



C-R is for “Creator’s Rights”

Once again we are blessed to hear from dear Australian Crossings-colleague, John (Joe) Strelan. Joe has been a professor of theology in Australia for many years, and is now retired. But his wisdom has been a blessing to us in his presence at our last Crossings International Conference, and we are doubly blessed that he will be with us again at the forthcoming Second International Conference this October. Joe shares with us a piece he presented to fellow clergy on Reformation Day just this past year, fitting also for this time when there are celebrations of Independence in America or anywhere else. Yet it is not independence that is crucial, but dependence, rooted in God and in Christ. Joe gets us back to that. We thank him for his contribution here.

mhoy

On July 4, 1776 the Congress of the United States of America declared:

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness...

What do you think of this claim? Are life, freedom and happiness ‘rights’? Lots of Australians would say Yes! My life is my own to live as I like; I am free to do what I like when I like; happiness is owed me—by God, by society, by the government, by everybody!

Life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. The Reformation has a different take on these so-called ‘unalienable rights’. It says that these things are not rights, but **gifts** from God. Let’s look at these gifts.

O is for “Out,” in the Public - with the Gospel

Life. For many people life doesn’t make much sense; it doesn’t have any goal or purpose. People desperately want their lives to have a purpose, a goal. But they don’t know how and where to find such a life.

A few years ago an Australian magazine reported on life in a town in rural New South Wales. It’s a town under stress. It’s becoming economically redundant. People are experiencing mental health problems, alcoholism, drug addiction and domestic violence. ‘The kids here are lost souls’, says one storekeeper. ‘What do I hope most for?’ asks 17-year-old Jess. ‘That I die pretty quick’.

The Gospel offers a response to this hopelessness and sense of despair. It tells of life with a plot, with a beginning, a middle, and an end, a life with signposts, with a plan and purpose and goal. This life-with-a-plot is the Jesus story. When it intersects with our story it becomes a life-saving and life-changing story. Jesus’ life becomes our life; his story becomes our story.

How does this taking on of the Jesus story happen? It starts with a call. The Holy Spirit calls people to be ‘in Christ’, to share Christ’s life and Christ’s future. The means by which the Holy Spirit calls people to Christ is the word of God, the gospel of salvation, the Holy Spirit’s powerful, life-changing story of Jesus.

If this gospel is to do its job, it has to be publicized; it has to get out to the public. This is our task as Christians: to tell out the Jesus story and invite others to become part of that story. We are called to call.

Many of us first received the saving call of the Spirit at our baptism. There we entered into life, Jesus' life. When the Name of Jesus was spoken over us, we were committed to him as Lord. His story became our story, his life our life.

But remember, for this new life to begin, there had to be a death: Jesus' death for us, on our behalf, and our death with him. We old sinners don't like that idea, because we think there's a lot about us that is pretty good, far too good to die. But that's how it has to be if we are to have true life in all its abundance. The old self has to be put to death, it has to die. Or as the Catechism says: it has to be drowned in the waters of baptism.

The shape of the baptized life is cruciform, cross-like. That's because the baptized life is one of repentance and faith. Repentance is not just feeling sorry or saying sorry. Repentance means the death of the old self, the daily deathing that God does to us in order to give us new life. Faith, however, means trusting God's word of forgiveness and life, taking on the life of Jesus Christ and walking his way, the way of the cross. I'll say more later about the cross-shaped life. For now let me sum up: The only life worthy of the name is life in and with Christ. It alone has an

eternal purpose and goal. This life is not an 'unalienable right'; it is gift, the gracious gift of a generous God. It comes to us with the compliments of our Lord Jesus Christ.

S is for Slavery (Overcome)

Life...Liberty. In a famous essay, Martin Luther set out two propositions concerning liberty and bondage. The first is: **A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none.**

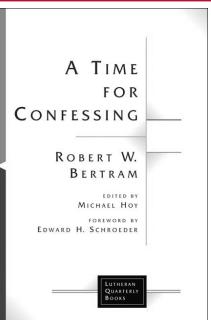
Ever since sin first enslaved man and woman, the human story has been one of slavery and enslavement. Over the gates of the Nazi death camps in Europe was the sign: *Arbeit macht frei* –yes, if you worked hard enough you'd achieve for yourself the freedom of death before you were gassed or burned to death by others.

In India today, poor, debt-ridden parents sell their children into slavery. Five-year-old boys are chained to carpet looms; they work at the looms for 13 hours a day, six days a week. One meal a day. By the time they are twelve their spines are contorted, hands crippled with arthritis. Slavery.

Then there's enslavement of the will. Like: slavery to gambling. Australia's 20 million people **lose** eleven billion dollars on gambling each year – that's more than twice the world's second biggest loser (the USA). We have less than 0.4% of the world's population, but 21% of the world's poker machines. Some people do it for fun; for many it's an addiction, slavery... like addiction to drugs and alcohol and other chemicals which destroy a person's wellbeing.

How do we get to be free from these slaveries, all of which have their roots in our slavery to sin? The Reformers said that true freedom is rooted in our relationship with God. God's word sets us free. Luther wrote:

The person who has the Word of God is rich and lacks nothing, since this Word is the Word of life, of truth, of light, of peace, of righteousness, of salvation, of joy, of liberty, of wisdom, of power, of grace, of glory, of every blessing beyond our power to estimate...Conversely, God can send us no more terrible plague upon people than a famine of the hearing of his Word.



