



C is for Correction

(another word for Reformation)

What are we correcting/reforming? Well, congregation life, for one. What's wrong with it? Read on. We are blessed to have that kind of correction from one of our best and most creative Crossings colleague's, Jerome (Jerry) Burce. He is the Senior Pastor of Messiah Lutheran Church, Fairview Park, Ohio. He is also the author of **Proclaiming the Scandal: Reflections on Post-Modern Ministry**. Most of all, he is deeply rooted in the Reforming and Promising Cross of Christ. Pastor Burce has prepared a crafty and insightful examination of just where we are in the early 21st century in American worship life together (Who do we worship, again? Not the triumphant America, but the Triune God). It is more than amusing. It is honest. Also with God. You won't always get that, not even on Sunday morning. But you will if you are among the many blessed hearers of Pastor Jerry Burce. But don't thank him. You might get corrected, and with a knowing smile. "It's not about me. It's about Jesus, thank you very much." We are, nonetheless, grateful for this servant of Christ's cross in our midst. So please, this once, accept our thanks, Jerry, for getting us on the correct (right, righteous) path.

Michael Hoy

Q. What's required if the congregation I serve and the others I'm yoked with are going to survive as outposts of the mission of our Lord Jesus Christ?

A. Correction. Repentance. The Original Sending Spirit's Intervention. Now. (God Save us!)

The following is an imagined conversation with the Rev. Martin A. Johnson, alter ego of a certain senior pastor who serves these days at SubGeneric Lutheran Church, Metroburbs USA. For "alter ego"

you can also read "voice inside the head," the one that refuses to mind its tongue and spends its days yelling at its long-suffering host, who does. Pr. Johnson, be it said, approves wholeheartedly of his host's careful attention to the output of the Crossings Community and to his habit, by now instinctive, of employing the distinction between the Law and the Gospel in his preaching and pastoral work. For the sake of getting the most out of Pr. Johnson, we've assigned the interview to the savvy editor of Local Church News, a small Metroburbs monthly. LCN will ask a question or two that we wouldn't dream of posing ourselves.

LCN: Let's start broadly. What's on your mind these days?

MAJ: These days? As in early September? The usual, what else? Cranking up for the fall. Sunday School, the confirmation program, Bible classes. Watching to see if attendance rebounds post-summer. Wondering who's going to drop the ball this time when it comes to tracking down the lag-gards. Wondering too if that building program we just kicked off is going to get funded. Speaking of which, that Gospel lesson we heard last Sunday was a punch in the gut.

LCN: Which one? How so?

MAJ: You know, the one about the fellow who pours the foundation, slaps on a roof, and then stands there like a goofus unable to finish. Talk about premonitions.

LCN: We sense some angst, do we?

MAJ: Well sure there's angst. There's got to be angst. Angst, remember, is the base-line mood of

Old Adam, and we've all got great thick rolls of that grim creature draped around our necks. That's Luther's image, by the way; one of his better ones. Anyway, Adam the Old can't help but dread the future, and dread it he always does, all the more when he's prancing around in a great thick hide of braggadocio—something the American Old Adam seems especially fond of doing, by the way.

LCN: But why the dread?

MAJ: Because he—Adam—is canny enough about the world to anticipate the lurking of nasty happenstance around every corner he approaches; and deep down he understands that if and when it pounces he'll have somehow deserved it. Take me, for instance. Whose will be the fault, do you think, if the saints of SubGeneric do a thumbs-down on the capital campaign? Or if, for that matter, they simply quit coming to church?

LCN: But that's not likely to happen, is it? We're told that you're the strong and stable congregation in your neck of the woods. How many members, eighteen hundred?

MAJ: Thereabouts. Minus the deadwood, about fifteen.

LCN: And you worship how many on Sunday?

MAJ: Say again?

LCN: How many people do you worship on Sunday?

MAJ: Stop it! "Thou shalt worship the Lord thy God and him only shalt thou serve."

LCN: C'mon, you know what we mean.

MAJ: Of course I do. And I refuse to play along, so don't ask me to.

