



We knew we would be criticized. We had it coming.

Plans are set for the International Conference of the Crossing Community in Belleville, Illinois, January 27-29 (pre-conference January 26-7). Brochures have been printed, and pictures of the speakers were in the last issue of our newsletter. I'm excited.

And then, inevitably, someone picked up on the fact that all the presenters are men, and wrote to express a disappointment which others probably also felt.

The board shares that feeling, or we wouldn't have worked so hard to make our panel more inclusive in that way, among others. Let me just say that a serious attempt to make it happen did not succeed. We did opt for a young hand as moderator. We have a Finn speaking, who works in Taiwan. William Burrows is Roman Catholic.

But how can we answer criticism we agree with? In fact, with those few exceptions, the speakers and participants in our conferences tend to come from a very narrow and unfortunately homogeneous strand of the church universal.

I thought this newsletter would be a good place to address the point and encourage people to come anyway. As I already said, we tried to get a woman speaker. We were more successful in getting a woman preacher for the eucharist, who is bishop of the Northeast Ohio Synod. She accepted with alacrity! Alas, our board members had no sooner unpacked our suitcases back home than our invitee was elected Presiding Bishop of the ELCA. Now she probably has way more important things to do than come to our humble conference to preach. (I hope I'm wrong! Bishop Elizabeth Eaton, are you reading this?) I could point out the merits of those who *will* be speaking; but probably none of them are superstars in your book, although they all have their points.

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Strand Street Lutheran Church in Cape Town, South Africa, where the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Southern Africa - Cape Church Synod met June, 2013.

Let me share with you some Crossings positives, before I get all down on us.

Rev. Jerry Burce represented us as guest speaker for the Synod (assembly) of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in South Africa (Cape Church). Also, our mission was affirmed by the promise of an amazingly large gift to the Bertram-Schroeder Crossings Legacy Fund from the Marion I. Breen Charitable Foundation, for the perpetuation of our work. I am excited and proud about both of those happenings.

A few years ago we had a remarkable speaker at our international conference, Rev. Felix Meylahn from Cape Town, South Africa. Enthusiasm was great for his passionate and humble disquisition on the function of the law and the gospel in his ministry. After he returned home, he invited Rev. Jerry Burce to return the favor, to "come over to Macedonia and help us." The Church Council of the Cape Church asked Burce to be the main speaker at their "synod," and also to do workshops with members, "helping them to get the distinction between Law and Promise into clearer perspective."

Meylahn wrote to us afterward:

Both tasks Jerry fulfilled with marvelous energy and grace, and the response from many that talked to me about it afterwards was "I've at last understood what the Gospel actually is!" And I must agree wholeheartedly: I was also brought

back to the reason why I wanted to be a pastor and found myself full of new energy to go and do it! Preach the marvelous good news that God has two visions, two views of humanity, a “dreadful” one (Law) and a Promising one (Gospel), and that finally the second one is the one God calls the church to see and to proclaim.

Knowing Burce, I am not surprised to hear that his message was deeply appreciated by that church.

Secondly: we recently established a “Bertram-Schroeder Crossings Legacy Fund” within the Lutheran Community Foundation, to further the mission those two professors initiated when they founded the Crossings Community, whose mission statement is:

Believing that the art of properly distinguishing law and gospel is the key to understanding what God is doing in the world, Crossings’ mission is to make that art a useful skill to the everyday Christian in both the interpretation of Scripture and the living out of Christian vocation in the world.

I was skeptical when the idea of an endowment fund was originally floated and we started working on copy for the brochure. Who would ever give *us* money? (Sorry, I should have known better. Your gifts, gentle readers, are all that keep our organization going!)

But one thing led to another, one conversation to another, and someone who appreciated the ministries of Ed Schroeder and Robert Bertram at Valparaiso has given \$500,000 to the fund! *Deo gracias!* And thank you, Mark and Kathy Helge!

