

CROSSINGS

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C - Crumbs

My recollections are hazy but warm from our recent conference at the snowy retreat center of Our Mother of the Snows in Belleville, where we gathered to discuss the immodest claim, “One for All and All in One.” I don’t know if my memory will match yours (if you were there), but I came away impressed with the winsome appeal of a faith which does not propose to heal the world by subduing and incorporating other people, but by meeting all people where their need matches ours and is met by a gift from above.

At the conclusion of the conference I tried to pull together the various contributions we had heard using a metaphor drawn from a nursery rhyme:

“Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall. Humpty Dumpty had a great fall. All the king’s horses, and all the king’s men couldn’t put Humpty Dumpty together again.” No, all the king’s horses and all the king’s men could not, if by “king’s men and horses” you mean all the power and wisdom of this world, even when it is wrapped in religion. Even Christians, when we are theologians “of glory,” cannot pull this world (Humpty Dumpty) together. All we do is impose another yoke on people, a heavier burden. The result is the division, party spirit, polarization, hatred, rivalry—nothing good, even if you call it religion. Humpty Dumpty’s shell, albumen, and yolk smeared across the globe.

But there is One whose “yoke is easy,” whose “kingship” is a bringing of peace through his own dying and rising. I thought all our speakers were pretty much in concurrence, that harmony and unity and peace and agreement are not

the product of our imposing a best way of looking at this or that. Rather, the Crucified One offers a gift of peace which heals the world from our inside out, through our repentance and faith in him. Not a victory of Christianity or Lutheranism over their alternatives, but a victory of Christ over the enemies we all have in common.

So, for example, Jukka Kaariainen skyped from Taiwan about exploiting the very hiddenness of God as a bridge to people of other religions. Jerry

Burce clarified that the world’s necessity is what brings Christ to us. Steve Kuhl argued that ways of thinking which stress “how things ought to be” (he used the term “nomological”) do not afford us a way to make things right; instead, the

promise we have in Christ achieves what no law can. Philip Kuehnert demonstrated that the public ministry of chaplaincy, which takes place in the midst of a swirl of competing ways of seeing the world, has its opportunities because it meets people in their pain. Ralph Klein highlighted both helpful and unhelpful items in the Old Testament: some voices raised in support of crushing people who worship differently, but others criticizing that rage as not reflecting the character—mercy—of the Lord. Bishop John Roth spoke of our theology not being flyover theology, but crumbs on the ground. Presiding Bishop Elizabeth Eaton vigorously proclaimed that, while our power is powerless, God’s power revealed in the death and resurrection of Christ is unstoppable. I can’t remember exactly how all the concepts and insights of these and other





Bishop Elizabeth Eaton was our special guest presider and preacher at the Eucharist Service and later participated in a Bishop's Round Table. Here she is assisted by Steven Kuhl, our new Executive Director who also presented at the conference.

speakers were fleshed out, but I always felt I was among theologians "of the cross." We do believe that Christ is One who is for All. But we do not desire to plant our flag on other people, only to share our hope with them. Because, if all the king's horses and all the king's men and all the theology of glory can never put Humpty Dumpty together again, maybe a crumby old theology of the Christ will do the job.

Permit me now to bring into this discussion a voice from the past. In Lent of 1996, for the second time ever, the Crossings newsletter was posted online. Dr. Robert Bertram did a lovely text study in that issue on the Second Reading for Passion Sunday, which I have lightly edited. (Lucky for us!—we have the same reading this year.) You will have no trouble seeing why his study is relevant to the topic our conference discussed.

C: Cur (Latin for "Why?")

The little word "why" marks humans as rational. We want explanations. All of us do, not just philosophers like Aristotle, who asserted that *all* knowledge is the knowledge of cause. Theologians and three-year-olds ask "Why?" Coming from a teenager, the query might be merely a diversionary tactic; yet the same word will do for the abject cry of neighbors when a neighbor family perishes in a house fire.

"Why?" is our altogether reasonable question when we are told that Jesus is the only one under heaven by whom we can be saved. Why Jesus? Why is it that at just *his* name every knee should bow? God does not forbid us to ask that question—we were *created* to ask it. The question lies behind every Christian creed, animates every good hymn, is assumed in every prayer ending with "for Jesus' sake." *Why Jesus?* To answer that question, as Augsburg confessors confessed and as every preacher knows or ought to know, is the point of every sermon. Necessitate Jesus Christ! Show why Christ is our true consolation!

When folks ask me what Crossings is, I reply that it is a way to "show the need for Jesus Christ." To satisfy the why.

You should receive this issue around the Sunday of the Passion (Palm Sunday). The Second Philippians 2:5-11, one of the New Testament passages most likely to make people ask "Why Jesus?" Here is a sample of how the Crossings Community deals with scripture, how we unpack a biblical text. This is how we give an accounting for the hope that is in us, "with gentleness and reverence" (see 1 Peter 3:15) to anyone who asks "Why?"



