



CROSSINGS

WHERE THE GOSPEL MEETS OUR DAILY LIVES

Lent/ Easter 2018 | Vol 129 | From the Crossings Community, Inc

Up Weak Knees!

The theme for the seventh international Crossings Conference January 28-31 was “Up Weak Knees! The Power of the Gospel for Times Like These.” **Jerry Burce** and **Stephan Turnbull** grounded us in the conference text, Romans 1:16-17.

Burce introduced the theme Monday morning asking participants to name those things that distress us. He rooted these distressful things in our disobedience. “Yet,” he said, “the Lamb’s obedience is to wear our disobedience.” With careful exegesis Turnbull unpacked Romans 1:16-17, revealing the cruciform shape of the way God exercises power.

Tracking the troubled times for which our knees require bracing was **Francisco Herrera** of the movement “Decolonizing Lutheranism.” The decolonization Herrera called for was not from our theological heritage but from a cultural definition of what it means to be Lutheran.

David Zahl, director of Mockingbird Ministries, joined in tracking our troubled times with a presentation titled “Charlottesville: I Live There. What I’m Thinking Six Months Later.” Feeding the nihilism of our times is a perfectionism in which the good life is no longer good enough. We no longer have the resources of theology or ritual to

acknowledge the problem is ours. So, we project it on others. Such scapegoating escalates to seeking revenge. In such times the gospel is indeed good news.

Crossing the word of God with the life situation tracked is the crucial third step.

Kathryn Kleinhans, dean of Trinity Seminary, crossed Romans 1:16-17 with

our troubled times in a presentation titled “For Such a Time as This: The Power of the Gospel in a Divided World.”

She drew her theme “For such a time as this” from the book of Esther, Mordecai’s words to Esther as Haman plotted to exterminate the Jews. For such a time as this God made Esther queen. “What kind of time is this,” Kleinhans asked. We see partisanship



Kathryn Kleinhans opening day two of the conference.



(Left to right) David Zahl, Francisco Herrera, and Stephan Turnbull

dividing us. The deeper problem is individualism, the old Pelagian heresy. The final diagnosis of our times is that empires always fall. This is God's judgment. Such bad news forces us to look away from ourselves to what God is doing. We see King Jesus, crucified, risen, and reigning. The Lord is our righteousness. We won't find it in our individual efforts. Faith in Jesus frees us to understand what government is for and to exercise our citizenship, according to Galatians 5:13-14, loving our neighbor as ourselves.

Matthew Becker, professor of theology at Valparaiso University, joined in the effort to cross the word of God with our world by offering "knee bracing" from the teachings of Werner Elert and Bob Bertram. "Thou shalt" is our primal experience of God. "But we can't" is our primal response. Ultimately we are enemies of God. That is as deep a dilemma as there is. God rescues us from "We can't" by hiding our lives with Christ. "He can." And Christ's life is hidden with God. In Christ God frees us to be someone else's liberator.



Lori Cornell rounded out the conference by leading us in the six-step Crossings method for Bible study. This method keeps Jesus' death and resurrection for us at the center. Then Jerry Burce, in a *tour de force*, grounded us in Mark's Gospel as "The Right One for Dark Times."

Conference papers will appear in full in the Thursday Theology blog and be available on the website www.crossings.org. The conference theme is from the hymn "God, My Lord, My Strength."

Up, weak knees and spirit bowed in sorrow!
No tomorrow shall arise to beat you down;
God goes before you and angels all around;
On your head a crown.

Meet Conference Attendees

Pictured here are **Pastors Nathan Hall** and **Bradley Haugen** attending their second Crossings Conference. They were roommates at Valparaiso University, class of 2006, and graduated from Luther Seminary in St. Paul, MN.

They met their spouses at Valpo. Nathan and Laura have two sons, 3 ½-year-old Stephen and 9-month-old John. Brad and Jula are expecting a second child in July. Their first born is Robbie, 3 years old. Both are in their second calls. Brad serves Followers of Christ Lutheran Church in Plainfield, IL. Nathan is the pastor of the Lutheran Church of the Nativity in North Conway, New Hampshire.

When asked how Crossings impacts their lives and pastoral callings, both first cited the preaching task. Brad said Crossings helps him keep preaching at the center of the many pastoral tasks before him each week. And it keeps central the good news of Christ crucified and raised for us. Nathan commented that Crossings provides new images and channels for sermon preparation and helps him avoid superficial and moralistic sermons.

Both said that the Crossings focus on the external, internal, and eternal dimensions of Biblical texts and our lives helps them listen more deeply in pastoral conversation with others. They also expressed an appreciation for gathering at the conference with others who share a love of theology.

Brad said that when leading Bible study he is aware people assume we are the primary actors doing one thing or another for God. Crossings helps him reframe that assumption by asking “What if God is the primary actor?”

Nathan described using Crossings to design a curriculum for a high school summer camp that focused on the sense of worthlessness common among high school students and the worth bestowed on us through Christ. The resume they are building for college applications, the competition fostered by social media, and the pressure to make the grade give youth the feeling they can never be good enough. The Crossings model pushes the conversation deeper to the internal problem,



*(Top) Ed Schroeder opens Sunday evening with a slide presentation and Q and A's.
(Left) Jerry Bruce
(Right) Matthew Becker
(Below) Lori Cornell*



which they identified as putting their trust not in God but in what other people think of them. When pressed to consider what God might think about their situation, particularly their misplaced trust, they had a difficult time even considering that God might also evaluate them negatively.