Mark and Kathy are long-time fans of the Crossings Law-Gospel mission, going all the way back to their days at Valparaiso University. There, as students, they met and fell in love, not only with one another but also with the school and their teachers, Crossings founders, Bob Bertram and Ed Schroeder. Mark is a retired pastor in the ELCA, having served in a wide variety of ministry contexts, who now has the vocation of “Benefactor” (Fred Danker must be smiling) and philanthropist as he manages his late Aunt’s (Marion



Felix Meylahn sent the invitation to Jerry Burce to address the South Africa Synod.

Breen) Foundation -- an amazing story in itself. Their generosity on behalf of the gospel is surpassed only by the humility and philanthropic service they render quietly, often behind the scenes, in the church’s work of higher education. This they do in the hope that young minds might see the connection, the crossing, between their faith in Christ and their aspirations for daily work and life.

I hope many more people will make gifts large and small, so that eventually the fund will be sufficient to enable us to hire a full-time director for the Crossings Community!



Crossings is extremely grateful for the generosity of Mark and Kathy Helge, who have donated \$500,000 to the Bertram-Schroeder Crossings Legacy Fund. What a giant step this is toward guaranteeing the ongoing theological work of our "law-gospel community."

Back to the original topic. To the aforementioned criticism I/we could add many more. One particular “beam in our eye” is that although we publish “Sabbatheology” as a *clarifying* tool to help people theologically analyze pericopes in a way that brings out the Gospel, we have not figured out how to make that method itself winsomely *clear* to others. Consequently, it has not gained the traction it richly deserves among the large number of people who could benefit from it. What a shame. The more I use the model the more impressed I am with the genius of its developers. Part of our problem may be our satisfaction? I hope it’s not

smugness. Do we think it's up to "outsiders" to come over and figure us out? Why hasn't the Crossings Community multiplied astronomically, if we're so great?

We're not great. I'm not being facetious or ironic. I won't pretend to repent *on behalf of* the Board, but I think they would agree that as an organization we're just not that terrific, and part of our problem is that we look too much like our dear friends who founded the community. (Although our executive director, Cathy Lessmann, is a great woman who plays an enormous role in our work; and we have a young woman physicist on our board, Carol Braun.) I know a lot of organizations get things right that we don't. Maybe because they are less shy? Equipped with better software?

I still think you should come to our next conference, January 26-29, 2014. Belleville, Illinois. Give me a chance to explain why.

I was all set to write a newsletter which would "hype" a few recent moments in our community's life. But then came the criticism, and I was driven to a different place. A different place from either Boasting or Excusing. A place called Contrition.

I was reading an old Schroeder document in which he defined "hypocrites" as "those who are not critical enough"! (Say the word with a long "y" as in "hypodermic," which means *under* the skin, and its meaning becomes clearer.) That idea has been exercising my mind and shaping my preaching ever since. To think! That we are . . . not critical *enough!* Wouldn't most people agree that everyone is wa-a-ay *too* critical? Don't we all need to love ourselves a lot (and then love others as ourselves)?

But the Gospels these past few weeks have reminded me of how hypercritical Jesus always was. Didn't he ever lighten up and tell people they were doing just great?



Jerry Burce addressing the Cape Town Lutheran Church assembly: "The Vision of God for the Church." That was followed up with workshops teaching the Crossings six-step method.

Did he have to criticize even our hospitality, and the way we take the appropriate place at a banquet?

So I wondered: In a church which touts theology "of the cross," is it ever right for us to promote ourselves by *telling others what we do right?*

Luther gets in a high dudgeon about this topic in the Heidelberg Disputations. What he objects to is all boasting about the ***really actually good*** things we do. Like feeding the hungry. Helping the sick. Being kind. Being inclusive! When we boast about those things as though we have had any part in them, when we accept credit in any way for any of those truly good deeds, he says we have fallen into a trap.

This is clearest in Thesis 27:

Actually one should call the work of Christ an acting work and our work an accomplished work, and thus an accomplished work pleasing to God

by the grace of the acting work.

