

## C is for Confessing, or Cathy (or, Cathy, Confessing)



“Diet of Augsburg” by Christian Beyer

This year marks the 480<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Augsburg Confession. At the Diet of Augsburg, June 25, 1530, several lay-princes of the Reformation conviction took the witness stand to confess the teachings of the catholic church. Here were lay-princes - with names like John, George, Ernest, Philip, Francis and Wolfgang - standing before their ecclesiastical leaders and theologians, proclaiming what it is that the church has always lived, taught, believed, and confessed. Oh, to be sure, a weighty theologian like Philip Melanchthon had his hand in the crafting of their document; and Luther certainly applauded the effort; but neither were the original presenters of this confession. The confession was theirs. The audacity of it all! Given their seemingly weak credentials, and the risk they were taking on the witness stand, they prefaced their remarks with this quote from the Psalms:

*I will also speak of your decrees before kings, and shall not be put to shame (Psalm 119:46).*

So as we we're nearing this anniversary, I asked one prominent lay-leader, Cathy Lessmann – certainly a princess in all she does for Crossings - to tell us in a few short paragraphs what the “Augsburg Aha” means to her in 2010. Some clarification is in order, particularly about the lingo of “Augsburg Aha.”

The “Aha” at Augsburg didn't occur to any of its presenters until the Augsburg Confession received its formal rejection by the critics of the Reformation. The Reformers initially thought that the matters in dispute were the seven concluding “Articles in Which an Account is Given of the Abuses That Have Been Corrected.” But the real crux of the dispute had to do with varying hermeneutics of the Scriptures. The Reformers were proceeding on a hermeneutic of law and gospel, with the emphasis being on the justifying promise of the gospel grasped by faith.

In contrast, the critics of the Reformation insisted, and with biblical proof-texts, on works of the law as that which justify the sinner. So in the Apology of the Augsburg Confession, which was penned by Philip Melanchthon a year after Augsburg, he explained the “Aha” in great detail in Article Four on “justification by faith.” It still has meaning today, in the midst of all the Biblicism that seems to capture (stifle, really) the imagination of many in the church today. More about that later in this newsletter. For now, here's Cathy's confession - both of sin and of hopeful promise - via the Crossings matrix of diagnosis and prognosis which she applies to her own life.

michael hoy

About the greatest thing that ever happened to me was learning the “Augsburg Aha” via the Crossings Community. This has made a tremendous difference in my life in two ways: first, it has freed me from the stifling, demanding, self-righteous-making, narrow-mindedness that is Biblicism. Second, it makes the gospel – the good news – really, **really good** – so good that it energizes my life and such that I can’t stop raving about it!

Some autobiographical history: I grew up a missionary kid in the Philippines. My dad taught us children well; I took my faith seriously. I even went through catechism class twice, I had such a desire to soak it all in. Maybe there’s the rub. I didn’t know it, but I was a Biblicist and I was developing into a Pharisee.

I didn’t know there was any other way, any other “lens” through which to interpret the Bible except literally, so that’s how I read it. I was proud that I “got” everything down pat, oh, so much better than others. Every law, every command, every expectation, was a mandate that I had to live up to, even, and especially, the gospel passages.

As you might guess, this all became very stressful. I became driven. I had an image of myself as being a “good Christian,” which then became a compulsion. I **had** to be “good” – a good student, a good friend, then a good wife, good mother. It all became a slavery, with the symptoms of anxiety, stress, sometimes depression, accompanying it.

What I didn’t realize is that that literalism was sneakily making me into a Pharisee. Frankly, looking at myself from the outside, using human standards, I think I did look pretty “good.” That in turn made me secretly smug as I compared myself to others who were not quite-as-good. Long and short of it, (I realize now) I had morphed into a self-justifying do-gooder, a Pharisee, a legalist, and I had used the Bible to prove and measure all that. It was my “guide” on how-to-please-God, especially the passages about what all I had to believe and obey.

After I learned the Crossings six-step method, I caught on that in my heart, I was really trying to justify myself! I learned that that was step two of the diagnosis, the “internal diagnosis”: my heart trusting myself, even though what I was trusting was the fact that I was believing everything about God and Jesus!

