

What the Bishop Said about “Repent,” and other Post-Conference Notes.

Colleagues,

We got a note from one of you last week reminding us that this is supposed to be a weekly blog. It has not been that in 2014 so far. Whether we’ll get back to that pace remains to be seen. For your generous patience as we work in that direction, our thanks. Meanwhile, and at last—

What the bishop said, is “Give up!” And in saying that, she—the Rev. Elizabeth Eaton, as of late last August the Presiding Bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church—urged all who were being privileged to hear her preach on Tuesday evening, January 28, to do nothing less. Isn’t that, she said, what Jesus is asking of us when, according to St Matthew, he launches his ministry with the word “Repent” (Matt. 4:17)?

You can’t do it. You look downright silly pretending to do it, where “it” means churning out the top-notch righteousness God seeks in all his human creatures. So give up. Quit trying. Instead trust Christ to have done it for you as he hung there dying. And in the strength of that trust, push into the adventure of living with others in mind, no longer chained to the nonsense of puffing yourself up.

Well OK, there’s maybe more Burce than bishop in these last couple of sentences, but isn’t that what listeners do as preachers try to push their words through filters long since in place? Still, “Repent!” “Give up.” That’s for sure what the bishop said; and it’s equally as certain that there was joy in

the room as ears and hearts grabbed hold of an invitation that led them directly into the embracing arms of Christ their Lord when the Eucharist ensued. I'd be very surprised if the chatter that broke out later over end-of-the-day refreshments wasn't pulsating with thanks to God the Holy Spirit for having raised up the leader that the ELCA is blessed with these days.

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For my money, the presence and preaching of Bishop Eaton was the highlight of January's Fifth International Crossings Conference in Belleville, Illinois, fifteen minutes from downtown St. Louis, on the other side of the great river. It was, even so, but one of many reasons for rejoicing in what happened there. Herewith a few recollections, liberally mixed with some post-conference ruminations of my own.

1. You'll recall from the pre-conference build-up that the general topic was pluralism, with a focus on the challenge of confessing Christ in a world that takes the central pluralistic tenet more or less for granted. As one hears it too often said, with a blitheness that wearies: "The paths to God are many. No one path can be privileged over another. To suggest otherwise is rude and presumptuous, all the more when the person making the suggestion is somebody with Christ in mind." Etc.
2. Seven presenters tackled this chestnut from a variety of angles—systematic, to be sure (Steven Kuhl, Jukka Kaariainen), but also exegetical (Ralph Klein, S. John Roth), missiological (William Burrows), historical (Martin Lohrmann), and pastoral (Philip Kuehnert). If I tried to summarize what they treated us to I would carry on far too long, and make a hash of it anyway. Better that we make a point of directing you to the papers as they become available on the Crossings website, as I hope most of them will, and fairly soon. We'll let you know when and as they

appear, making sure to underscore what I emphasize already now, that you'll find them both meaty and of great help in responding to the pluralistic assumption, no matter where you encounter it. Encounter it you do, and will. It's everywhere, from ivy-towered academia to the neighborhood bar. It's in the pews we share or preach to every Sunday. I'll lay a hefty bet that it continues to have hooks of sorts in most of our own hearts. Old Eve and Adam are far from dead, however deeply we may dunk them in the daily contrition and repentance that Luther recommends (*Small Catechism*, Baptism, Part IV), and there's nothing those two like better than telling God how to go about God's godly business. No one said this bluntly at the conference, so I say it here: telling God how to *be* God is, at base, what the pluralistic impulse is about.

3. From the pluralist's point of view, of course, the issue is one of basic respect. That's "respect" as in "re-spect," the double-take one gets when somebody deems one worthy of a second look, and after that a third, a fourth. If there's one thing Eve and Adam (old-style) insist on, it's that God should respect them. The more thoughtful they are, the more likely they'll be to try showing God what to do through the respect they grant each other. But like most things sinners try, respecting the other is a trickier business than we imagine it to be. That's so especially when it comes to the matter of religious difference, a point that our conference presenters were manifestly clear about.
4. More than one of these presenters got me thinking about the favor pluralists do for Christians when they bridle at the wretched lack of respect that our crowd commonly shows to other religious systems and the few billion people who adhere to them. Dismissiveness is a folly that ill becomes us. We won't find warrant for it in the likes of St. Paul,

for example. Quite the contrary. Just this week I sat with a Bible class as it read through his effort to insert good news of Christ into the abundance of god-talk swirling around the Areopagus, Acts 17. I was struck all over again by the pains he takes to stake out some common ground with the folks he's addressing. How does he begin? By respecting the altar they've set up for "an unknown god" (v. 23), and after that by respecting the insight of their better thinkers into the relationship between deity and humankind (v. 28).

5. Paul's immediate aim, of course, is to elicit some respect for the singular tale he tells of God's doing in Christ. That much he gets, at least from some: "We will hear you again about this" (v. 32). Others dismiss him outright, objecting to his babble, as they perceive it, about resurrection (again, v.32). Paul can hardly be surprised by this, having just endured worse in Philippi and Thessalonica. It certainly doesn't stop him from sticking with his mission to push the promise that Jesus, and not another, is the one appointed to judge the world "in righteousness" (v. 31). Therein lies the singularity. A most promising singularity, come to think of it. Who better to judge the world than one so committed to the world that he died for it, and "while we still were sinners," no less, as Paul will point out later to the Romans (5:8, NRSV). Parenthetically, I've long thought that the Church's theology and proclamation pays too little attention to Jesus the Judge as a key feature of the Gospel, but that's a topic for another time. The point for now is to note how it sets Paul's message apart from everything else that's been said in that Areopagite plurality of religious proposals. At day's end the Final Say is Christ's, and if Christ's, then it can't be someone else's. Or to put that another way, there's no dodging

Jesus to get to God—which, Paul would add, is a gift both good and salutary. Pity the sod of a sinner who runs into God Unmitigated.

