

CROSSINGS

Lent 2017 | Vol 125 | From the Crossings Community

C-R is for Crossings Rigor

That's what Steve Kuhl brought to the biennial seminar that happened in January at our usual meeting site, the Shrine of our Lady of the Snows in Belleville, Illinois. Thanks chiefly to Steve, the 40-plus attendees were treated to a workshop in the classic style that our founders, Bob Bertram and Ed Schroeder, developed in the 1980's. We enjoyed it so much that we asked Steve to write a summary of the proceedings for the benefit of the entire Crossings community. You'll find it below. We trust that as you read you'll find yourself giving thanks to God, yet again, for the gift of the Gospel. These thanks are the very thing that rigorous attention to the Crossings Method is meant to produce—or so we pray.


Cathy Lessmann

O-S is for Organizing a Seminar

Last minute. It's not how I like to work. Still it's how I and others *had* to work to organize the January seminar. Tasked with developing the topic, I had planned on other things, perhaps a

rerun for Americans of work I had done in October at a Crossings workshop in Singapore. Then came November. Headlines erupted. Donald Trump was suddenly the U.S. president. Responses to a Thursday Theology discussion of that astonishment showed a pressing need in our community for more discussion of it. So I swiveled, as servants of the Gospel are all too often called to do. The gift of Christ is meant in the first place for immediate hurts.

Within a day or two a new topic was being advertised on our website. Here's what visitors saw:



So Where Is God Now?
Tracking and Crossing Our World
After November 8, 2016

A Crossings Training Seminar

January 22-24, 2017
Our Lady of the Snows Conference Center
Belleville, IL (near St. Louis)

You can imagine the challenge this topic presented us. Could we have a deep, honest *theological* discussion on such a *politically* charged aspect of American life? As it happens, this is precisely the kind of challenge that a thorough Crossings-style

analysis is designed to meet. Unfolding in three phases, the analysis begins by examining a slice of daily life, however disconcerting, with honesty and repentance. We call this “tracking.” Next comes “grounding,” as we run a Biblical text through a six-step inquiry to unearth its law-and-gospel resources. Finally, we put these two together in a move called “crossing,” so that the gospel can speak to the issue at hand with integrity and hope.

“Tracking” can be likened to what cultural anthropologists call a “thick description” of the world in which we live. It entails not only the most obvious facts, but also the best accounting human reasoning can give of the interconnections, the meanings, the human motivations and assumptions that accompany those facts. Thus, our first task at the seminar was to “track” our American world in light of what happened on Election Day, November 8.

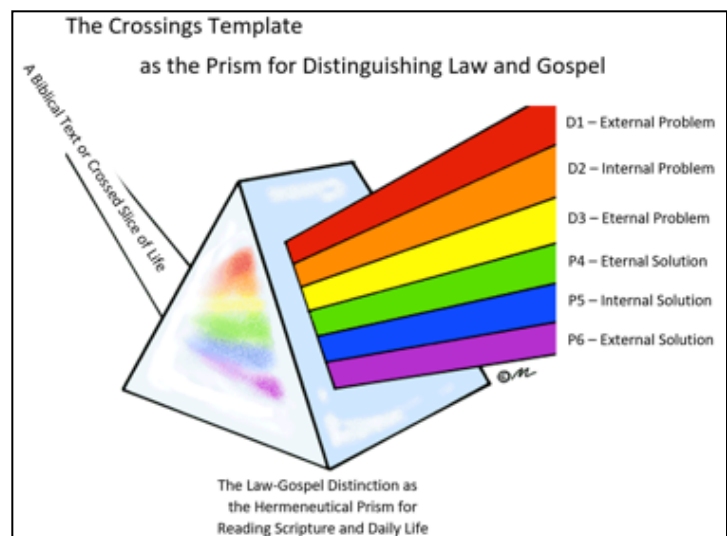
I took the lead on this, drawing on research from a variety of social commentators and day-to-day observers of America’s capitalist-democratic system. For additional insight I invited contributions from **Martin Rafanan**, who has spent a lifetime working on advocacy issues for the working poor, and from **Pat Keifert**, who brought his expertise as a researcher and consultant in congregational life and the church’s public engagement in society.