Those of you who had Richard Caemmerer's book for preaching will remember his distinction between goal, malady, and means—three topics for discussion in a sermon. Briefly: Goal=love. Malady=sin. Means=the cross of Christ. What Luther says in Thesis 27 is that when we talk about the good we do as something *we* accomplish we are confusing the goal and the means. To brag about any of the good we do ("I made breakfast for Christine this morning," or "I preached a really good sermon," or "My congregation built two homes," or "Our denomination has become much more inclusive-looking") as if we had something to do with bringing it about, we are wrong. Those things, when they happen, (and, thank God, they do happen!!) we should speak about as things which God in Christ has accomplished in us. They are done in us. By the grace of God working in us. So there is nothing to brag about but the grace of God.

Reserve the active voice for Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. Use the passive voice to talk about our part in such good things.

Let's face it, we are all insufficiently critical (especially of ourselves!). We are "hypo-" critics. Not only us Crossings people, but all Lutherans. All Christians. All people. We fail Jesus' litmus test of hypocrisy even if, with the rich young ruler, we have "done all these things right ever since we were young people." As Jesus said (Luke 17:10) "So you also, when you have done all that you were ordered to do, say, 'We are worthless slaves; we have done only what we ought to have done!'"



I am indebted to David Rhoads' article several years ago in *Currents in Theology and Mission* for his breakdown of hypocrisy in Matthew. He found Jesus judging four sorts of hypocrites: e.g., those who say one thing and do another, or impose burdens but don't help people bear them. But I disagree with Rhoads when he says that

. . . the interpretation of the Law by Jesus, in Matthew's portrayal, empowers people to carry out the full measure of the law in righteous integrity and without hypocrisy, which brings life and salvation. The result of such behavior will be a just society. As leader of the people, Jesus the Messiah lives what he teaches and is therefore a model to follow. [David Rhoads, "The Gospel of Matthew: Righteousness before the Law," in *The Challenge of Diversity: The Witness of Paul and the Gospels*, Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1996, 80f.]

When he says that "the result of such behavior [by us] will be a just society," he's doing what Thesis 27 warns

Your contribution to the Crossings Community will sustain our efforts to proclaim the superiority of the righteousness we have from Christ through the Gospel over the shoddy, so-called righteousness we cobble together on our own. Please donate to

- the upcoming conference (esp. to scholarship seminarians and first-call pastors)
- the Legacy Fund
- the support of our general operations

Please use the enclosed envelope. Thank you!

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us against. Using the active voice to talk about the good things we do, instead of the passive. As though the world is saved by our acting more like Jesus.

This is not a technical point, it is very important. And it is for this reason I encourage you to come to the conference in January. We may not be a great community, but we

continually call each other to account on this particular score. (That is why we accept criticism with good grace.) We seek to reinforce and double-reinforce what we consider the excellent point Luther made in "Heidelberg" and elsewhere, about who and what saves the world—and it isn't us. We open ourselves wide, under the Law of God, to how badly compromised we are in every way and how hopeless our situation is; we face the fact of the grave's victory over us. Then, hearkening to the Gospel, we rejoice at the efficacy and goodness of God's promise to those who repent. We get life!

The church is fascinated and deluded by achievements. Congregations long to be seen to be vibrant. We pastors wish for many new people to show up and then become members. We especially want young ones, with families, helpful and generous ones, active ones. We all want to *see signs* that we are making progress toward some vision we have cast.

Such a church needs an aw shucks organization like ours, whose efforts are desultory and results unimpressive, but one where we give more than lip service to the notion that *crux sola nostra theologia*—the cross alone is our theology. For we have this *treasure . . . in earthen vessels*.

For details about the upcoming conference, and to learn other ways we struggle to be useful (and the Holy Spirit works in us!), go to www.crossings.org. And please do the best you can to help our effort by contributing to Crossings using the enclosed envelope. We would be honored and very pleased if you would also contribute to the Legacy fund.

Marcus Felde