

Octoberish Orts. 1) Richard Dawkins, Fundamentalist? 2) Romans 3 in English 3) The Intriguing “God’s Word” Translation

Colleagues,

Instead of bread this week we feed you crumbs, i.e. another batch of quick thoughts arising from items that caught the attention of the undersigned as recent days flew by. Links embedded here and there will lead you to chewier substance. Thank God for the Internet. Seriously.

Peace and Joy,

Jerry Burce, for the editorial team

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1. There’s a little dustup going on this week among members of the atheistic tribe. Do you all know Richard Dawkins? He’s an English biologist who burst into view eight years ago as the best-selling author of [The God Delusion](#), a manifesto of sorts for right-minded folks who are sick to death of religion and can’t fathom why anybody would continue in this day and age to entertain absurd theistic fantasies, and thus to underwrite the horrors that such fantasies are bound to spawn—and so on. The usual drill. Dawkins’s latest effort is *An Appetite for Wonder: The Makings of a Scientist*, the first half of a proposed two-volume memoir. John Gray, for one, was not impressed,

and said so via a book review in the latest print issue of [The New Republic](#). Gray is a superb writer and thinker who closed out a teaching career as emeritus professor of European thought at the London School of Economics. I know him strictly through his *TNR* reviews, which are almost always rewarding. An atheist himself, Gray finds Dawkins to be narrow and shallow, and, where Christian thought is concerned, either unwilling or unable to understand what he rushes to critique. Thus the title that either Gray or a *TNR* editor affixed to the piece, "The Closed Mind of Richard Dawkins." Better still is the subtitle, "His atheism is its own kind of religion," an assertion that was proved this morning when a [furious rejoinder to Gray](#) appeared on the *TNR* website. I coin a term: atheology. Its practitioners appear as quick as their theological counterparts to jump all over each other at the first whiff of error, where "error" is often little more than a synonym for "deviation from the party line." That's pretty much what thoughtful Gray is being hammered for right now, or so it seems to me. I note all this with a certain degree of unholy Schadenfreude. Christ loves his enemies. His lesser disciples choke down their chortles at seeing a fellow like Dawkins dosed with a hefty spoonful of his own medicine. Yes, shame on me. By contrast, kudos to John Gray for pushing us all, through his spanking of Dawkins, in the direction of greater charity in our estimation of the Gentile other. The risen Christ whose existence Gray doesn't credit had a remarkable thing for Gentiles, a point that Matthew keeps making in the texts we're listening to this fall. I can't help but think that he's pleased indeed with his unwitting servant, and wishes that members of his own baptized tribe would perk their ears up and pay attention. Hence this present note. What is fundamentalism if not the smug certainty that I'm

righteous in my right-thinking, whereas the other is a wicked, dangerous fool. Fundamentalism so defined afflicts us all in one way or another, and makes us blind and dangerous. Listen to Lutherans, for example, as they natter among themselves about the folks on the opposite sides of their intra-tribal divides. "Good Lord, deliver your world."

2. Righteousness came up at my pericope study this past week as we looked at texts for the next few Sundays. Well, of course it did. One of those Sundays, at least for Lutherans, entails a celebration of the Reformation, at the heart of which is a reading of St. Paul's astonishing reflection in Romans 3 on the import of Christ's crucifixion for God's response to sinners. Far be it from me to dig into that right now, lest I get buried, and leave you devoid of a Thursday Theology post this week. So instead, let me merely draw your attention—again?—to the misery of English translation as funneled through the King James tradition and settling in the ears of many in our pews via the prose of either the New Revised or the English Standard versions that we listen to these days. The problem has to do with the different streams that modern English draws its vocabulary from, modern English being dated from the decades prior to Shakespeare and King James's scholars. Already by then half our words were taken from ancient Anglo-Saxon, and the other half from the Latin and French of England's medieval overlords. So we wind up with "right" and "righteous" on the one hand, and with "just" and "justice" on the other, both being dragged in to deal with Greek words that share a common root, "*dik-*". Paul's initial listeners heard a word beginning with "*dik-*" driving into a noun that also began with "*dik-*" Our listeners on Reformation Sunday will hear a verb, "justify," and a noun, "righteousness," and they