The upshot of the Tracking was that the November 8 election signaled a “legitimation crisis” that is simmering in the American psyche. Americans are not only pitted against one another on the basis of their diverse self-interests, race, gender, social location and class groupings, but they lack confidence that the American way of life (“the marriage of capitalism and democracy”) is able to bring about economic fairness and social cohesion.

Vast numbers of people think the system is “rigged” against them (for which there seems to be lots of evidence) and they *resentfully* blame one another for their discontents. Mr. Trump seems to have effectively exploited this discontent. He also seems to have no interest in addressing it. Creating chaos worked in the campaign, fomenting chaos also seems to be the strategy for governing.

Pat Keifert commented on the contempt that seethed between groups and parties throughout the campaign. Many read it as hatred of those we despise. It was rather a resentment of those who have what we covet in a system rife with inequality.

The “Grounding” focused on the Epiphany Texts for this past year, specifically, Jesus’ “Sermon on the Mount” as presented in Matthew’s Gospel. As you may remember, the Grounding is a methodical unpacking of a biblical text so its law/gospel message becomes clear. I shared an illustration I recently developed of the six-step method we follow in Crossings, the image of a prism. A prism takes white light and breaks it out into the color spectrum that comprises it. That’s what the law/



gospel prism does with a biblical text. It takes the text and breaks it out into its constituent parts: three progressively deeper levels of diagnosis of the human problem (with the world, the self and God) and three correspondingly hopeful levels for healing of that problem through Christ.

The key text for the seminar was Matthew 4:12-23, where Jesus begins his ministry in Galilee by calling three fishermen (Peter, James and John, people like us) to become also “fishers of people,” i.e., partakers in Jesus’ saving work for a world mired in darkness and death. You can find my full refraction of it through the law/gospel prism online titled: [“Business as Usual and the Unusual Business of Jesus.”](#) In a nutshell, the text analysis goes like this:

BAD NEWS

Diagnosis of the human condition

D-1 – Fishing:

Minding our own business by attending to business as usual.

D-2 – Obscurity of Sin:

Probing deeper. Business as usual takes place in the symbolically significant land of “Zebulun and Naphtali,” a land of deep darkness, unaware of its sin and God’s judgment.

D-3 – The Reign of Death:

Probing still deeper. The land of darkness and obscurity is finally a land of death, a sentence that God himself has pronounced upon it.

GOOD NEWS

The Prognosis in Christ

P-4 – Enter Jesus, the Reign of the Kingdom:

Jesus enters our world, confronts the reign of death head-on in his cross and comes out victorious in his resurrection. The Kingdom/reign of Heaven is coming near.

P-5 – Clarity of Faith:

But even better. Jesus’ first word to us is “repent,” a shocking word of clarity about our sinful situation, and, then, “follow me,” a surprising word of clarity about the new land, the new regime, the new hope, to which Jesus now leads us.

P-6 – Fishing for People:

But even better still. Business as usual (that is, minding our own business) is no more. Our business now becomes the unusual business of Jesus and our ultimate concern becomes rescuing fellow fisher-folk from the obscurity and morbidity of life by inviting them to become repentant followers of Jesus with us.

“Crossing” is the apex step of the crossings method. It is a deliberative process of relating the “Tracking” to the “Grounding” with the intent of doing to our daily life experience what the biblical writers did for theirs: enfold it into the promise of Christ. Without a doubt, it is also the most difficult and tentative part of the process. Three “experts” took a stab at crossing what we know about post-11-8 America with the Epiphany texts: Steve Kuhl, Michael Hoy, and Jerry Burce. However, here, I want to give you a rendition of the crossing that Ed Schroeder did in a post-seminar email reflection. He is still the master of the method.

Steven Kuhl



BAD NEWS

Diagnosis of the human condition

D-1. Business as Usual in America.

The election reveals a deeply divided America that is frustrated with business as usual. That is true for both the so-called right and left. The capitalist economy works for billionaires but not for regular Americans. The chief blame fell on the current political leadership, described as elites on the left, who have “rigged” the system in favor of themselves, and on corporate elites and freeloading interlopers (undocumented immigrants, welfare gamers, etc.)



