

Whither Thursday Theology? A note from the Board of the Crossings Community

To the subscribers of Thursday Theology:

We write to announce what strikes us at first blush as an exercise in folly. We also write to enlist your help in perpetrating it.

To start with, some background:

701 weeks ago Ed Schroeder launched what nowadays we call a blog, a term that popped into speech about a year or two after Ed had started doing what the term describes. A person is bitten by a bright idea, or many of them, and sees fit for reasons known only to him- or herself to launch them into cyberspace. If her prose attracts an audience, great. If not, the blogger-at-heart will plug away regardless. In the end, thinks she, it matters only that the thing be said.

One guesses that he who told the parable of the sower would have blogged like mad had the internet been a feature of life in first-century Palestine. Or else he'd have assigned the job to someone in the entourage, Bartholomew, say.

Thursday Theology has always been Ed's project. He took it up after writing Sabbathology text studies for nearly two years-a task he passed to some associates he trusted to carry on the work while he faced surgery for a faulty aortic valve. When he recovered from surgery, he felt the itch to keep writing. Whereupon he spread his wings and started producing essays. The first is dated 13 May 1998, though on the Crossings website-it's

there, and the 699 succeeding posts as well-you'll find it listed as May 14. In 1998 that was, of course, a Thursday. Someone, either Ed or his friend and colleague Robin Morgan, hit a button that day and shot the essay by email to the addresses on the Sabbathology mailing list. We assume that alliteration had everything to do with the choice of day and title for that first post. A person who peddles the joy of the Gospel with phrases like "mangered Messiah" and "sweet swap" is one who revels in the music of words well paired. "Wednesday Theology" would not have worked. It rang no bells. Not that this would keep Ed from a later proclivity for hitting the "Send" button on early Wednesday evenings, St. Louis time.

And that's what he did, week after week for 13 years and counting, essay upon essay appearing without fail in his subscribers' inboxes. The content was always and exclusively his choice, no one else's. Either he wrote what we got or he picked and edited it. We who followed it kept reading because Ed was being Ed. At some point he had gotten under our skin, whether as a friend, colleague or teacher in one of the innumerable venues of his peripatetic career, or else as a voice one stumbles across via somebody's passing recommendation or the vagaries of an internet search engine. Ed being Ed meant snappy prose, sharp opinion, and unfailing confessional substance, where the thing confessed is the Gospel of Jesus Christ in its address to the church and the world that we occupy today. Getting that right has always been Ed's passion. Helping others to get it right became the single-minded focus of his entire working life. Thursday Theology allowed him to extend that work into the gray years when theological institutions weren't interested in paying him to do it, and trekking the country as a peddler of the Gospel-seeking methodology he and Bob Bertram had developed under the Crossings label no longer appealed to him. How could it once he had found the internet and discovered that he could

push his wares from a keyboard at home to an audience that was wider and farther flung than any he could ever hope to reach by riding on airplanes? In the end we who comprised that audience read and kept on reading because getting the Gospel right mattered as much to us as it did to Ed, and no matter how we responded, whether with delight or dismay, to his grinding of other axes, we found that he almost always had important things to say or repeat on this one essential subject.

Has there been any other voice in the theological blogosphere or for that matter in the broader world of Christian inquiry and opining that has zeroed in on the Gospel question with such unrelenting and revealing focus? We who write and subscribe this current essay-members of the Crossings Board-don't know of one. If any of the rest of you does, tell us about it so we can pass the news around. As for Ed, he's done. So he says. If he means what he says, then a void opens up that begs to be filled, if only by lesser lights who nonetheless are bitten by the same compelling passion.

We of the Crossings Board, lesser lights all, think we should to try to keep Thursday Theology going. It's a fool's thought, not least because the only way we can imagine pulling it off is by changing the form of the thing itself. That risks an alienation of the audience it's intended for. Or not. That depends on you, obviously.

To repeat, Thursday Theology has been a blog, a one-person show. As such its hold on our attention has been due in large part to the personality and trustworthiness of its author-cum-editor. To continue it will almost certainly have to morph into something else. We on the Board don't have another Ed to pull out of the hat, not even an Ed-Lite. Could be, of course, that he or she is lurking out there in the present audience, unknown to us. The Holy Spirit has always had a penchant for the highly unlikely.

See Abraham, Moses, Mary, Paul. See Francis of Assisi or Hans Luther's boy. See half the pastors you've ever met. Then talk to your current pastors and believe them when they tell you that you'd never guess who some of the anchors of the congregation you belong to happen to be. With all such things in mind we're bound to ask: is one of you reading this right now the lurking neo-Ed? Do you wonder if you might be? If so, put your hand up, please. See below for how to do this. We'd love to talk to you, and the sooner the better.

Meanwhile, here are some things we're thinking about, given what we are aware of:

1. There's a bit of thinking and writing talent on our board. There's a whole lot more of it in the Thursday Theology audience of the past few years. We think there's enough of it combined to come up with a substantial weekly posting that all of us can learn from, or at least enjoy.
2. By "substantial" we mean postings that either speak to or reflect the substance that Ed was so single-minded about, i.e. God's good news in and through Christ for sinners whose sinning wears the clothes of the 21st century. Queensland's Neal Nuske came through a few weeks ago with a sterling example of a substantial posting (ThTheol #696), one that doubtless drove lots of us to inspect the hulls of our operative theologies for any limpet-mines that are still attached to them. If it didn't, read again and start searching. This noted, we'll hazard a guess that even if none of you is a lurking neo-Ed lots of you lurkers are like-unto-Neal. You too have something vital to say about the Gospel that others do well to heed. We'll want you to break cover. If you do we think Thursday Theology has a chance at a useful and promising future, one that carries forward the work Ed started so well.
3. As to that future, we're seeing a sort of combination