Pastor Hall pressed on to the promise of the Gospel. God in Christ came as one of us. Jesus took on our worthlessness and God's judgment on us for our misplaced faith. He put these to death in his own death. As we live in Christ by faith we rise with him, freed from the oppression of these pressures to live out our lives as God's sons and daughters.

The youth at summer camp experienced what we all do. We resist hearing that our situation is bad enough to warrant God's censure. In the Smalcald Articles Luther says true repentance begins with listening “to a judgment such as this: ‘You are all of no account.... You may be as great, wise, powerful,

and holy as you could want, but here no one is righteous.’” The law drives us to the gospel. Paradoxically, we cannot acknowledge the truth about ourselves unless we have at least an inkling of “the consoling promise of grace through the gospel.”

Witness how these themes and the issues raised by Pastors Hall and Haugen play out in the following narrative.

Lively Use of Law and Gospel

I noticed a stranger in the back pew one Sunday. I keep my eye out for strangers. He was gone by the time I got out to shake hands at the end of the service. But he was back the next Sunday and the next. He made



himself known by coming up for communion, but always slipped out at the last hymn. He never wrote his name in the fellowship pad. He was like the homeless at the homeless shelter, who come to sleep within the safety of the walls of the patio built just for them. They come inside for a shower and to wash their clothes and for a meal. But they will not register their names or stay inside overnight. They are wary. They aren't sure what might happen to them. They don't trust anyone enough. This man was like that.

One Sunday, though, he stayed through the final hymn and came through the line to introduce himself. He was Don, just Don. That was the Sunday he heard me say in the sermon, “You need to die,” which is harsher than John calling his congregation a brood of vipers. That was the Gospel reading on this particular Sunday (Luke 3:7-18). I didn't tell them they needed to change. I told them, “You have to die.” Actually, what I said was “The old sinner we are, the old Adam and Eve need to die.” But the Holy Spirit

filtered out the qualifiers. All Don heard was “You have to die.” And he knew it was the truth.

Some months before, Don walked out on his wife of more than twenty years. He stretched thin the bonds of their marriage with a string of affairs. He had two daughters: one in high school, the second just finishing college. He walked out on them, too. He described nights of debauchery, his term, at one of those places advertised in ½” ads at the bottom of the sports pages.

Don’s older daughter was planning her wedding and she called him. She wanted him to walk her down the aisle. She didn’t ask for money. She wanted him only to be part of the wedding. She wanted him in her life. That brought him back in proximity with the church. Not a physical proximity to the church to which he belonged. He couldn’t walk back into that place. But picturing the wedding in the church where he and his family had worshiped all those years got him thinking about the songs and words and the kind of man he had hoped to be. His daughter’s call and her wedding brought him back in conversation with his wife. In one of those conversations she said to him, “Come home, Don. Just come home.”

The effect this had on Don -- his daughter’s kindness and his wife’s invitation -- the effect it had on him was that it forced him to look at the kind of man he had become. He was disgusted with what he saw. That disgust was the means the Holy Spirit used to get him to cross town to hear this comfortably middle-class pastor who didn’t even know he was impersonating John the Baptist that day. Don was already in the wilderness. When he heard me say, “You need to die,” he knew it was the truth. And so, he died with Christ.

That offer was in my next breath. After saying “You need to die,” I said, “Come die with Christ and rise with him forgiven and changed.” Hearing this is why he stayed to introduce himself to me. And it’s why he came to see me the next day the way those who heard John came to see him. The word of judgment is good news when it is coupled with forgiveness and repentance.

The next day, toward the end of a long conversation with me, Don asked, “What shall I do now?” I led Don into the nave and stood with him by the baptismal font. I handed Don a copy of the worship book as I grabbed one for myself. I asked him to turn to the brief service called “Individual Confession and Forgiveness.” I asked, “Are you prepared to make your confession?” Don said he was. Together we read verses from Psalm 51 concluding with “Have mercy on me, O God, according to your loving kindness; in your great compassion blot out my offenses. Wash me through and through from my wickedness, and cleanse me from my sin.” At my invitation, Don summarized what he had told me in my study.



Kris Fahey and Steve Kuhl lead worship and (below) Candice Wassell preaches.



Together we read more of Psalm 51, “Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me. Cast me not away from your presence, and take not your Holy Spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of your salvation and uphold me with your free Spirit.” I asked him, “Do you believe that the word of forgiveness I speak to you

comes from God himself?” He answered, “Yes, I believe.” Following the order of service, I laid hands on him and said, “God is merciful and blesses you. By command of our Lord Jesus Christ, I, a called and ordained servant of the Word, forgive you your sins in the name of the Father, and of the + Son, and of the Holy Spirit.” As I said “the Son” I marked his forehead with the cross. I reminded him this cross was first traced on us at our baptisms. It is traced on us in ashes every Ash Wednesday. I said “Peace be with you.”

“And also with you,” he replied as we shook hands. We stood looking at each other. Don asked, “What shall I do now?” I said, “This is not hard. The answer to this is obvious. Go home. Your wife has called you home. Take it as God’s voice gathering you home. Your shame has turned to rejoicing.” He did. He went home. He walked his daughter down the aisle. The father of the bride often sheds a few tears as he walks his daughter down the aisle. Usually he does not bawl his head off.

Bruce Modahl

The Crossings Community Inc.

Box 7011 Chesterfield MO 63006 + 314-576-7357 + www.crossings.org + info@crossings.org