings' library. Going forward we plan to do this at least once a quarter. Today's item was written by Ed Schroeder in 1976 and originally published in *Currents in Theology and Mission*, launched two years earlier as the theological journal of Christ Seminary–Seminex. (Today it serves as such for both the Lutheran School of Theology in Chicago and Wartburg Seminary.)

Today's rerun is especially timely. A new church year begins on November 28, the First Sunday in Advent. It will feature Year C, the third annual cycle in the Revised Common Lectionary. Most of the Gospel readings will come from St. Luke.

Ed's review of Luke will be a valuable resource both for those who preach and those who listen as the coming year unfolds. It bears consulting already now. See, for example, Ed's interpretation of the Parable of the Lost Sons. It still stands out, forty-five years later, as a fresh and provocative look at one of the stories that only Luke tells. The entire article is a masterpiece in how to use the Scriptures to "make full use of Christ's benefits." It presses the question of questions that interpreters must face and too often dodge: "Why was Jesus' death necessary?"

Steve Hitchcock, a member of our editorial team, abridged the original article slightly and updated its language. Steve had served in the past, with Ed's blessing, as an editor of his work. The [original can still be found and consulted](#) under the "Library" tab of our website.

Peace and Joy,
The Crossings Community

Luke's Gospel Through a Systematician's Lens

By Edward H Schroeder

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In a workbook for his seminary students, Robert Bertram laid out his approach to systematic theology:

What is most “systematic” about systematic theology is not merely that it arranges its material—say, the biblical data—in this or that orderly way (that much is true of all the theological disciplines) but rather that it consciously and explicitly insists on asking “Why.” It asks for the Sufficient Reason, the Adequate Basis, The Fountain, never resting until it has found “Reason Enough.” Why, for what reason, finally, is this or that Christian claim made?

By saying that systematicians asks for the “why”, I am not suggesting that they do not know what it is. On the contrary, because they do know, at least in principle, what that sufficient reason is, the asking is meant chiefly to ask it into clarity, into the full prominence it deserves. Systematicians cannot even settle for the explanation, “Why, because Scripture says so.” They persist and ask, “And, why, in turn, does Scripture say so?” The job of systematics is done only when the reason has been traced back to The Source: namely, God’s reconciling the world unto himself in Christ Jesus—in other words, the Gospel. The systematician’s task is to “necessitate” Christ. (R.W. Bertram)

In this essay we propose to practice this paragraph as we read Luke’s Gospel.

The Question of Christ’s Necessity

At first the question of Christ's necessity sounds impious. "Of course,



Christ is necessary," is our automatic response. "Without him there would be no Christian faith, no Christian gospel at all. No thoughtful Christian disputes that." But why is Christ necessary? Put crassly from the other end: How much salvation is there to proclaim *apart from* any connection with Jesus of Nazareth? For example, is God merciful to sinners even apart from Jesus Christ? Luke's parable of the Prodigal Son on first reading could sound like that. And yet Luke himself makes clear throughout his Gospel that the "repentance and forgiveness of sins" which he is proclaiming is necessarily linked to the "name" of Jesus (24:27). The canticles recorded by Luke in the infancy narratives, with which he starts his "orderly account" (chapter 1 and 2), leave no doubt that God's "remembering his mercy which he promised to our fathers, to Abraham, and to his posterity forever" (1:54, 72-73), is to be found in the son born

of Mary, named Jesus. Simeon punctuates this Lukan overture about the linkage between Jesus and salvation with his own song after he had seen the Lord's Christ: "Now...mine eyes have seen thy salvation" (2:26, 29- 30).

But *why* is Christ necessary for salvation according to Luke? What does Jesus Christ do to rescue people "from darkness and the shadow of death," as Zechariah describes un-salvation, and bring them into "salvation in the forgiveness of their sins through the tender mercy of our God" (1:77-79)? Does Jesus' mere presence down here on the ground with people effect salvation? No, Luke's Jesus encounters many folks without moving them to salvation. The fact is, Luke records that at Jesus' preaching debut in Nazareth "when they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with wrath" and tried to lynch him (4:28-29). Jesus' mere presence doesn't do it, nor does mere proclamation.