Two Others Enliven the Seminar

*Pat Keifert (left)
shared his wit and
wisdom.*

*Martin Rafanan
(right) shared his
experiences and
passion.*



The reigning idea is to “unrig” the system by running government like a business. So an electoral majority elected Donald Trump president to do that: a self-acclaimed super-businessman who says he alone is able to “make America great again,” by making the American way of life (the marriage of capitalism and democracy) work again for everyone, that is, for everyone who is a legitimate American.

To many it sounds convincing, to others it sounds like “false advertising,” but that, in effect, is where the election leaves us: divided. The only point of agreement is that America is in bad shape. Like the exiled, biblical land of Zebulun and Naphtali, for many, America is facing a “legitimation crisis”: the “America promise” lacks credibility, the boast of “American exceptionalism” lacks substance, and the claim of being “the land of opportunity” lacks evidence.

D-2. America’s Darkness—Misplaced Faith in the American Way of Life

Probing deeper, America today also sits in a darkness that is very much like the darkness in which Zebulun and Naphtali sat. In America’s case, that darkness is the intrinsic trust it puts in the American way of life, the “marriage of capitalism and democracy.” That marriage has been the focal point of trust for many years and, as the current political rhetoric reveals, it still is regarded as the focal point of trust by both so-called liberals and conservatives alike.

But that marriage is darkness. For to run government like a business is as benighted as to run human marriages like a business. Caring for one another and making a profit are simply apples and oranges. The purpose of democratic government is the care of people; the purpose of capitalist economics is to make a profit. Those are

irreconcilable differences. Even darker is the belief that a president could reform this dark-marriage and turn it into light, into rescue, into “a viable form of life.” That is darkness because it fails to see the internal contradiction in the marriage and the evidence that it is crumbling.

D-3. America and the Reign of Death—Signs of Decay

Probing even deeper, America and the American way of life are headed for disaster—death! Here too the analogy to Zebulun and Naphtali are instructive. What is hidden in the darkness is our approaching death, exile, the end of the American way of life, and the collapse of the American Empire.

And surprise! Just as God signed Israel’s death certificate, the reality of which was exile, so God is in the process of signing America’s death certificate, the reality of which is the crumbling way of life. God is the one dismantling the capitalist/democratic marriage, the military-economic empire. Such empires can never fulfill the “love thy neighbor (selflessly)” commandment. To the contrary, they cannot think outside the (selfish) box of profiting from their neighbor, of exercising power over their neighbor, and of advancing their interests to the exclusion of their neighbor.

That’s why God’s first word to America is “Repent,” meaning “stop, turn around, you are going in the wrong direction.” But can we hear that cry over the chaos of our politics? The odds are not good. According to the Bible, the track record for empires concerning repentance is Zero. God has never let an empire “last.” Now it seems to be our turn, seeing how America is the prevailing empire at the moment.

GOOD NEWS

The Prognosis in Christ

P-4. Jesus Enters America with a New Deal—The Kingdom of Heaven

The Good News begins with the fact that Jesus not only entered Galilee back then, but that he is in America now, thanks to the Holy Spirit and a long chain of followers beginning with Peter and Andrew, James and John that now includes us, the Crossings Community. For wherever Jesus' chain of followers is, there he is also, just as he himself promised (cf. Mt 18:20 and 28:20). He is here in America with his new deal to rescue us from the same deep darkness and reign of death that plagues every geographical location: the death certificate God is signing on us and our way of life.

Ironically, the heart of the new deal begins with God's signing off on a new death certificate for his own Son, Jesus himself, but for equally ironic reasons. Jesus is consigned to death in order to destroy death by rising from the dead in order to replace the reign of death with God's new deal called the kingdom of heaven. This deal does not mean Eden restored or the marriage of capitalism and democracy saved or business as usual revived. Those things operate by debit/credit transaction, aka, the law, and end up serving only the reign of death. His new deal operates by the unusual business of extending mercy and forgiveness to those who sit in the region of death and ends up serving the resurrection of the dead.

P-5. Repentance as Clarity.

If the darkness in which America sits is its stubborn faith in its way of life, the marriage of capitalism and democracy, the good news is that that is changing as some Americans, at least, begin to gain clarity about the foolishness of that stubborn faith. That clarity begins with "repentance," that is, heeding Christ's word to "stop and turn around," and culminates in "following him," entrusting our future to him.