serial journal and community forum. What you'd get, in other words, is a succession of vetted and edited essays, articles, reviews and other contributions by a variety of authors, one per week, interspersed at regular intervals with readers' responses, the latter vetted for charity and edited for length, though not so much for content. Here we'd be departing somewhat from the model Ed established. We understand there was a fair amount of conversation between him and his readers. Every so often he'd lift the flap on that so others could listen in, but for the most part the talk was a two-party exchange, reader-to-Ed, Ed-to-reader; and whether the rest of us got in on the talk would depend on whether Ed agreed with the responder's conclusions. If not, he wouldn't publish them. Fair enough. It was his baby, as they say. But in the new model, where the toddler's care and feeding becomes the work of many, it's of the essence that the many will get their say, and if the folks with their fingers on the microphone switch find it disagreeable, so be it. The say will be said regardless, allowing others to chime in if and as they so choose.

4. Speaking of these switch-fingering folks, we've asked three members of the Crossings Board to function for now as an editorial committee. The team includes two aging pastors, Steve Albertin and Jerome (Jerry) Burce, both of whom count Ed as a formative teacher in their seminary days, both also having opted later on to add the academically dubious distinction of a D. Min. to their working credentials. The third member of the team is Carol Braun, a newly minted Ph.D. physicist (Northwestern University) whose summa cum laude undergraduate work at Valparaiso included a second major in English. These days Carol teaches both her specialties to sharp and often irreligious high school students at the private Staten

Island Academy in New York City. So far the team has cobbled together enough material to keep Thursday Theology going for three more months. What happens beyond that will depend on two things: first, their success in lining up topics and writers for another stretch of months beyond that, and second, the feedback they get or fail to get from all of you. If the interest is there, the project continues. If not it doesn't. Indeed it can't. All three members of the team are up to their chins in the deep waters of primary vocations, and none is a blogger-at-heart who will carry on whether others read or not. Aside from emailed responses, one way of gauging readership will be to see how often the forthcoming installments attract attention on the Crossings Facebook page. If you haven't seen this check it out. Go to facebook.com and enter "The Crossings Community" on the search line; and if you're a registered Facebook user, take the time to "like" the page once you get there.

5. Here are some key principles that the editorial team will be working with. First, they'll want to favor you with lively, literate writing. Second, they'll insist that every installment of Thursday Theology will continue somehow to confess the Gospel; and if in the confessing it flashes a facet of the Gospel's stunning glory that lots of us have yet to notice, so much the better. Third, they'll require that everything you get will reflect a use of the essential tool for unearthing real-deal Gospel that Luther and Melanchthon honed and wielded to such salutary effect in the 16th century. We refer, of course, to the distinction between law and promise as the lens through which the Bible gets read. This tool, as Ed kept underscoring, is woefully underemployed in Century 21, also within the Lutheran slice of the church catholic where people ought to know better. Addressing that is

precisely what Thursday Theology will continue to be about. Fourth, the editors will keep a close eye on the unfolding second decade of the 21st century as the moment of God's address in law and promise alike. "Now is the acceptable time," writes Paul. "Now is the day of salvation" (2 Cor. 6:2b). The Holy Spirit means for us to take that seriously, and we will.

6. As to the range of topics, who knows? To a large extent, that will be up to you who see fit to send in essays. (Send! Send!) Ed had his interests, avocations, and pet peeves. He wrote a lot about the Church's mission. He grieved and raged over post-9/11 America. He argued over and over that "Gay Is OK," to quote one of his titles. He didn't always convince all his readers. We know that, and we're willing to entertain alternative arguments that meet the specifications outlined in the paragraph above. This goes with broadening the conversation, as again we must if the project is to continue. We hope you'll see a lot of work on the never-ending task of couching the Gospel in real language that real people really speak; on finding points of conversational contact with folks who can't imagine a use for a dead Jesus let alone a living Christ; or on puncturing the persistent folly that dismisses the wrath of God as a piece of pre-modern nonsense. Now and then we'll feature a sermon contest, submissions to be juried by a team of lay readers who know what to listen for in a sermon worth sitting through. Look for the first of these early next month.

With this we quit, hoping we've whetted your appetite for further reading and even more your interest in pitching in. (In case you missed it the first time: "Send! Send!") For now address comments, proposals, and submissions to Jerry Burce, jburceATattDOTnet, who will pass them along to the others on the team. Burce will say, by the way, that he isn't exactly holding

his breath over the prospect of an overflowing inbox. He's spent too many years tracking responses to pleas for help in parish Sunday bulletins. We dare you to surprise him.

A quick closing thought, or maybe two. This really is an exercise in folly. Sanity screams that Thursday Theology ended last week with Ed's swan song, and the poet Pope would laugh at us for daring to flout that. Still, the Christ Ed confessed so well has a thing for fools, and he's absolutely worth looking foolish for. You who know and relish the Gospel get that. With this in mind, away we go. For how long and to what end, who but the Spirit is able to say?

In the meantime, peace and joy. That was and remains Ed's unfailing blessing. It adorned every piece he sent us in the 700-piece stretch, testifying in a wonderfully succinct way to the true glory of Christ. "Trust him," said Ed. We say it too and will keep saying it also without fail for as long as this continues. Peace and joy. In Christ, of course, always and only, world without end. Amen and Amen.

And for Edward H. Schroeder, faithful servant of Christ, and for all his works, words, and weekly gifts these past 13 years: thank you, friend, colleague, teacher, mentor. Much more to the point, thanks be to God!

On behalf of the Crossings Board-
Jerry Burce
Carol Braun
Steve Albertin