## *R is for Rejected and Renewed*

Worse, because I was justifying myself, the diagnostic step three said that God was against me. Now that really threw me for a loop and took me a very long time to absorb and accept. Unsurprisingly, Ed Schroeder was brutally honest on this point: the end of the Law is that God is **against** sinners, God executes sinners. What a shock. God against **me!** But I’m a good Christian! It took me quite a while to grasp the seriousness of my plight.

When I finally did – and I remember the moment, I was out running – I was distraught to the point of abject despair. I was thinking, “I can’t help it! This is the way I am. I can’t change. Every part of me loves the law. I **ooze** the law. It’s who I am. Oh woe, oh woe is me!” I remember looking down at the cracks on the sidewalk and wishing I could disappear into them. Today I realize I was finally catching the distinction between Law and Gospel.

In fact, Crossings was teaching me that there’s another way, other than literalism, to read the Bible. This way of course is Luther’s “aha” – that God speaks to us with two voices, law and gospel. Today I can see how, on that run, the Law was doing its “proper” work on me: not saving me, but rather, showing me the seriousness, the damnableness of my unbelief.

But then, like a bolt of lightning-insight (hmmm... the Holy Spirit?), it hit me. “Cathy,” I exclaimed, slapping myself on the forehead, “that’s **exactly** why God sent you a Savior! That’s exactly why Jesus hung on the cross – to save me!” Tada! I had just made that crucial step that Bob Bertram called “from three to four and not before” [from the depth of diagnosis to the beginning of the good news]. This is where the “sweet swap” happens – Jesus swapping and taking my judgment, my death as his, giving me his life in



*A joyful, recovering “good person”*

return. I was filled with so much joy that I leapt and danced as I ran the rest of the way home, throwing my arms in the air rejoicing, "I'm saved! I'm free! I'm free!" Truly, it was the most refreshing run of my life; heavy chains had fallen off my back. The Gospel had gripped me.

It has now become habit to process everything that happens in my life and world through the six-steps. I ask myself, what's going on, what is my heart (or my society's, or country's, or church's heart) trusting? What does God have to say about what's going on? And then, making the move "from three to four and not before," I work through how having a crucified and risen Savior can, **does**, change all that. Come to think of it, that's exactly what our founders, Robert Bertram and Ed Schroeder, intended for Crossings to do, namely "cross faith and daily life!"

In addition, Luther's "two kingdoms" clarifies for me the difference between doing God's good and necessary "law" work in the world, such as peace and justice, such as my "jobs" at home and outside-my "callings"- versus doing God's reconciling, "gospel" work, such as seeing to it that the forgiveness of sins gets done. I picture myself operating in this world dictated by the law of debits-and-credits as God's mercy/forgiveness guerrilla worker. I picture the church, not as a grand social-work organization involved in promoting peace and justice, but rather as the **channel** through which people get hooked up to Jesus and have their sins forgiven. All this the Augsburg "Aha" has done for me, and, as Bob Bertram used to say, yes, I'm very, very glad!

*Cathy Lessmann*

## ***O-S*** is for ***Out-Sourcing*** or really, ***Other-Sourcing***

Cathy piques my interest with her remark about what's going on in our collective hearts - not just our own, but society, country, and church. How might we think of the "Augsburg Aha" as we reflect on these? How deeply is biblicism rooted in our Scriptural hermeneutics? That is not an easy reflection, or confession, since we all tend to be infected with the problem (ask Cathy, ask me). It is what

Jesus implied in taking "the log out of your own eye" in order to "see clearly" before making an attempt to "take the speck out of your neighbor's eye" (Matthew 7:5). The critics of his time didn't get it, but were all too happy to notice the speck in the eye of their neighbor. "Here, let me help you with that," they would suggest, when in reality they themselves needed the help - and precisely from Jesus the Christ.

One of the phrases that is used today in business is "out-sourcing." That's just another way to say "other-sourcing," looking for a source **outside** the resources that exist within the organization or corporation. Not that I am commending all the forms of "out-sourcing" that I see in society today. On the contrary, many who practice it at the corporate level dehumanize their neighbor, exposing their interest of greed under the disguised excuse of "saving a few bucks." The problematic results of taking shortcuts are in abundance today; don't think it goes without notice (not just before others, but before God).