Luke, like all the evangelists, proclaims Christ's *death* as necessary for salvation. But here again, as the opening paragraph above indicates, we must persist in asking the why question. Why in Luke's gospel is the *death* of Jesus necessary for his good news to be true? The necessity of a crucified Messiah is a tender question in Luke. On the one hand, he makes no clear statement, as do the other evangelist, that Jesus' *death* is a ransom for the redemption of sinners (Mark 10:45), or that he is the Good Shepherd laying down his life for the sheep (John 10), or that his is "the blood of the covenant which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins" (Matthew 26:28). Yet, on the other hand, Luke has almost double the number of "Passion predictions" when compared with Matthew and Mark. All but one of these are stylized into his formula, "It is necessary (one Greek word *dei*) for the Son of man to suffer many things, and be rejected by the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised" (9:22). And in his final chapter, his Easter chapter, the disciples are

told three times “It was necessary that the Christ should suffer these things.”

Why *must* the Messiah’s be a suffering and crucified Messiah? Though the “must” is emphasized in Luke (9:22; 13:33; 17:25; 22:37; 24:7; 26:44), Luke never gives us an easy answer to the *why*. What is most vexing, he never necessarily links the suffering to the redemptive work. The last three of the “must” references above give the reader the impression that God’s own plan for getting his Messiah through to glory was to put him through the wringer of suffering. For those with eyes to see it, this plan can be culled from the OT. And even though forgiveness of sins is mentioned along with the last of these three post-Easter “musts,” there is no “must” connection made between the two.

Luke is not as explicit as John when the latter says that the “seed must fall into the ground and die” or else it will not bear fruit (12:24). As my colleague Robert Smith reminds me, “forgiveness of sins” is listed in Luke 24:46-47 after the “must” of Jesus’ death. But it is listed as one of a series of musts: Everything about the Messiah written in the scriptures must be fulfilled: he must suffer, he must be raised, repentance and forgiveness of sins must be preached in his name to all nations. But no causal connection is apparent between them.

Why then did Jesus have to die? Luke’s best initial answer seems to be that human sinners are just so hostile to God’s mercy mission that even God’s chosen people are dead set against it. And that’s why Jesus must die. Stephen’s long sermon presented by Luke in Acts 7 appears to be the prosecuting attorney’s summary speech to support this: “You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you always resist the Holy Spirit. As your fathers did, so do you... They killed those who announced beforehand the coming of the Righteous One, whom you

have now betrayed and murdered" (Acts 7:51f).

If we stop for a moment to summarize, our first sortie to get an answer to the necessity question for Christ's death results in an answer of historical necessity. He had to die because the people to whom he came at that time in history were the sort that killed mercy messiahs. If they had not been that sort of people, Jesus would not have been crucified by them. But is that "reason enough"?

From our own Christian intuition and from other N.T. writings we sense that historical necessity is *not* sufficient reason for the death of Christ. Is there not also a *theological* necessity for a crucified Messiah? Even if the Establishment of his day had been friendly toward him, don't we need one who will die for us? Given the sort of un-salvation in which we are all stuck, unless a suffering and dying Messiah enters our scene, there is no salvation for us, no matter what. Thus, John's gospel makes it plain that unless this Lamb of God takes away the sins of the world (as victim), we will all die in our own sins; and even worse still, if after he has done it, we then snub his efforts, not only won't we "see life, but the wrath of God rests upon us" (3:36).

Even though we drew a blank by asking Luke to draw connections as the other evangelists do, there are other avenues for asking Luke about the necessity of a crucified Messiah. One is the item of human need mentioned in the previous paragraph. From the data of human need, as Luke chronicles it, the necessity of a crucified Messiah resurfaces. Luke's material on human need can be grouped under two headings: the specter of the sinner's death and the deadly misuse of legal righteousness.



The Specter of the Sinner's Death

Luke has two death episodes not recorded in the other gospels, the young man at Nain and the conversation with the thief on the cross.

1. The episode at Nain (*Gospel for 3 Pentecost, Luke 7:11-17*) is the death of an “innocent,” a widowed mother’s young boy. Tragedy, helpless, too young to die, senseless death—these are the responses the text elicits. The real victim is the mother. She is the object of Jesus’ compassion. As a widow now bereft of her only son, she is left without any life-support system in her “men-only” society. Next week or next month, they will be carrying her out to the cemetery, too. The phenomenon of death is bigger than she is. To be rescued from her own imminent death, she needs her son’s death reversed. And that is what Jesus does. He touches the casket, technically “defiling” himself with death, stops the funeral and finally reverses it. “He gave him (back) to his mother” (7:11-17).

