

CROSSINGS

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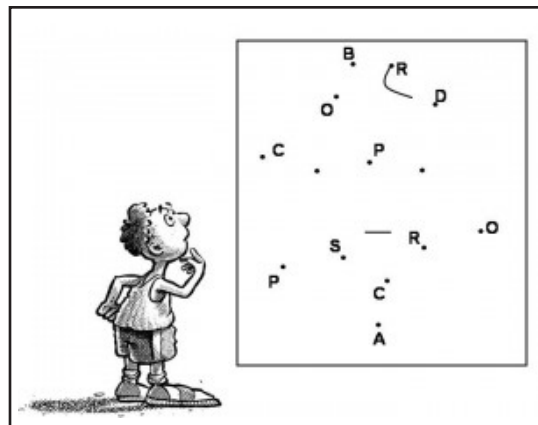


Connecting the Dots

For years after 9/11, we frequently heard the expression “connect the dots.” Recrimination over the failure to prevent that terrorist attack boiled down to this: people had failed to “connect the dots.” Pundits pored over multiple missed connections between particular behaviors of individuals, organizations, nations; the temper of the times; the needs of people in other places—and disaster. If only someone had organized the raw data into a coherent picture. If only someone had connected the dots!

Let’s not make that mistake. Here comes 12/25. There will be all sorts of commotion around the globe over what once seemed to be just another dot in a speck of a village at a moment in time. But millennia have passed, and billions of people are convinced that the babe in the manger is our connection to the God of all mercy and compassion.

How do we connect the dots? Here is a rudimentary example of what I mean, borrowing a passage from Paul:



For it is the God who said ‘Let there be light’ (dot x) who has shone (dot y) in our hearts (dot q) to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God (dot xyz) in the face of Jesus Christ (dot z).” (2 Corinthians 4:6)

Dots x and y (the Creator and the Redeemer) connect to our hearts (dot q) by the shining of the Holy Spirit (dot y).

The mission of Crossings is to help people “connect the dots” in a way that gives Life. We are interested in how people interpret the stream of input from Scripture, not just to understand the Bible but so that

the Word of God gives Life to the world. Jesus said, “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.” If that is so, the world needs to be connected to Jesus: the Jesus in the manger who is connected to the man on the cross who is connected to the Spirit given on Pentecost who is connected to our every need and our every vocation. Shepherd to the sheep. Vine to the branches. Bread to the hungry.

Connect the dots.

When I was asked to write the quarterly newsletter of the Crossings Community three years ago, I closed my first letter like this:

We do not want to be hearers of the word only, and not doers—all blessed up and nowhere to go. So the six-step method helps us articulate the connections between our faith and our daily life. Theology is tasked, we

believe, with gracefully connecting the dots of the oughts and the nots with the grace in which we live.

I bring it up because I used the phrase “connect the dots” to say what Crossings is about. I’d like to edit it:

We do not want to be “hearers of the word only, and not doers”—“all blessed up and nowhere to go.” The Crossings (or “Six-Step”) Method helps us do good theology, which is what you call it when the dots—all the disparate topics, themes, and claims in Scripture—get connected to all that is wrong in us in such a way that the gospel becomes “the power of God for salvation.”

How should one connect the dots? The answer to this question is not obvious. For on the one hand Jesus says, “Come unto me, all who are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest”—yet on the other hand he says, “You must be perfect, as your Father in heaven is perfect.” How do you connect those dots?

Some dot-connecting is insane. My father ridiculed people who would close their eyes, open their Bibles, point blindly at a verse, then take that one to heart. He told a joke about someone who first landed upon the verse about Judas: “Then he went out and hanged himself.” Not thinking that message could be from God, he closed the Bible and tried again, but blind chance led his finger to the verse which says “Go and do likewise.” A terrible sense of humor, I know, but also atrocious hermeneutics. To connect the dots blindly as though you were playing “pin the tail on the donkey” does not give people “the power of God for salvation.” It is not the Bible that is “the power of God for salvation”—it is the Gospel.