The church, regrettably, also engages in the act of "other-sourcing" when it tries to make its case on biblicistic grounds. And the problem is not limited to just the conservative right, but also to those on the more liberal left. Both engage in proof-texting, lifting up their Scriptures and shouting, "Look, it's right here!" Both talk past each other, unable to get clear

### Upcoming Crossings Event

## **Two Kinds of Sabbath Theology One Cripples; One Mobilizes**

**A Crossings Staff and  
Congregational Workshop**  
on the gospel for the day, Luke 13:10-17

led by  
**The Rev. Dr. Steven C. Kuhl**

**Friday, August 20, 2010  
Grace Lutheran Church  
River Forest, Illinois**

**If your group would like to host a similar Crossings event, contact the Crossings office at [info@crossings.org](mailto:info@crossings.org), or call 314-576-7357**

why it is that the other cannot understand what is truly God's will, and neither understanding that all along they are really "other-sourcing" the heart and soul of the Scriptures themselves, away from **the** Source (Latin, *fontes*) that gives them (both Scriptures, as well as ourselves) life.

## *S-I-N is for Sin*

Before long, what really gets exacerbated is how each side sees the sin of the other, but not their own. The "speck" dominates all our energies - even energies which we seek to justify - so that we cannot repentantly reflect even on the "log" that is in our own eye.

That does not mean that God is not seeing clearly what is going on. That is why, also, when the Reformers of 1530 articulated how it is that we are justified, they did not seek to underestimate the problem: we are, all of us, "full of evil lust and inclination and cannot by nature possess true fear of God and true faith in God." (*Augsburg Confession, Article 2, on Original Sin*). That universal is the problem. It is not a "we" verses "them," but an "us." Think of that "us" also as US, as in United States. The one state we are united in, unfortunately, is our sin. Notice, it is not "original sins" (plural) but "original sin" (singular). Any "sins" we might commit have an original source - a source that God declares out of bounds, evidence of our Fall. To be sure, before pointing the finger at others (all others, including Adam and Eve whose trait we mirror), we might start by pointing the finger at ourselves.

Nonetheless, other-pointing is what we are so often doing in our biblicistic practices (left or right), trying to justify how **we** are righteous and **others** are guilty - rather than recognizing along with Paul that **we**, "**all** have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23).

## *G is for Gospel*

When the fuller, accusatory truth of the law is exposed (not settling for the half-hearted, civil criticisms of sin as we so often do), then there comes the promise. The Augsburg Reformers emphasized that the gospel both uses Christ fully (*was Christum treibt* - what conveys Christ), and also "comforts consciences."

When the law does its worst, and we find ourselves caught in the truth of our sin, we find comfort and solace in the promise of the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. Now there is **gospel** - promise - for us. As Paul would say later in Romans, using the gospel's own double-negative: "Now there is **no condemnation** for those who are in Christ Jesus" (8:1).



*A confessing theologian and an exceptional editor*

The fingers point instead like St. John the Baptist in Grue newald's Isenheim Altarpiece, or even more pointedly in the gospel of John: "Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" (John 1:20). Note, "sin," singular; note also, exclamation point. You can't do that kind of finger-pointing without getting excited, because that's exactly what the good news is. Ask Cathy. Ask me. Ask anyone who comes to grasp its promise!

## *S is for Signing-off*

For the last five years, it has been my privilege to be the editor of the Crossings Newsletter. But now I'm ready to hand the task on to another, so that I can focus my energies on other "crossings" that are part and parcel of my everyday life. No doubt I will still be publishing for Crossings for some time yet. But at least as newsletter editor, let me just say, it has been my privilege and my joy to serve you, our dear readers. And more importantly, I hope it has been helpful for all you treasured readers, through whom others come to see the promise and for whom you too make the bold confession by finger-pointing to the Christ - for their sake, and for the sake of the whole world.

*Michael Hoy*

*Printing and mailing this quarterly is paid for by your gifts, thank you. If you are a reader but not yet a giver, we can wait. When you are ready to be both, we won't object.*