Vainglory or "Sain" Glory? Philippians 2:1-11 Sunday of the Passion (Year A) Analysis by Robert Bertram

(Note: Bertram's analysis reaches back to include verses 1-4.)

If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who,

*though he was in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God
as something to be exploited
but emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness.
And being found in human form,
he humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of death —
even death on a cross.
Therefore God also highly exalted him
and gave him the name
that is above every name,
so that at the name of Jesus
every knee should bend,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
and every tongue should confess
that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.*

Part One: God Sees Through Our Vainglory (God's Law at work)

To diagnose is to "see through." God's law "sees through us." Because of our sin, that is bad news. The diagnosis cannot be blurted out all at once but step by step: initial, advanced, final. Otherwise it is too much to take in, sort of like filling a glass with the faucet on full force.

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (Our External Problem—vis-à-vis one another)

The problem with Paul's readers, at least their most conspicuous problem, is that because of each one's vainglorious self-concern they are losing Christ's concern for one another. People are doing things from selfish ambition and conceit. They/we regard themselves as better than one another. And who are Paul's readers? Only first century Philippians? Doesn't that shoe fit us as well?

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Our Internal Problem—vis-à-vis Christ)

Seriously, if the readers are losing Christ's concern for one another they must also be letting go of the concern which Christ has for them. If we do not dare to spend ourselves for others, we must not believe all that much in Christ's spending himself for us. And not to believe in Christ is to lose the benefit of him.

The King James Version translated verse 5 to read "Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus." But Paul does not place the distinction between a mindset which Christ has but his readers have not. He allows, for the sake of argument, that they too have Christ's mind, since that is what they assume. Euodia, for example, thinks the same thing about herself that Christ thinks about her, namely, that she is dear to God. Trouble is, she does not go on to think the same thing about Syntyche; and vice versa (see 4:21). But with that sort of self-inflation we not only get ourselves wrong (as though we were better than others); we also get Christ wrong (as though he loved us because we are better!). That is unbelief. That is "not having" Christ, not just his mind but his self. No wonder we can't give his love. We don't have it from him to give!

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Our "Eternal" Problem—vis-à-vis God)

Worst of all: Heedless of others because we are mindless of the real Christ, those who glorify ourselves face a humiliating end. Our glory turns out to be vain, devoid of approval from God. We die as God's defeated competitors, compelled to bend the knee to the very Jesus we spurned, conceding dominion to him instead of having it ourselves (vv. 9-11).

This Final Diagnosis, where our most serious problem is seen to be a problem with an angered God, is the hardest step for Crossings practitioners to make. It would be easier if all we were up against were ourselves, our own sin. But what we need saving from, to speak biblically, is not only ourselves but also an accusing Creator. It is not as simple as "God's grace taking care of our sin." We deal with God's law *and* God's gospel, "God's gospel taking care of God's law. Our culture demurs: people may be bad but they're not as bad as all that. Crossings, before accounting for the fullness of the hope that is in us, accounts for the depth of our desperate situation.

Part Two: God Sees Us Through, Grants Us His "Sain" Glory (God's Gospel in Play)

The word "prognosis" has a special, technical use in Crossings lingo. As the counterpoint to "diagnosis," it means God "seeing us through." That God will see us through is almost unbelievable good news. What the gospel says about believers makes others scoff: People may be good, but nobody is that good. Again, it is best to break the (good) news gently: initial, advanced, final--so it will come across as too good not to believe.

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (God's "eternal" solution--for us)

Unlike us, Christ did not seek to equal God by clinging to godness. Rather, he humbled himself to become one of us slaves—Christ Jesus: empty, guilty, executed. Yet precisely in doing so he *did* equal God, who in return for Christ's identifying with us raised him from the dead and, to God's lasting credit, gave him title to us and to the whole creation (vv. 6-11). The initial stage focuses on the part of the solution which is most conspicuous. And what is not always most conspicuous--to non-Christians "scandalous"--about the Christian solution is the way it, so to speak, changes the subject. Throughout the diagnosis it was we sinners who were the subject of investigation. Suddenly, with the prognosis, Christ Jesus becomes the topic. It's not all about us anymore! We change places. Luther called this the "Happy Exchange." (My students have learned to call it, affectionately, The Sweet Swap.)

The Christ(ian) solution does not seem sensible. If *your* congregation were divided by some vainglorious prima donnas who put themselves ahead of one another, wouldn't it be more reasonable to confront them, say, using some conflict management techniques? So, why does Paul take the Philippians on the scenic route, reciting a lengthy "Christ Hymn" about what happened to Jesus, about his humiliation and exaltation? *Because Paul grasps the depth of the problem:* God. Not only is the "practical" approach shallow, it is insufficiently critical (hypo-critical) and, worse still, *has no need* of Christ. But isn't it more popular? Yeah. This seems insane.