Nor does God save when preachers connect the dots in such a way as to drive people to good deeds. (I would call this “legalism,” but I ran into people at the Divinity School

of the University of Chicago who were unfamiliar with the term, so maybe it is not common parlance.) Just because Jesus said to someone “Go, sell all you have, and give to the poor,” does not mean you can save yourself or become righteous by doing so. He also said “How long must I be with you?”

Some careful assembly is required, if we are to get all the good out of God’s Word so that our lives can be lived within God’s blessing. We have to open the book with our eyes wide open.

But how? How do we articulate (from *articulum*, the Latin for joint or connection) what “the Bible” says?

Sadly, the church does not always connect people to Jesus in ways that give Life. When the bits we know about Jesus get connected wrong; when the gospel is distorted instead of being taught in its “truth and purity,” when law trumps or covers up the gospel, then the gospel is altogether lost, and people do not receive the strength and joy which God means us to receive through Christ.

Hence our heuristic, our rule of thumb, the six-step method.

Crossings peddles a technique for making Life-giving sense out of the Word of God. We distinguish, classify, distill, and stratify the mélange of messages which lie on the page of the Bible, always trying to connect dots in such a way as to make much of Christ by maximizing the gifts of Christ to those who believe in him. “God did not

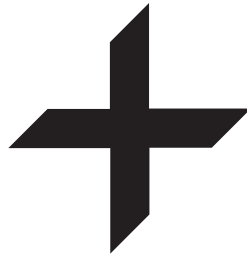
send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.”

Without mounting a full-scale description of the Crossings approach, let me show how this works:

Scripture identifies and denounces bad behavior. It also commands and exalts behavior that is good. Call those two dots. (They are more like splotches or continents, but let’s stick to “dot” terminology.) People behaving badly, people behaving well. They connect, don’t they? Like theses with their antitheses.

Scripture also addresses something deeper than behavior, something we could call not loving and trusting God. On the other hand, Scripture lifts up the value of loving God, placing one’s confidence in God, etc. Call those topics, the negative and the positive, two dots as well. People not having faith, people having faith. They connect as opposites, right?





*The dots must be connected in such a way
that the promise of God in Jesus Christ gets heard.*

Scripture also carries on about the doom or judgment upon us who do not trust in God and are thereby alienated from God. Again, there is a mirror topic: the undying hope which is ours when we are united with God through Christ Jesus. Two fates, two dots: doom pronounced upon us, and the gift of new life. Bane and blessing. The ideas connect like rivals.

A lot hangs on exactly how those six dots connect. Those six dots (three pairs) should not be jumbled up or we will wind up like the perplexed figure in my illustration—with a lot of data, but no life-giving picture. God loves us, he loves us not. Loves us, loves us not. Loves us, Loves us not. Are we merely picking petals off daisies, holding our breaths that we will be all right in the end?

This last Sunday I got to proclaim the gospel using Matthew 25:31-46. I suspect that a lot of preachers connected the dots in the parable of the sheep and the goats in an oversimplistic, legalistic way. They connected their listeners' lives by warning them to be good (by helping those in need) instead of being bad (by not helping those in need) since our eternal doom/life is in the balance.

But that is not a good way to connect the dots, since the resulting picture does not offer life to the hearers or lift up Christ and make us love God, even if it purports to be biblical. For better ways of connecting those dots, see Jerry Burce's blog on the Crossings website, www.crossings.org/thursday/2014, for November 20; or Nadia Bolz-Weber's sermon on her "Sarcastic Lutheran" blog—her "Sermon on Sheep and Goats"; or my own sermon for November 23, 2014, on www.indylutheran.org/sermons.

The dots must be connected in such a way that the promise of God in Jesus Christ gets heard. As Bolz-Weber muses:

So then where is the good news in this text about sheep and goats? I mean, that's my struggle each time I stand in this pulpit – as a preacher I scour the text for promises I can claim for you and for me. I dig and dig for what seems like good news. But so often all we can hear from a text like this is demand and judgment and not promise and good news. And I've said this before, but I think it bears repeating, that what passes for preaching in so much of the church is the following formula: Here's the problem, and here's what you can do about it. But I have never heard that as good news in my entire life. I've tried fixing my problems or the world's problems and it's rarely felt like it worked. I've tried the salvation and self-justification check-list and it's never saved me. Not once.