LCN: But that's a bit precious of you, isn't it? Half the American church is suddenly talking like this and you know darn well that in five years—ten at the outside—Webster will have blessed it.

MAJ: Yes, and Webster's business is selling books and online advertising. New idiom is his stock in trade. If and when it crops up, his only proper ques-

tion is whether the new usage is sufficiently planted in the public mouth to merit a listing. It's not his job to vet it for sin. That's what you and I get paid for.

LCN: So tell us about the sin. "You worship 500 (let's say) every Sunday." What's wrong with that?

MAJ: How about the silly self-defeating laziness of it? Used to be you'd ask "What's your average worship attendance?" Now it's "how many do you worship?" What have you saved, three syllables? And at what expense? You've planted human beings in God's place as the direct object of the verb "to worship"—Old Adam's Original Sin, yes? And when I point this out, then you have to fall all over yourself protesting that you're not doing that, that you're simply giving the old word a new twist. Which, I'll grant, you are; only it seems like a lot of extra effort to go to for the sake of trimming those three little syllables. That's effort compounded, by the way, if you keep talking like that and the day comes when you have to explain what "worship" is to a confirmation class. And this, of course, is the least of the problems.

LCN: And the greater?

MAJ: Start with the fact that old meanings aren't easily supplanted. They hang around. They haunt and infect whatever you're aiming to say in your new using of the word. "We worship 500." Americans idolize statistics. The stink of that clings to whatever's being said here—"Thee We Adore, Packed House of Ours." Second problem: As soon you start talking like this you start forgetting what a miracle it is that anybody shows up on Sunday at all, at least in those places where the Word of God is rightly divided and the Gospel of Christ Crucified is flagrantly preached. Miracles, remember, are things that God pulls off—the Holy Spirit, in this case, inducing faith in Christ or at least the hankering to hear more about this Jesus fellow and what he's about.

Only suddenly, in the new formulation, all this is beside the point. We're running the show, worshipping that 500 as in putting their backsides in the pews or at least attracting them there. Whatever it takes, right? That means jazzy music and cutting edge visuals. It means messages, not sermons, delivered by speakers, not preachers, said speakers all smooth and smiling. Pretty soon it means Jesus dethroned—first from that

annoying, confusing cross of his, then from his rightful position at the heart and center of human history and every hour thereof, the present worship hour in particular. After all, I'm in charge now. I'm worshipping the five hundred, remember? I'd prefer to worship six hundred—it'll look great on my resume. So to that end I'll prattle on about the God that people can please, if only they'll try a bit harder. That sells well. Old Adam loves a challenge. Ancient Eve does too, all the more when it's pitched in achievable steps with winning stories to cinch the point and encourage her on. If that means pointing to Jesus, fair enough. Just make sure that when you do he isn't standing there festooned in that ridiculous crown of thorny scandal he so likes to sport. Do not be hinting that Eve and Adam somehow **need** this guy to get somewhere with God—or in their personal lives, which is really what they're focused on. Do that, and they'll hear you calling them inept, incapable. You'll hurt their feelings. They won't come back.

LCN: Sounds to us like you're hammering on the evangelicals. Unfairly, we might add. Hysterically, even.

MAJ: Call me a caricaturist. That I'll accept, so long as you remember that whoever I'm mocking, it isn't the person per se but the old creature draped on that person's neck as stubbornly as he hangs on mine. I'm by no means the only preacher who does angst and dread. Some do it a lot more cleverly than I do. Or to put that another way, their fig leaf aprons are a whole lot prettier—more effective by far at warding off the immediate chill. I don't hold a candle to Joel Osteen, let's say. But to your other point: am I picking only on evangelicals? Not at all. Take, for example, my own outfit, the one that seems hell bent these days on reinventing itself as the ex-Lutheran leg of the American Protestant Union, Blue. We don't talk—yet—about worshipping people, not widely at least. But we're as madly in love with numbers as any evangelical, and that love is driving us crazy because we're losing the game. Our Lutheran numbers keep slipping.

LCN: Why do you think that is?

MAJ: My goodness, where does one start? The laws of sociology, demography, economics, social psychology, all of them enter in deeply, I'm sure. How, I can only guess, and I won't waste your time doing that. My specialty of sorts is theology, so that's where I tend to look.

