

Two Questions for the Baptized Person (Part Three of a Keynote Address)

Colleagues,

My younger daughter gets married this Saturday and expects her dad to come through with a sermon. So with that overwhelmingly in mind, I send along today's installment without prefatory ado. What you're getting is the third and final installment of my keynote address at the Crossings conference last January. You'll need to have scanned the first two parts ([ThTheol 887](#) & [888](#)) to follow the argument.

May the Holy Spirit woo us all this weekend with God's incomparable love in Christ.

Peace and Joy,
Jerry Burce

The Spirit-given Challenge of the Double-Life (*continued*)

VIII. Every Person's Essential First Question

The power of God, Type E, the kind that people hanker for, is deadly. It stings, as Paul will say, 1st Corinthians 15. Even so it's familiar; and until we're stung, we tend to like it. We like it so well that we'll even prefer it to the new kind, Type X. Jesus points this out himself in Luke's version of the wineskin parable. "No one after drinking old wine desires new wine, but says, 'The old is good.'" That's in Luke 5, and only Luke 5. The Pharisees Luke talks about were deeply hooked on the

taste of old wine. So are lots of Lutherans.

Quickly, let's recall. God's power Type E works *on* us, as *objects*. God gives. We get. God gives not. We get not. Were this the only thing to talk about this evening, we'd observe how this Power Type E is the engine that drives the world as we know it.

Thinking on, we might explore the oddity of people's expectations of Type E power: how they imagine, for example, that God being good is bound to give us stuff that we call good, forgetting that what's good for God is often really, really bad for the sinners that God in his goodness is trying to control.

Or we might talk at greater length about the way God's exercise of Type E power leads always, and without fail, to a great, irreparable dispute between God and every sinner, sinners concluding that God has done them dirty, God for God's part refusing to put up with that nonsense. Some of you spent much of today exploring the Crossings method of unpacking a Biblical text. The one side, the diagnostic—that's where God's Type E power is at issue and in play, top to bottom.

Enter Christ Jesus, the Son of God, born of Mary, and now let's see how Type E power comes crashing down on him. For our sake, for our salvation, "God made him to be sin who knew no sin"—yet again St. Paul, still trying, trying, trying in chapter 5 of the Second Letter to wean the Corinthians off their fundamental folly, their absurd, insane addiction to a core precept of Type E power-in-operation: to get you've got to earn. To be right you've got to do right. And if something looks shabby, an apostle, for example—one Paul in particular, in case anyone is wondering—it probably is shabby, not blessed by God, as some at Corinth seem to be suggesting.

But isn't that how the world still works, the world we see that is? In this world I'm under the gun to be as righteous as can

be, as good as I can manage; and this, that's true of me, is true of you as well, and of every other human being, be they baptized or not. It's true of the communities we form and the institutions we organize and run, including ones with labels like ELCA or NALC or Wartburg Seminary or Messiah Lutheran Church. I can't recall a day going by when I haven't had to ask the question: what must I/we do today. Those better organized than me, my wife, for example, make little lists that they carefully work through. What must we do to finish our work, to care for our families, to serve our customers, to keep sticky fingers out of the till, or, in my daily digs, bad guys from hurting little children at our school? What must we do to be better, more deserving, a tad more righteous? What must I do to keep, God forbid, from wasting this day—which, if I do, I'll hear about, God channeling his opinion, for sure, through someone else. The frowning boss. The weary spouse. That teacher, appointed by God, to mark my test with a C-. Or an A+, in which case I beam, don't I. Look, I say, the mark of a righteous student—and isn't that the aim, to come out righteous? Not, of course, that I'm altogether there yet, or anywhere close, for that matter.

But so long as I'm not there yet, the question persists. I cannot *stop* asking it. "What must I do?"

IX. The Baptized Person's Second Question—Greater, Unsettling

Comes the dilemma, and with it a challenge.

Even as I live this life, the one my mother pushed me into, I live another life, the one that God the Holy Spirit either pushed or drowned me into, depending on which baptismal metaphor you want to play with.

This other life is Christ-life—or to stick more closely to Paul,

life *in* Christ.