"Unearthing Gospel Gold" is the Crossings Seminar offered January 25-27 at which we will encourage one another in the pursuit of good news. Please join us if you can, as several of the leaders of the Crossings Community share their angles on the task of ensuring that the Gospel reaches God's people for God's purposes. Details at www.crossings.org/conference.

It will be close to Christmas by the time you receive this letter, so let me share with you a sermon of mine whose purpose was to connect hearers with the Gospel, picking out a couple trivial words from the Luke 2 Christmas story: "this" and "this." ("**this** day," "**this** sign)."

Marcus Felde

What Child is this, who laid to rest,
 On Mary's lap is sleeping?
 Whom angels greet with anthems sweet
 While shepherds watch are keeping?
 This, this is Christ the king,
 Whom shepherds guard and angels sing;
 Haste, haste to bring him laud,
 The babe, the son of Mary!

(design by Richard Caemmerer)



“This, This . . .”

A Sermon for Christmas Eve
 (7:30 service), 2010.
 Bethlehem Lutheran Church.

INI

If you were writing a hymn,
 you would certainly do your
 best to match your words to
 the music.

Say you employed the
 Common Meter, a stanza with
 four lines: eight syllables, then
 six syllables, then eight, then
 six. Like the old Norwegian
 Christmas song, [speak] “I am
 so glad each Christmas Eve/
 the night of Jesus’ birth!/
 Then like the sun the star
 shone forth/ and angels sang
 on earth.”

Or you could use what we call
 Long Meter, 8 8 8 8, like
 “From heaven above to earth I
 come/ to bear good news to
 every home! Glad tidings of

great joy I bring/ to all the
 world, and gladly sing!”

And, of course, it isn’t just the
 number of syllables that has to
 match the notes in the tune.
 You would also want the
 emphasis in the poem to match
 the stress in the music. If a
 syllable was especially
 meaningful, you would want it
 to occur on either a high note,
 or a long one, or the down beat,
 or a combination of those.
 Otherwise, it might sound
 rather off.

For example, if you wrote a
 poem like [speak] “What child
 is this, who laid to rest/ on
 Mary’s lap is sleeping?” You
 might break that into two lines
 of 8 syllables and 7, then
 repeat: Whom angels greet
 with anthems sweet/ while
 shepherds guard are keeping?
 Hmmm. Could we locate a
 tune that would fit our words?

Aha! The meter so far, 8 7 8 7,
 matches the beginning of a tune
 we all know and love:
 Greensleeves, a hit song in the
 80’s. The 1580’s. Originally, it
 was a love song about a woman
 called “Lady Greensleeves.”

But if we are going to match
 our poem to the tune
 Greensleeves—and the English,
 unlike the Germans, did this

sort of thing all the time—we will
 want to be very careful. We might
 run afoul of no less a critic
 than . . . William Shakespeare!
 Great poet that he was, he knew
 something about hymnody as
 well! He mentioned the tune
 Greensleeves in his play “The
 Merry Wives of Windsor.”
 Mistress Ford says, talking about
 Falstaff:

I would have sworn his
 disposition
 would have gone to the
 truth of his words;
 but they do no more
 adhere and keep pace
 together,
 than the Hundredth Psalm
 to the tune of
 Greensleeves.

[demonstrate by singing to the
 tune Greensleeves] Make a joyful
 noise to the Lord, all ye lands---
 doesn’t work at all. And what a
 clever analogy Shakespeare offers
 for hypocrisy: words not matching
 actions, is like lyrics not fitting the
 music. Of course, the whole play
 turns on the deceitfulness of a
 man named Falstaff.

We want to be careful, then,
 matching our poem with this 430-
 year-old tune, because otherwise
 our hymn will sound false, not
 true.



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Six Step Method*

*Then Cross the Gospel
with Daily Life*

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The first four lines ask the question: “Who is this . . . child?” Our fifth line will answer the question: “This is Christ the King!” Except that’s only five syllables, and the tune has six. Maybe we could throw in an extra “This.” “This, this is Christ the king!” That fits better.