What about necessity here? The victims involved surely need a Messiah bigger than death. Is Jesus bigger than death just because he is the only son of God, and of course God is bigger than death? From this text and the one preceding it, (Jesus healing the centurion's slave), we see the necessity of a powerful Messiah with "authority" over death. How does Jesus acquire such authority? Is it necessary for him to engage death itself and save the hapless human victims presented in Luke 7 by letting death kill him and in the process destroying death itself? Luke doesn't say it that way. But neither does he say, nor does any other N.T. writer, that Jesus has authority over death merely because he is the Son of You Know Who. Jesus' authority over death shows us where to probe further.

2. The episodes on the cross between Jesus and the repentant thief (*Gospel for Last Sunday of Pentecost, Luke 23:33-43*) gets considerably closer to our question, for it joins the death of a sinner with the death of Jesus, and the outcome is the salvation of that sinner.

In contrast to the Nain episode, the victim here makes a theological interpretation of his own death. He designates it a "sentence of condemnation" from God "justly" imposed. He refutes his fellow thief's demands by saying, "we are receiving the due reward of our deeds" (23:40f). What does it take to save this guilty mortal (in contrast to the innocent victim of Nain)? What kind of Messiah is necessary for his salvation?

His fellow thief plainly thinks he needs a cross-less Messiah: "Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us." The repentant thief, however, rebukes his colleague and recognizes Jesus as the Christ who is coming into his kingdom in, with, and under this very cross. Like the Roman soldier below, he attests Jesus' innocence. But he at least says more, although Luke does not quote him saying as much as we would like to hear. He perceives

crucifixion of this particular innocent not as contrary to kingship, but – dare we say it? – necessary. Does the thief already see what finally dawns on the disciples three days later where Jesus opens their eyes to the necessity of a crucified Messiah?

Here we have the death of an innocent Jesus alongside the death of a guilty thief, with the guilty one admitting his guilt (= repentance) and trusting that the death of the innocent one is not the tragic end of his kingdom, but its real beginning for the thief (= faith). It is no surprise to hear Luke's Gospel say again that repentant guilty sinners, who are also believing sinners, are the intended beneficiaries of Christ's kingdom. Throughout the gospel Jesus has associated with sinners. Here he fellowships with a sinner at the very end of his receiving God's "due rewards" for his deeds.

When Jesus responds, "Today you will be with me in Paradise," the "today" focuses not only on what awaits the repentant criminal, but equally on what Jesus is accomplishing, namely, coming into his kingdom. "Today" Jesus is dying *with* sinners. Is he also dying *for* sinners? The thief never expresses his faith in those terms. But how far from that is he when he asks: "Jesus, remember me"? Luke does not make it crystal clear. But he does not disallow that the thief's repentance-plus-faith linkage with Jesus the crucified is his transfer from God's just condemnation to God's mercy-kingdom, from inescapable and justly deserved death to Paradise – and all of that "today".

The Deadly Misuse of Legal Righteousness

Luke's theme of repentance moves us right into his extensive materials on the need of the righteous for that same repentance. The key texts are all parables: the prodigal son, the Pharisee and the tax collector, and the Good Samaritan. The classic is

the prodigal son; in Luke's introduction he signals Jesus' disdain (or is it dismay?) about "righteous persons who need no repentance" (15:7).

The Parable of the Prodigal (*Gospel for 4 Lent, Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32*) would be more accurately captioned if it were called the Parable of the Lost Son. It is the third in a sequence of parables: the other two are about a lost sheep and a lost coin. Better still would be to call it the parable of the lost *sons*, for when the parable ends, we see that the older son is more lost than his prodigal brother ever was. Just how bad is the bad news here?

That the younger brother needs mercy is clear. And that he receives it gratis from his father is equally clear. What's the human need of the older son? Initially we can appreciate his dismay at all the fuss the father is making for the returned renegade. Fact is, he's got a point. We can all empathize with the "good guy" who plays it straight. Who wouldn't think twice about joining the party to celebrate such a rascal's return?

But this is the opening diagnosis for the deadly disease that stalks the righteous brother. By objecting to the father's extending mercy to sinners, the older brother starts to expose how lost he really is. His own need for mercy is so bad that it is hidden from his eyes. Not only is he opposed to mercy for renegade brothers, but he rejects it for himself. He has never lived with his father on the basis of mercy, nor does he desire to. "These many years I have served you, and I never disobeyed your command." "Just deserts" is his commitment and he intends to stick to it. It has such a deadly grip on him that it might just keep him away from the kingdom banquet by his own choice.