won't make the same automatic connection between those words that their Greek counterparts once did. To compound the mess, they'll hear "justify" being used in a transitive sense that hardly ever appears in spoken English these days. I wrote about this some years ago in a piece that's unavailable online. Otherwise I'd link to it and be done. Suffice it for now to underscore the imperative, for this year's Reformation Sunday preachers, of repairing the translation; of ensuring, that is, that the people they're talking to will grasp that "justify" in Romans 3 is about *making* something right that initially was not right—this as opposed as to making a case that the thing was right in the first place. That latter is what goes on when "I justify my actions." The former is what God does when God "justifies the ungodly." We were *in truth* all wrong. In steps God to make us all right. The breathtaking marvels here are, first, that God chooses to do it in the first place, and, second, that he settles on so apparently simple a mechanism for getting the job done. He sees us trusting Christ, and claps his hands, and says "Voilà!" "All right!" Go figure. Comes the persistent challenge for us of spotting other Christ-trusters and saying "All right!" about them, and doing that even when we notice how grievously wrong they are, and in so many ways.

3. I should mention that not all English translations follow the King James path. Of those that don't, none is more intriguing than *God's Word to the Nations*, more briefly known as the God's Word translation, GW for short. Check out what it does with [Romans 3:19-31](#). "Righteousness," "justify," "justification"—these go out the window in favor of "God's approval" as something to have or to get. It's an intriguing approach. I think it works. GW is not well known, I suspect, and I can't imagine it's being used

in the churches that most of you attend. It deserves attention, though, and especially from Lutherans, the Christian tribe that produced it. Decades ago, amid the noxious contentions of the Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod, a fellow named William Beck produced his own, idiosyncratic [“American Translation”](#) of the Bible. Beck was full of fulmination about the “modernistic” errors that had crept into the RSV, the preferred version of the day in most mainline churches. A prime example of such error was changing “virgin” (KJV) to “young woman” (RSV) in the rendering of Isaiah 7:14. What could that be, except some arrogant modern scholars with unbelief in their hearts taking a whack at the doctrine of the Virgin Birth, a point that Beck’s publisher and chief promoter, Herman Otten, made over and over, ad nauseam, in the noxious pages of his weekly *Christian News*. Beck’s stated aim was to produce a translation free of doctrinal error. His high hope, urged by Otten, was to see his work adopted as the LCMS’s official translation. It didn’t happen, and Beck died; and at some point a group of Otten fans in my neck of the woods, Cleveland, Ohio, decided to take Beck’s work and update it. They formed a private Bible society. They hired scholars. They set up shop for a time in a building barely a mile from the church I serve. And out of that emerged something fascinating, the GW, a piece of work that more than deserves our attention. Almost twenty years ago, while the work was still in progress, I had a chance to talk with the scholars involved. One of their lay associates is a member of my congregation today. As I recall, their chief aim was to produce an accurate rendering of the Scriptural text in English that a seventh-grader would find accessible. Hence the disappearance, say, of a multisyllabic, mouth-filling word like ‘justification’. But what do you replace it with?

That's where the fascination enters in, and I often catch myself being pleased and instructed by the choices these scholars made. My friend and colleague, Dick Gahl—we've passed along some work of his in Thursday Theology—uses GW as a matter of course, and for good reason. One of my own tests of a translation's accuracy, theological as well as linguistic, is to see what it does with the "*skandalizein*" of Mark 9:42ff. Why I've seized on that test in particular is for some other time, perhaps. Here I simply note that KJV, followed by NRSV, gets a passing grade with "cause to stumble." RSV, followed by ESV, flunks the test with "cause to sin." GW, by contrast, gets a flying-colors A+ pass with "cause to lose faith in [Jesus]." The minds and hearts that settled on that rendering knew what they were doing. So yes, check GW out, add it your arsenal. For what it's worth, the original society went out of business shortly after the translation was done—the challenge of marketing it was more than they could handle, or so I understand—and they sold the rights to Baker Publishing, which has kept it in print. You can find it online too. I get it at biblegateway.com, my favorite source for a wide range of translations, including Latin and German.

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