6. But enough with my meandering. Back we go to the conference, where the speakers uniformly underscored this singularity of Christian promise and the impossibility of reducing it, as the pluralist seeks to do, to one of many religious alternatives, each as efficacious as the other in solving the conundrums of alienation, death, and judgment. Came the helpful observation: the effort to engineer such a reduction is itself fundamentally disrespectful, and not only toward the Christian, but also toward the Muslim, the Buddhist, the Hindu, the animist (whether traditional or New Age), and whoever else is able to recognize that the faith he or she professes is not merely distinct, but so distinct that it can't be reconciled with other faith proposals, including Christianity. Nor can it be proffered as a mere alternative to those other proposals, each serving in its distinct way to bring its adherents to the same end in God. Indeed, a respectful treatment of the major religious proposals will notice that they don't envision the same end. It has ever been thus. As noted already, Paul ran into this in Athens when he started touting bodily resurrection (Acts 17:32), an outcome that would surely have struck some of his Greek hearers as more hellish than heavenly.
7. Jukka Kaariainen, Skyping in from his study somewhere in Taiwan, told us that [S. Mark Heim](#) of Andover Newton Theological School is the scholar who has grappled most openly and creatively with this plurality of ends that religions seek. For a quick sample of Heim's thinking, take a glance at "[The Pluralism of Religious Ends Dreams Fulfilled](#)" (*The Christian Century*, 1921). What impressed

me immediately as I read was the breadth and depth of his respect for all serious religious traditions, not least his own. You will not find him shutting Christ to the edges as an inconvenient obstacle to inter-religious amity, nor does he mute the hope that Christians find in Christ. But neither does he scoff at the hopes of the pious Buddhist. Jukka, respecting this, was nonetheless inclined to think that Heim's effort—to balance a full commitment to Christ with a full appreciation for the efficacy of other religions in achieving the ends they propose—is contradictory, and can't be sustained. For his ever so careful reasoning on this point, and the better proposal he'd make to Heim from the strength of Law-and-Gospel thinking, you'll have to wait for Jukka's paper. Do so eagerly.

8. Jukka also drew our attention to the work of the late Jesuit scholar, Jacques Dupuis, than whom, he said, no Catholic theologian has grappled more deeply or effectively with the challenges that religious plurality presents to the integrity of Christian confession, where the God confessed is the One who, in Christ, loves and cherishes the entire world, and not only the professing Christian world. Bill Burrows, both editor and good friend to Dupuis, was quick to second that estimation when it was his turn to speak, the point being that if you want to dig deeply into this topic, Dupuis will be at the top of your reading list. In a post-conference note, Bill recommends [Christianity and the Religions: From Confrontation to Dialogue](#) (Orbis, 2002) as the book to read first. For a fast summary of the work and a quick introduction to Dupuis's thought, see the [review and appraisal](#) by his fellow Jesuit, Gerald O'Collins (*Theological Studies* 64, 2003). After that you'll want to check out Jukka's paper, as soon as it's available, for a

succinct Law/Gospel analysis of Dupuis's key insights. And while you're at it, buy the book Bill published a year and a half ago about some trouble Dupuis ran into with the Vatican's doctrinal watchdogs. It comprises Dupuis's responses to his official critics buttressed by introductory and background material written by Bill. The intriguing title: [Jacques Dupuis Faces the Inquisition](#).

9. With that I quit—2000 words is enough for one session—recognizing as I do how scandalous it is to have said so little—indeed, so next to nothing—about what Jukka, Bill, keynoter Steve Kuhl, and all the other presenters brought to the table. More to come in future posts, I trust. How about some help with that? Were you there in January? Did a light or two pop on at points as you listened? Were you hit somewhere along the way with a significant “Aha”? Send us a short note about that, and we'll pass it along. My own terse summation of the proceedings as a whole: respect the promise that can't be found except in Christ, and keep pushing it as God's gift for all. But do so without dismissing the religious other out of hand, or worse, clamping limits on the scope of the reconciliation that God is able to effect through the death and resurrection of his Son and the faith-inducing power of the Holy Spirit. “With God all things are possible.” So said Jesus when small-minded disciples wondered if anybody could be saved at all (Matt. 19:25f.).
10. Postscripts: a) Did I mention how good it was to see more younger faces at the event than we've been used to? More laity too, including several folks who serve as authorized lay ministers under the aegis one of the ELCA's many synods. b) What a treat the devotions were, with thought-and-faith-inducing reflections from a variety of presenters. c) For once we missed the treat of meeting and hearing from somebody who holds a passport from beyond

North America. Chinese New Year kept friends from Singapore at home. That connection stayed alive even so through Jill Kuehnert, who lives in Singapore as an American expat. d) Jill was there to keep her parents company, father Philip doing us the honor of a presentation on the final morning. Midway through it his pacemaker went off, startling him in earnest and the rest of us by extension. He finished his presentation anyway, then went to the hospital. He let us know a day or two later that the Lord was seeing fit to keep him with us for a while. For that and so much else in those recent conference days, thanks be to God!

Peace and Joy,

Jerry Burce, for the editorial team