Except that the musical line has a powerful stress on those first two notes. Both are high pitches, long, and downbeats! That was the climax in the original poem, so it made sense. “Greensleeves is all my joy . . .” But does it make sense to sing “This! This!” then trail off with “is Christ the King”? Maybe we should sing “Je-sus, is who this is”?

No. “This, this is Christ the King” works perfectly, because that is the emphasis of Christmas. Not on the kingship, but on the unexpected lowliness, the ironically humble point of entry God uses to visit his people. What some theologians refer to as the “scandal” of particularity, when talking about the problem of history and faith.

This, **this** tiny baby. **This** one.

This, **this** first-born of young Mary.

This, **this** one, for whom there was no room, no place to be born.

This, **this** one, whose “guards” are—laughably—shepherds,

. . . is the one whom angels sing: Christ the King.

That is how our carol turned out, with us marveling as we do each Christmas that God has entered this world the same way we did: naked and cold and helpless and needy.

God’s body in the world today is no less remarkable for how humble it is . . . for how humble we are. Can I hold out my hands indicating you who are gathered here this evening, and say, “This, **this** is Christ the King?” And why should I not? Has not Christ himself dictated that we should be, that we are, his body in the world? That we incarnate God’s will for the peace and unity of all? That we are his hands and feet in the midst of a tired and troubled humanity? Has he not specified that those who call him Lord are

united with him and with each other, and that he sends us into the world to work his work?

Surely God can't expect much of us? We're, like, only human, right?

Can this, **this** collection of his people really matter, in the greater scheme?

We have a sign, a token of that similitude or relationship every time we take communion. Two of the most important words in the liturgy of Holy Communion are the two you hear when the pastor recites the Words of Institution. The two words are: "this" . . . and "this." As in "**This** is my body, given for you." And "**This** is my blood, shed for all people for the forgiveness of sin."

Do you think he was joking?

Do you think Jesus was kidding when he said he was with us, and would be in us, to the end of the age? He knew he was not getting the A-team, the all-stars. Just us. This, **this** motley crew of people with a little faith, would do. The world would be astonished, if we ever amounted to anything.

But here we are.

This, **this**—little baby is the Christ, the Son of God

This bread, **this** wine—a sacrament linking him to us

This, **this** community of people who are Christ's body today.

Hopefully, matching our lives to his tune. Following his beat, moving to his music, breathing his Spirit, making not just any old difference in the world, but the difference Jesus came to make. It would be a shame if our disposition and our words did not match and keep pace together, like Falstaff. How awful if our disposition did not match the truth in our words, as a community of children of God. But what amazing fruit of love and joy and peace would be brought into the world if we would ignore the drumbeat of the world and suit our lives to the grace we ourselves have received through the one who was born at Bethlehem.

We have not done so well, truth be spoken, matching our disposition to the truth of our words, to the truth of God's word. We are dissonant by habit; we have a taste for *hemiola*. How will we, **we** ever sing God's song of righteousness and peace, in this world?

Only if God should deign to come to our aid, with gifts of reconciliation and harmony.

And this is Christmas. This, **this** child appeared in order to die for us, and to bestow his spirit upon all who love him, so that the Hundredth Psalm (Make a joyful noise to the lord!) might be fitted to every sort of melody, played on every instrument, sung in every tongue, in every land, for the peace of the world.

This, **this** is Christmas. God turning and tuning the world to his ways, by means of a surprising savior and normal people.

Amen.

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No matter how many dots get connected ever so well by national security listening to phone calls, physicians checking our blood work, police interviewing suspects, highway engineers taking core samples, and sociologists, parents, climatologists, dentists, journalists, entomologists, geneticists, pathologists, hog farmers, and insurance adjusters trying to figure out how to solve our problems—no matter how well we analyze all the world's symptoms; the world is not safe until people live not for themselves but for one another. For that, we need to connect to the God who said "Let there be light," who created us for himself in love. To make that connection there is Jesus Christ, who loved us and gave himself for us.

Marcus Felde

Please remember The Crossings Community with a gift this Christmas. An envelope is supplied.

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