But just suppose the older brother got his just deserts. What would they be? What does he have rightly coming from the

(heavenly) father for his years of obedient service, when that service generates his anger at the father's mercy? According to the commandments which he claims as his criterion, he has death coming. How so?

The older brother is clearly breaking the two fundamental commandments: he is not loving the (heavenly) father, nor is he loving his brother. He has moral grounds for saying "not fair," but he uses this moral capital to be angry with the father and to refuse to go in. The "man under the law" uses the law's help to break the law. Since the only biblical alternative to love is hatred, the righteous older son hates the father's mercy management of sinners and hates the brother who gets such undeserved mercy.

Yet this parable says there is good news even for big losers, really lost big brothers. After the older brother registers his "righteous" god-hatred and brother-hatred, his father comes out and "entreats" him. The good news in Jesus is God's offer to those clinging to their own righteousness: Let go and come join the festivities for forgiven sinners.

Luke makes this parable a cartoon for the central issue at stake in Jesus' encounter with Judaism. In this parable, Jesus' mercy call is: Turn around from where you are going, both you obvious sinners and you folks who have real righteousness. Jesus offers mercy to those who are sinners contrary to the law as well as to those who use righteousness to do their sinning. The path of repentance for the *obvious sinner* coming from the far country was shorter than the path for the *righteous sinner* in the fields in sight of the farmhouse. Kid brother had to forsake his unrighteousness. Big brother had to forsake his righteousness. Did he do it? Typically, the parable stops short at this point, for the story line jumps from the page over to the life of the reader. But if the older brother did (if we do), then the

father's final sentence is true about him as well: "It is fitting to make merry and be glad, for this brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found." Note the mention of death. Both righteous sinners and unrighteous sinners are in death. Whatever God's mercy mission in Jesus entails, it has to cope with their deaths in the process of saving them.

Renouncing righteousness in order to be justified sounds like a strange formula. Yet that is the either-or throughout the gospels, and it is nowhere more vividly drawn than in another one of the Luke-only parables, the Pharisee and the tax collector (*Gospel for 20 Pentecost, Luke 18:9-14*).

Luke opens with these words: "He told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and despised others." As the parable opens, there is no question that the Pharisee does have Torah righteousness. The eventual verdict on him, "not justified," arises from his trusting in his own righteousness. Just what is wrong with that? How necessary for him is a mercy Messiah?

Should not tax collectors – public traitors to the Jewish theocracy and sell-outs to pagan enemies of God – be despised? Well, yes and no. They are despicable, but...if Jesus is calling them his friends, as he does so vividly in the Zacchaeus story (another Luke-only episode), then maybe.... In language common to Lutherans, we can say that the Pharisee is using his unquestioned moral righteousness for his own salvation, rather than putting it to use for the welfare of those who don't have it, say, tax collectors. By using his own righteousness for himself, he is cheating the neighbor out of what God wants that neighbor to have. Remember what Jesus did with his personal righteousness. He did not cling to it as something to be hoarded, but emptied himself of it by bestowing it on those who were very short on righteousness– tax collectors and sinners.

Worse than that, even, the Pharisee is cheating God out of what God has claimed for himself, for instance, in the directly preceding text (18:7f): "Will not God vindicate (make righteous, justify) his elect who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long over them? I tell you he will vindicate them speedily."

In making his plea for mercy the tax collector opts for precisely this route in order to "go down to his house justified." It is the only way. The other pray-er at the temple – the Pharisee – does not make it. He loses out on both counts, at the front of the temple where he cheats God, and at the back of the temple (and down at his house) where he cheats his neighbor. Faith's righteousness trusts mercy and is free for works that benefit the neighbor "down at the house." Work's righteousness trusts the righteous works, despises both mercy and the neighbor, and loses out both at the temple and at home.

What kind of Messiah do mis-users of righteousness need? A crucified one? It would be easy to have Luke come out and simply say so, but he does not. One spot where he gets close is his presentation of the parable of the good Samaritan (10:26-37; *Gospel for 8 Pentecost -- CHECK*). Jesus is discussing with a Torah expert what it takes according to God's law to "inherit eternal life." After agreeing on the two love commandments, ("Do this, and you will live"), the Torah expert, "desiring to justify himself, said to Jesus, 'And who is my neighbor?'"