In this other life “What must I do” is a stupid question. It doesn’t belong. It makes no sense. Remember, in Christ-life “all things are yours.” A parenthetical question to talk about later: why wasn’t this drummed into us when we were little baptized children? Why in my own case did it startle me so when I stumbled across it at age 28? Yet here it was, and is, and always will be, God’s Gospel—nothing less, that is, than the Holy Spirit’s declaration of present reality, anchored in Christ: *all things are yours*.

This being so, what *must* you do? The only sensible answer: “Nothing at all.” Think about it. You wake up one morning with a billion dollars in your bank account, dropped there, no strings attached, by a mad and wondrous donor. What *must* you do? Answer: “Nothing at all.” Addendum to that answer: “Stop babbling. Start exulting instead in the only questions that your new and sudden circumstance begs you to ask: “How *might* I spend this day?’ ‘How *might* I use the treasure I get to wallow in the whole day through?’”

It occurs me to that most of us—working stiffs that we are, obsessed day in and day out with all those things we don’t have yet and have got somehow to obtain—would have a tough and terrible time adjusting to this new circumstance. Suddenly gone are all those spiky, pressing obligations that shape and order our schedules. It’s one thing to take a week’s vacation, though even then there are things I’ve got to do. It’s quite another to be on permanent vacation for the rest of my life, with not a care in the world, at least where I’m concerned. Would I not go crazy?

Welcome, then, to Type X-powered reality. In my seminary days a professor made some of us bog our way through a poor translation

of Werner Elert's *The Christian Ethos*. It was thick and dense and magisterial—and ever so marvelous. With all my heart I recommend it to seminarians here if you're lucky enough to find a copy.

There were in that book a few lines that burned tracks in my brain. Here's one of them: "The person who has experienced liberation from nomological existence floats in empty space where he feels giddy." I kid you not, that's what it said—again, "The person who has experienced liberation from nomological existence floats in empty space where he feels giddy." Yes, that's bad translation from tough theological German, but still, the point comes through. Life in the Spirit, Type X powered life, is weird. The rules are gone. At first it's dim; it's murky; I'm not sure what to do. No doing is required, and I seriously dislike the feeling this creates. It's like stumbling through a haze.

And I dislike it all the more when I find myself stuck simultaneously in the old life, Type E powered, where the rules abound and I'm forced to earn my keep.

It's precisely here that the two-ness we've been speaking of gets unpleasant, and living with it becomes like walking through that Beijing smog. And I'm not at all surprised that Paul, the apostle of two-ness, continues in churches today to get much the same rough treatment he got in those churches he founded way back when.

How does a person or, even harder, a church of persons carry on in two God-given systems that ask us to operate on contrary assumptions? In the one, righteousness of a sort is the goal you're aiming at. In the other, righteousness of another astonishing sort is your jumping off point. In the one, rules are of the essence. In the other, rules are absurd. In the one

you're a work in progress with heaps of work that has got to be done. In the other you're a finished product who is free to play the whole day long, and, in the joy of that play, to spread the riches around.

Paul's point to his churches, especially at Corinth and Philippi, is that the second system takes precedence. It's the one that baptized people are called to pay attention to first and foremost, and to trust, and to practice, above all in their dealings with each other. To read his letters is to see how hard he has to work to make the point.

The challenge at this conference is to listen to Paul, or rather, to the Holy Spirit speaking through Paul, and to practice what the Spirit preaches.

I, for one, don't see the churches I know doing that very much at all. That too is something we can talk about later, if you'd like.

X. Two Lives to Lead, Two Questions to Ask. Simultaneously.

As for now, I wind things up by tossing out my own chief contribution to the conversation we're going to have.

Baptized people, at once saddled and blessed with two lives overlapping, two forms of God's power working either on them or through them, have two questions to ask. Not one, but two.

Question 1. "What must I do/you do/we do? What must they do?" Can we dodge this question? No. Does baptism relieve us of the imperative to ask it? Again, no. It's of the essence in the life we were *born* to live, and sooner or later to lose. It drags in its wake a couple of other questions: a) How do I get what I need/want, assuming I don't have it yet, and, once I think I have it, then b) how do I *keep* it?