LCN: And what do you see?

MAJ: I see a church that's making a persistent hash of two key words. One of them is "Gospel," the other "mission." We're abusing both as badly as the other crowd is abusing "worship," albeit in a somewhat different way. A dumpier, less imaginative way, come to think of it, though equally rooted in laziness. Truncation as opposed to appendage.

LCN: How so?

MAJ: Well with "worship" the New Speak vandals have tacked on a connotation that wasn't there before. With "Gospel" and "mission" it's a matter of abandoning connotations that have been there from the Church's beginning, though too often tucked from view through our propensity

to talk in shorthand. By the way, you can see that propensity at work already in the Letter of James. "Be doers of the word," he writes (1:22), without bothering ever to specify which word he has in mind. He simply takes it for granted that we'll know this—which maybe we do, or then again, maybe we don't. Anyway, preachers have been carrying on like this ever since, often to the Church's calamity. We're in calamitous times today, I think.

LCN: Because?

MAJ: Because hardly anyone these days, saying the word "gospel," wants to take the time to spell the thing out the way St. Mark does, chapter one verse one: "The Gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God." And even that's a form of shorthand, a mere headline, prelude to sixteen chapters and a few thousand words

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about the fellow, a man for sure and much more by far, who turns God's regime on its head, forgives sins, gets killed for it, and then is raised—by God!—to keep the new thing going through the Spirit-driven witness of his followers. “That,” says Mark, “is the good news **I**m talking about.” But more and more we've stopped filling in the blanks. You can walk into most any church associated with my outfit and you'll hear the word “Gospel” repeated over and over again. Too often that's all you'll hear, as if the preacher has forgotten that gospel means good news and that “good news” has got to have a referent. Good news about what? About whom? Who's it for, and if for me, then how is it good for me, or newsy, as in something I haven't heard before?

LCN: If you'll pardon our saying so, so what? What has this got to do with calamity?

MAJ: Lots of things. Start with the fact that if we don't spell the good news out the way Mark does, or Paul, we've got nothing to offer you. Nothing, that is, that you aren't going to find in every other God-joint in town, and not just the Christian ones. Last I heard both synagogue and mosque do God and prayer, community and ethics. And if you're determined for reasons of culture and heritage—prejudice, perhaps—to find these things strictly in a Christian setting, then why would you pick the Lutheran church? Culturally we're an acquired taste, like liver or Scotch—hard enough to enjoy even at their best; impossible when the quality is low-grade, as it usually is. Down the road they're serving beer and chicken, and they're doing it with flair. Why is anyone surprised that the better run outfits, the ones with the snappier cooks and the sharper sense for the public palette, are “worshipping” their thousands? I'm not.

LCN: So you Lutherans aren't attractive. And the public isn't checking in.

MAJ: It's worse than that. They're pulling away. There used to be, what? Nine million of us—in America, that is? And now it's seven million tops? You'll know the numbers better than I do, I'll bet. In my section of Metroburbs we've seen three churches fold in just the past five years. Another four are on the brink. Meanwhile the rest of us sit there looking on. Or when, as recently happened, our judicatory pulls us together to discuss the situation, we babble.

The fellow moderating starts off by asking us to identify our “mission.” Up pops an earnest lay person: “To make God present in the lives of people.” Say, what? Yet no one challenges this. No one thinks to observe, if ever so gently—she is, after all, earnest, and yes, she's trying—that she's talking nonsense; that it isn't our job to make God present in people's lives; that God's presence in every life is constant and intrinsic, an axiom of existence, not a breath drawn unless God blesses the lungs that suck the air in. Or the cop busting you for speeding: that too is God's presence in your life. What lacks is an awareness of this presence. Remember, “the people walk in darkness.” They also “hate the light.” Eve senses God's presence in the garden, and what does she do? She cuts and runs. She has to. She doesn't have a choice. She's naked, ashamed, and God's presence scares her witless. She wants nothing to do with it.