Here again we have a candidate presenting the classical righteous sinner symptoms. What Jesus' interrogator needs is not instruction on who his neighbor is, whom he then ought to love. Rather, he needs rather to expose the killer he carries within himself, his desire to justify himself. The one to whom Jesus tells the parable is indeed the victim. He's half dead already, stripped of real resources for eternal life, and ironically thinks that knowing the law he has "eternal life" cinched.

What all sinners need—righteous and unrighteous ones—is a Good Samaritan to show mercy upon them. When Jesus calls righteous sinners to go and do likewise, the “likewise” is that of the prodigals and prostitutes. “Go and get yourself some mercy, if there is any to be had. And it just so happens for your benefit that I am here as your Good Samaritan for precisely that purpose.”

Any explicit need for a crucified Messiah here? Not directly, but we see the signals in the transfer of biographies between victim and Samaritan (one’s negatives for the other’s positives). Just how much the Samaritan would have to repay on the return visit to make the rescue complete is not specified. But in any case, the mercy is not cheap. It costs him considerably.

Perhaps the upsetting question we have been sparring with all along is, Is God’s mercy in Luke’s gospel “cheap? What does it necessarily cost him? Elsewhere the N.T. is clear that it costs the very life of God to get the eternal life of God into sinners. How costly is mercy for God in Luke? Given the diagnosis of the sinner’s need as we have traced it above (needs real righteousness, caught in the death of mis-used righteousness, or the death of just deserts), getting such folks saved is a costly job. What signals are there that Jesus’ own messianic sonship bears this necessary cost?

He Must Die. Why?



Whatever help Luke does give us for the problematic necessity of a crucified Messiah is concentrated in the last Easter chapter of his gospel.

The Easter angels give the message about the “must” of suffering to the women (*Gospel for Easter Sunday, Luke 24:1-12*). These women relay it to the apostles, but they remain uncomprehending. Then Luke tucks in his own Emmaus episode (*Gospel for Easter Eve or Monday, Luke 24:13-49*) with Cleophas’ self-pitying moan: “We had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel,” but instead he was crucified. The dramatic punchline at Emmaus is supplied by the Risen Lord himself. “Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things in order to enter into his glory”—his position as Israel’s mercy Messiah? Jesus’ educational vehicle for moving his disciples to this perception is to open their

minds to understand the Old Testament after the fact of Good Friday and Easter Sunday.

Luke reports Jesus doing the same with the Jerusalem disciples later that same first Easter evening (*Gospel for Ascension, Luke 24:44-53*). At Emmaus, Jesus linked suffering and Messiahship to help the two disciples understand *his death*. In Jerusalem he goes one step farther and links suffering Messiahship with repentance and forgiveness of sins to help them understand *their need*. Even with no direct statement (without a crucified Messiah there would be no forgiveness of sins), we do see that God faithfully meets the need of all for repentance and forgiveness of sins by remembering God's promises of mercy to Abraham and the fathers as he leads his Son through Good Friday to Easter Sunday evening.

For those who have eyes to see and ears to hear, Luke's one recorded dialogue on the cross between Jesus and the criminal may say it all. That sinner is the first to perceive what the disciples still have not. Repentance is saying in truth the thief's speech: "we have the same sentence of condemnation from God; we are justly receiving the due rewards for our deeds." Unless a disciple, especially a righteous one, acknowledges himself in solidarity with that law-breaker, he will never comprehend a Messiah who is willingly in solidarity with criminals, receiving in his own body criminal justice. Only after that does the door open a crack for us to see that such messiahship is "necessary" for him to get us into his kingdom, for us to be with him in paradise.

Conclusion

On the issue of "necessitating Christ" Luke is most clear on his diagnosing human bad news. He exposes the depth of sinners' problems as their being under God's judgment justly. They are

thus unprotected from unrighteousness' companion: death. Luke is less explicit—to put it mildly—on how the full history of Jesus works to de-fuse death's dominion and to make justified disciples out of sinners. The episode of the thief on the cross and the post- Easter incidents come close to making the bridge between malady and the full Christology of Good Friday and Easter. Consequently, the preacher or Bible student working through Luke in the coming church year may have to do what Melanchthon proposes for evangelical hermeneutics: where a fuller gospel is needed to meet the fuller bad news “it is also necessary to add the Gospel, namely that sins are freely remitted on account of Christ and that we receive the forgiveness of sins by faith.” (Apology of the Augsburg Confession, Article 4, Kolb-Wengert, page 160, 185-186).

Edward H Schroeder

Thursday Theology: that the benefits of Christ be put to use
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