Come, Discuss, Learn! about "A Time for Confessing" by Robert Bertram

Spend the day discussing the contents and contexts of "A Time for Confessing" and also "Postmodernity's CRUX" (found in the Appendix) with editor Michael Hoy and Ed Schroeder

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At the Pre-conference

All conference attendees will receive a free book

See enclosed brochure for registration & more details

A famine of the hearing of God's word. God preserve us from such a famine! *If you continue in my word, Jesus said, you are truly my disciples. You will know the truth and the truth shall set you free.* The truth that sets us free is the Word himself, Jesus Christ our Lord. It is our relationship with him which determines whether we are free or enslaved. It is a relationship in which I respond to God's call, and I hang onto God's promise of life and freedom.



Joe Strelan

S is for “Servant” (Overcoming, in Love)

The second of Luther's proposition on slavery and freedom is this: **A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all.**

This is the big twist, the big surprise of the gospel. Popular values say the only way to be free is to avoid taking responsibility for others. Look after number one. You want to get ahead? Step on others, put them down. Do unto others before they do it to you.

To which the Reformation says, Wrong! The true freedom of a Christian is found in becoming a servant. Such a person lives by the word of God, which calls him or her to service in the footsteps of Christ. Luther had a clear vision. He said: those who are curved in on themselves cannot come to themselves. In order to find ourselves we must be taken out of ourselves by God's word of grace and forgiveness. God breaks through our preoccupation with ourselves and our worrying about what God thinks of us and what we can do about it - and voila! we are free... to serve others.

In the gospel God says to us: don't worry about me; I've attended to our relationship. Trust me! You just worry about your neighbor. This is a scary kind of freedom. The only 'rule book' is written by the needs of our neighbor at any given moment.

I is for “Imag-ination” - living Christ’s Image

Life...liberty...the pursuit of happiness. Happiness is part of the Australian dream, and the pursuit of happiness is a lifestyle. It helps, of course, if you can get religion on your side to validate your pursuit of happiness. So Christianity is drawn into this fascination with happiness. Faith, it is claimed, should make life easier, it should neutralize conflict, release tension – in short, faith should guarantee the good life. Become a Christian and you'll get an ironclad guarantee of earthly happiness.

Wrong, said the Reformers. They insisted that true happiness is to be found in the last place you'd look for it: under the cross. The cross is our only hope. 'The cross', someone said, 'is a symbol of life on the boundary between life and death'. It's a sign not only of Christ's life, but of the life of every Christian. The 'cross' includes personal suffering and sorrow, but also conflict and opposition because we are Christians. We should not run away from such things.

Contrast this attitude with the fake Christianity which teaches that if you really have faith you will enjoy great health, you'll never have problems, and you'll have financial success. You'll be happy. If these things don't happen to you, then there's something wrong with your faith.

Can You Help Out?

Crossings would love to help some of our international friends attend the conference but we simply don't have the funds. We need approximately \$3,000 per person. For example, Ed Schroeder has been writing (on Thursday Theologies) about Ar-mencius Munthe in Indonesia who is using our Crossings six-step method to teach pastors how to preach. We would love to have him join us.

Can you help? Simply mail us a check (or use PayPal) and mark it "international guest travel."

We are also looking for donations to give scholarships to seminary students and others needing assistance (\$300 each). Mark that "scholarship fund."

See enclosed brochure for more conference details.

WHO DO YOU SAY “I AM”? : GETTING HONEST ABOUT GOD TODAY

Crossings Second International Conference

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Hospital chaplains tell us that many patients are totally unprepared to deal with the fact of their own illness. It cuts clean across the philosophy of happiness. It's not fair: I have the right to be happy, not to be sick, not to suffer. Marriage counselors report that many couples approach marriage in the belief that in marriage they have the right to enjoy perfect happiness. So when the going gets tough the marriage is seen as a disaster. Solution? End the marriage as quickly as you can.

In such a situation the religion of happiness-as-a-right is not much help. If you want to be realistic about life, take off the rose-tinted glasses and see life as it really is. Then you'll realize that what is needed is a faith in which the cross is central, a faith which takes seriously the weight of pain and suffering and frustration and sin. A faith which regards the cross not as a symbol of resignation and hopelessness, but as a sign of hope in the very teeth of suffering and opposition.

How can the cross give such a positive attitude to life? Luther answered: in the cross (Christ's cross and our cross) God comes to meet us. In the cross

Learn the Crossings Six-step Methodology

In response to your requests and suggestions, we have allotted more time and staff to teach the Crossings six-step methodology as a pre-conference workshop. Jerome Burce and members of the Crossings writing team will spend the entire day Monday, October 20, first walking through the six-step methodology and then applying it.

In addition, for those unable to attend the pre-conference or for those who choose additional training, the "d" option in each breakout session will provide such opportunity.

we see our actual connection with Christ. The cross is evidence of our fellowship with Christ. The cross shapes us to be like him. And being like him, being conformed to his image is, as Paul says, true happiness.

Life. Liberty. Happiness. None of these are rights. All are gifts from God. Sometimes, our quality of life is not what we would wish it to be; sometimes our freedom is curtailed; sometimes happiness seems to be a vague memory. Nevertheless, on our better days we acknowledge the gifts and the Giver behind the gifts, and we rejoice to share them with others.

N-G-S *is for “[Good] News Getting Shared”*

Some years ago I conducted a Call meeting in a congregation. The name of a certain pastor was proposed. I said that he has a real heart for mission. One person responded: 'We don't want a missionary; we want someone who will preserve the truth'. Preserve the truth! Keep it to yourself.

Sometimes we are told to preserve our Lutheran heritage. Hmm. You only preserve dead things. We have a **living** truth to share, a **living** heritage, centered on the good news of life in Christ, freedom through Christ, happiness with Christ under the cross. There are a whole lot of people out there who need, desperately, to hear this good news. Sharing with them what you have is the best way of keeping what you have.

John Strelan

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.