Not that anybody in our conversation points this out either. Comes the moderator's next question. “What are our ‘core values’?” “Diversity,” says one. And others: “Intergenerational ministry.” “Ecumenical relationships.” “Peace and justice.” Finally the retired pastor, the wise and quiet, decides to chip in. “Our core value,” he says, “is Christ in Word and Sacrament.” And the room yawns. Audibly, almost. You ask about calamity? There it is.

LCN: What's so bad about people getting excited about diversity and justice and cooperation between churches?

MAJ: Nothing at all. Unless they get overly excited about them. Unless they quit calling them “values” and start calling them “core values.” As if diversity is our defining characteristic. As if relieving hunger or playing nice with other religious people is our chief gift to the world. As if matters that used to be of enormous concern to Lutherans—to prophets and apostles too, come to think of it—are suddenly passe. Righteousness, for example. Or faith, or salvation. How did they vanish from the radar?

LCN: How do you think?

MAJ: Through sheer inattention. There sat “gospel,” the most important word in our entire vocabulary, and we stopped paying attention to it. We quit wooing it. We knew we were married to it and so we used it, but we didn't honor it. You honor a word when you ask

what it's about and what it's doing in your mouth. You honor it best when you crack it open, tumble out the contents, and sift through them for a while to see what's there. With the best words you'll do that again and again, expecting every time to be surprised by something you didn't see the last time you looked. Well, we quit doing that with our word "gospel." As you know, neglect is always costly, and the longer the neglect the bigger the price. Right now we're paying big time.

LCN: For instance?

MAJ: Let's start at the bottom and work our way up. One, we're babbling, all of us. It's not just the layperson at a low-level meeting, it's the high church official at a solemn assembly, collar and all. Who do you think that layperson took her pointers from? Second, we're lapsing quickly into irrelevance. Who needs a church to foster diversity or to bandage sores or to wave the flag about global warming? If that's what we think our mission is—remember, mission derives from core values; one does as one holds dear—then guess what? The secularists beat us to it, and they're doing it better than we ever will. What's more, they're doing it as God's servants, not that they'll admit this. That's one of the marvels of God's law, by the way. It works in us and through us without regard for our faith. Atheists too will hug their children, put food in their bellies, and tuck them into bed at night; and God's will-of-the-moment for those kids gets done, even without their prayers. Without the church, for that matter.

If all you can tell me when I stop into visit is that you're in the business of doing good deeds, I'll likely answer that I can do my good deeds with other outfits that don't make me sing hymns first. And we wonder why the pews are getting empty. On to price number three. This is the big one. We're tempting God. We're toying with his wrath. He sends his Son into the world, gets him pinned on a cross, and we've stopped asking why. If pressed we'll dredge up ancient formulae—Jesus died for our sins—that we haven't thought through and don't especially believe. "Me? A sinner? How rude of

you to say so." Suddenly we're a step or two away from agreeing among ourselves that the whole Jesus exercise was a needless waste of time. Which, you'll recall, is something we find that other crowd doing, the ones who worship people. "Let's get that crucified guy out of sight where he won't bother the newcomers and scare them away." I won't speak for the others. For our Lutheran part we ought to be ashamed of ourselves. Much more to the point, we had better repent, beginning yesterday. There comes a time, remember, when the gardener notices how dead the branch has gotten to be. That's when the pruning shears come out. For all I know the chopping has already begun. Maybe that's what our sliding numbers are finally all about. I wouldn't be surprised.

LCN: You talk about repentance. What does that look like? What does it entail?

MAJ: It entails coming to terms with a piece of Jesus' testimony about himself. Sermon on the

Mount: "Narrow is the gate that leads to life." And who or what is this narrow gate? "I am," says Jesus, John 10. This is a tough word for lots of folks in my outfit these days, especially the trendsetters. They've got us hustling down paths the secular left has long since blazed, no veering allowed lest our secular friends should frown, I suppose. So yes, we celebrate diversity, whatever that may mean. We revel in pluralism. We abhor exclusivity, especially of the nasty religious kind. How dare one posit that "our way is the better way," or even more appalling, that it's the only way. Yet this is precisely what Jesus asserts—my way or the highway, as in the big broad road that leads to destruction.