Question 2 is a different creature altogether. It starts with an altogether different assumption, intrinsic to this second life-in-Christ that we were *baptized* to live. So it doesn't ask, "How do I get, how do I keep," but, to the contrary, "How can I spend?" How can I spend what I have already in such absurd, profuse abundance? How can we spend it together with joy and abandon? What holy prodigality shall we indulge in today to our Lord's beaming delight?

Or to clean that up and sharpen it some more, let me draw on our tradition, specifically Lutheran. Let this second question be, "How might we use Christ and his benefits—so great they are, so abounding, so utterly inexhaustible? How shall we use them in each and every circumstance we find ourselves in, whether as fellow saints living and working and trusting together, or as the secret agents of new creation we become when God, exercising Type E power, wakes us up in the morning and shoves us out the door and into our daily routines?"

Christ and his benefits: how might we use them, how shall we spend them? (Not "must," but "shall.") We ask this question as an essential way of confessing that Jesus is our Lord. That's why it's also the focus of the second, prognostic leg of that Crossings method that some of you dug into today.

Of these two questions, 1) what must we do to get and keep, 2) how might we use Christ and spend his benefits, the second is by far the greater and more pressing. So says the Holy Spirit. How is it, then, that I've never heard it come up explicitly on the floor of a synod assembly, or be raised as a topic for a congregational Bible study? It's the first, the what-to-do question, that gets all the attention. But that too is something to chew on later if anyone is so inclined.

XI. Spending Tips

For now I draw to things to a close with a few semi-random thoughts about using Christ and his benefits. Each of them is cursory in the extreme, nothing more than the précis of an essay that hasn't been written yet and couldn't be delivered here in any case. I pass them along even so to incite your own better and deeper thinking:

1. On using Christ: again, it's murky, a dim seeing in the poor mirror. So it calls for imagination and a dollop of nerve, of the kind the Holy Spirit gives. Hardly ever, if at all, is there only one, correct way to go about it. Remember that when the Master buzzes off and doles out the talents to the slaves, he doesn't tell them how to use them, only *that* they use them; and the only thing that can land you in hot water with the Master is not using them at all, because you were afraid, or too damn lazy with a laziness that does damn because it blows Christ off and leaves us on our own to deal with God in Type E mode. This Sunday Paul will equate "using the Master's talents" with the word "love." That word doesn't come with an instruction manual.
2. We use Christ and his benefits when, like the Bethlehem shepherds, we return to the stink of our daily routines without fretting that the stink will stick to our clothes and hair and whatever, causing God to wrinkle God's nose at us all over again. The first and greatest gift of Christ is the promise that God is past wrinkling God's nose where you and I are concerned. Still less will God do this when we sit with sinners as Christ keeps sitting with us.
3. Back to the "it's murky" department. People using Christ will sometimes make choices and adopt procedures that leave other Christ-users appalled. For example, this from an article that appeared in Valparaiso University's *The*

Cresset in 1957, entitled "Legal Morality and the Two Kingdoms": "There is the case of the Nebraska judge who in the morning granted a divorce to a husband and wife and in the evening, at a congregational meeting, had to condemn their divorce and, exercising the office of the keys, had to vote to bar them from the Lord's Supper." Notice, *had to bar them*. The Christ-user who wrote this, by the way, was one Robert W. Bertram in his late 50's version, which I suspect was somewhat different from the Bertram of the late '90s.

4. Christ-users will not blanch at rejoicing when people who don't know Christ behave better than they do. Nor will they flinch from admitting that this can and does happen. Righteousness of the kind that emerges in the old life, Type E powered, has never been an exclusively Christian property, nor is it now. Righteousness of the second kind, Type X powered, frees one to see this, and to honor it as one of God's better passing gifts for life in this world.

Finally: Christ-users will practice, practice, practice at the great art of seeing Christ and honoring Christ in people they're simultaneously critiquing. That's what the Spirit keeps urging through St. Paul as he writes his letters. "If anyone is in Christ—new creation: look! Notice! The old has passed away, the new has come!" (2 Cor. 5:17). Let's practice looking for this right here, in and with each other, as we move into the rest of our time together.