"Sain" is an Old English word for "sign," referring especially to "making the sign of the cross." The *glory* of Christ is the *cross*. Sounds like an oxymoron, but there it is. In this reading from Philippians, Jesus empties himself, but he is no wallflower. Look how gloriously he ends up! And from what depths! What a comeback! That took *chutzpah*. And the Father who likes being equaled by the Child? What a great good sport!



Special guest speaker,
Missiologist Dr. William
Burrows

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (God's internal solution--in us)

Even better, because readers *believe in* this God-equaling, glorified slave as the Lord to whom they now belong, they/we are—as believers—“in” him. This is not to say that they have some thoughts or beliefs in their heads. *They are in him.* They feel about themselves what he feels about them, with his same “mind.” (v. 5) How is that? Not indulgently or permissively but as being crucified and raised with him, his history now theirs. Their faith, internalizing his passion for them, echoes his *chutzpah*.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (God's external solution--through one another)

Best of all, the readers bear the fruit of this Spirit in their lives, and begin to think with the same Christ-mind toward one another. True, if you look only at their behavior, their “one-anothering” still falls short. But if you look at it as Paul does, in his preaching, it already sounds better than it looks. To hear him tell about it, their same-mindedness is already assured, just a matter of time. He preaches them into it. Or, Christ does. At this level of give-and-take, preaching and hearing, saying so makes it so. Here, quite publicly, they are already a promising “one-anotherhood”—and people who recognize it for what it is give sain + glory to God. “What is this hope that is in them?” they might ask.

Forty years ago, a Roman Catholic priest chided me gently with these words: “The problem with you Lutherans is you think ten years is a long time.”

Well, it is, isn't it? A long time?

Ten years ago, as you will read below, Crossings was taking a big step onto a platform we were not sure of. We have changed some since then, but now we are taking our biggest “next step” since that time. We have hired an Executive Director, albeit a part-time one: the Rev. Dr. Steven Kuhl. Among his top priorities is to lead an already-named task force who will ratchet up and refine our internet presence and communications. We rejoice in his willingness to take this on, alongside other responsibilities he has. This serious undertaking has become possible because of generous gifts to the Bertram-Schroeder Crossings Legacy Fund.

So now I want to close, in a spirit of Bertram-Schroeder Legacy “Fun,” with the ten-year-old words of Dr. Schroeder as we were making that earlier leap.

S is for Successors --- (by Dr. Schroeder)

but it could also be for Space, Cyber. That's the virtual reality that many of you youngsters are nudging us goldie-olies to consider entering. Bob (70-something) and I (60-something) need such nudging, or else we should just turn that matter over to our alums, you our successors.

We thought that we were state-of-the-art when we leapfrogged Bob's “going with fax” by “going email” during our past two years in Australia and Ethiopia. But while we were gone the Net and the Web rushed in from wherever. Was it from heaven, or hell, or somewhere in between? So now we're taking Crossings Home Page on the Web and all the paraphernalia thereunto appertaining.

For your information, for ehs, not (yet) rwb, 100242.2470@compuserve.com is [was] that email address. That's also the mailbox for an experimental “Sabbatheology” that I've been posting to a few dozen folks on most of the Saturdays since Epiphany. If such a posting interests you cyber-crossers, you know what to do.

But back to the biggie, the Web. Is Crossings Web-able at all? some ask. Doesn't Crossings require the actual reality of three (more likely, four) gathered: you, me, the Word, and the Spirit? Is the Holying Spirit's light transmittable via cyber optics? Can the Holy Gust blow through silicon micro-circuits?

What I've found from the modest scanning I have done in the Web's Christianity pages is mostly schlock. But that may itself be reason enough to “go for it.” Tarzan was right: it's a jungle out there. In the language of Acts: it's Mars Hill out there. Zillions are online hustling everything imaginable--and some items unimaginable--so why not have the Crossings Community out there too? Can't we do a weaving on the Web, a tapestry for the Unknown God of the theology of the cross?

We have been getting local counsel Web wise from a number of pros. One of them even put a page out there with blanks for Bob and me to fill. So that may be the baby step whereby we start.

Counsel from any and all of you who may have your own vision (and visuals) for Crossings@www will get a ready hearing from our crew working on the project here in St. Louis. Most likely we won't know if (or how) the Crossing heritage is Web-able until we try it. And if it does bomb, I hope we'll have the *chutzpah* to say so, and cease and desist.

A Crossings board member's spouse asked one of our St. Louis plotters and schemers if there weren't elves in the box that made it all happen. Our pro responded: “That's very close. Really there are daemons in the box. Actually the daemons are in a box in Ohio; the daemon's ‘client’ is in your box at home.”

Even if that were true, we're encouraged by Luther's comment when he pestered about the tavern melodies he appropriated for his hymns. “The devil shouldn't have all the good tunes,” he said. So stay tuned. Stay online. Help us Cross the Web. *ehs*

[This conclusion is still valid!] 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.

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