Lately we've taken to sweeping that word into the corner along with others like it. The "no other name" passage, Acts 4:12, comes especially to mind. Repentance means turning back to look at that again, this time with the prayer that the Holy Spirit, intervening, will turn the lights on for us. It means retrieving some dusty old questions from that same heap in the corner and this time tugging at them until they start to spill their beans. For example, why is the apostolic witness so obsessed with the death and



Martin A. Johnson a k a Jerry Burce

resurrection of Jesus? Why was it “necessary” that the Messiah should suffer that dreadful crucifixion (Luke 24:26)? Why is the apostolic mission so blatantly Christocentric, the job being to gush not with generic God-talk but with Jesus-specific talk (Mt. 28: 18ff., Acts 1:8)? Why is St. Paul determined at Corinth “to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified” (1 Cor. 2:2), and why is “knowing Christ Jesus my Lord” of such “surpassing worth” to him that he happily discounts every other feature of his makeup and biography (Phil. 3:8)? Or how about this: is Jesus serious when he speaks of the Son of man being ashamed of those who were ashamed of him and his narrow, exclusive word (Mk. 8:38), and if he is serious, should that trouble us, and why?

LCN: OK, let’s say there was a sustained movement in your church’s seminaries and pastoral corps to do what you’re prescribing. What do you think might come of it?

MAJ: Many things, all good. For starters, a reduction in the blasphemous dumbing down of God and a growth in what the Psalmist calls the fear of the Lord. You and I might call it a sober assessment of who and how God is. It would mean a rediscovery of the terrible paradox that without Christ in the picture God’s goodness is bad for us, fatal in fact. Second, a more honest appraisal of who we are and who we are not; of what we’re obliged to do and what we don’t have a prayer of pulling off. I see the word “sinner” reentering our vocabulary. Third, a shelving of the skeptical rubbish that’s been flowing from projects like the Jesus Seminar, and an outbreak of fresh interest in the classic account of Christ’s dual character as God-for-us and us-before-God, with particular attention to the earth-shattering consequences of the crucifixion that result from this.

Fourth, a new appreciation for the essential role of trust in appropriating the everlasting benefits of Good Friday and Easter. Fifth, the emergence of a fresh crop of gutsy preachers who are fixated on sparking and encouraging this trust, and are equipped to do so. They’ll look us in the eye and tell us that the crucified dead guy, raised by God to be our judge, is the best thing going for us and for all the world, and we’ll itch to believe them because we’ll be seeing how they believe it, and how their eyes are dancing with joy and hope because of it. Sixth, we’ll

finally regain our wits on the subject of the Church’s mission. We’ll understand what Luther meant when he described the word and promise of Christ as “the true treasure of the Church” (Thesis 62), the one and only gift that never quits giving. And yes, we’ll want nothing more than to pass it along.

LCN: That’s quite some list. You left one thing off, though, and I’ve got to ask. If all these things came to pass, do you think you’d start to worship more people in your churches? You’ll notice, I’m saying this now with tongue in cheek.

MAJ: OK, I’ll let it slide, but only this once. Third strike and you’re out. But no, I can’t say what might happen with our church attendance. I said it earlier, the presence of a single person at worship is a miracle of the Holy Spirit who blows where the Spirit wishes. Our job is merely to throw down the seed. To the Lord belongs the increase. If it can ever be said that a person walking into any one of our churches will be almost certain to leave having heard the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, then I’ll be content. Until then, the fuss goes on.

LCN: One other thing. You dreamed just now about gutsy pastors who revel in the Gospel. Is that merely a dream?

MAJ: If you’re asking, can you find such pastors in our churches today, then yes. Of course you can. Many more, I’ll bet, than the Elijah in me is ready to admit. I’ve heard that a bunch of them will be getting together in St. Louis a year from now for the Second International Crossings Conference. It’s scheduled for the third week in October. Some very solid lay people will be there too. It’d encourage you to check it out.

LCN: Any last thoughts?

MAJ: Please pray for us. As of today we’re in peril. Ask God to save us.

LCN: We will.

Jerry Burce

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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