To be sure, at the present time there may only be a small remnant of America that has been given this gift of clarity, but I would venture to guess that that remnant is larger than the four that Jesus pulled

into clarity back then in the land of Zebulun and Naphtali. Might it not include the 40 who attended the Crossings Seminar? Might it not include you who are reading this newsletter? Might not America as a whole become a place that is more and more open to Christ's New Deal, especially, given the "legitimation crisis" they are sensing with America's present way of life?

It would certainly be a shame if America let that crisis go to waste. To be sure, this remnant in Christ might not agree on everything political about America in this post-Trump-election era. But it certainly can agree on the one thing America needs most: our repentance on her behalf borne out of faith, that spirit-given ability to repent not in despair, but in hope of the New Deal offered by God in Christ.

P-6. Appropriating the Unusual Business of Jesus as Our Business.

Even more, America needs our repentance and our faith spoken out loud and spoken in every geographical place we find ourselves. And that's precisely what Jesus authorizes us to do when he says "go, fish for people." To be sure, such speaking can be dangerous. At times it will more than likely entail an obvious bearing of the cross. But that is now our privilege as followers of Jesus. For in truth, it is really he who bears the cross for and with us in the give and take of daily life.

In addition, although the call to follow Jesus entails a break with the world it does not entail abandoning the world's politics and economics. On the contrary, it reinserts us into that world but now with the added new agenda Jesus calls "fishing for people." That phrase does not mean that everyone is to become a professional apostle as these four fishermen did.

The Kingdom of Heaven consists of neither a set of rules to follow nor a list of occupations to choose from. In such matters, we are free to decide on the basis of opportunity and the clarity of faith. Rather, when Jesus says "I will make you fish for people," he means that, whatever our worldly occupations or locations, there we will find people, like those Jesus found throughout Galilee, who will welcome the break from the world which the reign of Christ offers. So share it.

Edward Schroeder



Ed Schroeder signs copies of his book, Gift and Promise.

S—S is for Schroeder Signing

One of the highlights of the biennial Crossings Seminar in Belleville, Illinois was a book signing ceremony with Ed Schroeder. People brought or bought copies of Ed's new book, *Gift and Promise: The Augsburg Confession and the Heart of Christian Theology*, and he put his personal touch to their books.

The book shows how the theology of the Augsburg Confession is a gift for the world today. In the first three chapters, Ed Schroeder traces the "hub" of the Augsburg Confession – the promise of justification by faith alone – to its source in Luther's theology of the cross. The subsequent nine chapters, written by former students of Ed, demonstrate how that central hub is articulated in the various articles of faith that comprise the Augsburg Confession and is especially relevant for today.

Free copies of GIFT AND PROMISE are sent as a thank you in response to contributions of \$25 or more to Crossings, PO Box 7011, Chesterfield, MO. You can also receive a free copy by contributing to Crossings online. Simply go to www.crossings.org, click on the book icon and make your contribution.

I-N-G-S means that we are INDEBTED to and NEEDFUL of your GENEROUS SUPPORT

As Luther concludes his Small Catechism explanation of the first article of the Creed, he notes both how "indebted" (*schuldig*) we are to God for all that we have and how the only proper response to such indebtedness is "to thank and praise, serve and obey him." Indeed, so certain is Luther of this fact that he punctuates it with his characteristic "This is most certainly true!"

Two basic truths are embedded in this explanation of the creed: First, just because we "need" something doesn't mean we are entitled to it and just because we "have" something doesn't mean we have earned or deserved it. Rather, "needs" are supplied and "possessions" are had from God "out of pure, fatherly, and divine goodness and mercy." Second, since, as Luther also says, "God created me together with all that exists," we see that God supplies our needs and gives us our possessions through the very network of created things and neighborly relationships he has placed us in. In other words, God created us to participate in his divine goodness and mercy both as receivers and as givers.

In the spirit of that teaching from Luther, we at Crossings, Inc. give thanks to God for you! Through your generous support in prayer and your financial gift, you have been a good neighbor and an agent of God's goodness and mercy to us. For your partnership in God's amazing network of giving and receiving, we say: Thank you! Thank you! Thank You!

If you are a regular contributor to Crossings, we thank you and rejoice that you see value in what we do. A reply form and return envelope are enclosed for your convenience, and again, thank you.

Steven Kuhl

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