

### *C is for Conflict*

<sup>7</sup>And war broke out in heaven; Michael and his angels fought against the dragon. The dragon and his angels fought back, <sup>8</sup>but they were defeated, and there was no longer any place for them in heaven. <sup>9</sup>The great dragon was thrown down, that ancient serpent, who is called the Devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world—he was thrown down to the earth, and his angels were thrown down with him. <sup>10</sup>Then I heard a loud voice in heaven, proclaiming, “Now have come the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God and the authority of his Messiah, for the accuser of our comrades has been thrown down, who accuses them day and night before our God. <sup>11</sup>But they have conquered him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, for they did not cling to life even in the face of death. <sup>12</sup>Rejoice then, you heavens and those who dwell in them! But woe to the earth and the sea, for the devil has come down to you with great wrath, because he knows that his time is short!” (Revelation 12:7-12)

**“And war broke out in heaven.”**

The reference to “war” in this text for Michaelmas strikes an all too familiar tone for us. Yet texts like these can be horribly distorted, for there is no shortage of apocalyptic thinking in our war-torn world. Feminist Catherine Keller is right to notice how far apocalyptic emphases abound in both Christian and Islamic fundamentalism. Even though these fundamentalists see themselves as sworn enemies, for all their differences, their ideology is essentially the same: each claims to be the “good” engaged in conflict against others who are regarded as “evil”; yet

each fails to see the evil they commit. In the Christian tradition, we have a name for this kind of apocalyptic thinking: Manicheanism.

But St. John is unveiling for us a deeper apocalyptic vision, a Michaelmas vision, where we get to celebrate with Michael and all his angels. Michael (*Michael*) means “Who is like God.” And the name of Michael should draw us to the Name that is above every name: Jesus the Christ. **He** is like God, He is God’s presence. And He, together with his angels, fights the truly apocalyptic struggle on our behalf, “for us and for our salvation” as we confess in the creed, against “that ancient serpent, who is called the Devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world.”

### *R is for Revealing*

Apocalypse means “revelation,” “un-veiling;” and what is “un-veiled” is not only God, but also ourselves.

Good apocalyptic theology is going to have two revelations. One of those revelations (about God, but also about us—God revealing us) is not all that flattering. In fact, it is downright condemning. The other revelation (about God in Jesus the Christ, and also about us—God revealing us through our faith in Christ) is more promising.

We start with the “unveiling” of God’s judgment (under the law) in order to appreciate more clearly the “unveiling” of promise in Christ.

If ever there was a good metaphor to describe ourselves in the “unveiling” of God’s judgment, there is the word from the text above, “deception.” It might seem that is the Devil’s problem. But it is also clearly ours as well, since we are the ones deceived, and deceiving others. The evil presence is seen in so much deception at every level of our earthly life.

It exists in governments that deny their own accountability, deceiving us instead to fear for our lives and to protect our own security. It exists in businesses and corporations that don’t let on how deeply they are hooking us as well as themselves on their market of greed, deceiving us instead that this is what it means to live by “free” enterprise. It exists in churches that seem righteous and holy, but deceive the truth of sins past and present (even among its representatives among the clergy), or in embracing “alien gospels” like “God Bless America” or strategies for successful church growth as the real mission of the church, rather than repentance and the forgiveness of sins. It exists in us when we come to believe that we must be our own saviors, rather than relying on the One who can save.

It just goes to show how deep and down-to-earth the conflict is. It is not in some far away place, but very much here on our turf—precisely where the Evil One, we are told, has been “thrown down” (for heaven’s sake), here working us “woe.”

Consider also that the Devil, who aids and abets such deception, is also seeking to keep us veiled in the greatest deception of all—that judgment and wrath is our **only** revelation. He is called, in fact, “the accuser.” And the accusation is made “day and night before our God” who finally must judge. The truth of this condemning revelation is that God **does** hold us accountable for all our sins and deceptions in life. In the lens of the law, **God’s** law, the glory in which we were once created has faded. The image is broken.

## *O is for Other (as in An-Other, also quite revealing!)*

We could not overpower this array of forces set against us: the Devil, our own deceived flesh, and the deserved accusation. That is not to discount the truth of that revelation; but it does lead us to trust an-other, more merciful revealing that comes to us through Jesus the Christ.

**The** Revealing we need unveiled is God’s own merciful solution (a solution that is also revealed in us by faith) that crosses-out the revealed problem we have with God and God has with us.

The Other Whom God un-veils for us is the One Promising *Mi-cha-el*, Jesus the Christ. God does not leave us in the revelation of the “great wrath,” but gives the yet greater revelation of the “loud voice in heaven, proclaiming, ‘Now have come the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God and the authority of his Messiah....’”

Whatever accusation the Devil has to bring, even to the point to get saints who have a promising Lord to the point of despair, it is all “because he knows his time is short.” Jesus the Christ cuts it short, triumphing over the Evil One through his own death on the cross. There all the accusation in the world against us—a mound of evidence to be sure—is overcome. The unveiling of deception and accusation gives way to an-Other unveiling, the un-veiling of mercy and forgiveness. God has sent his Messiah to have the final authority, and to conquer “by the blood of the Lamb,” such that there is no accusation to keep us down under the law or under the thumb of the evil one. We have God’s Final Word on that, un-veiled, unfurled as a banner of love and wholeness and healing for us all.

## *S is for Seeing*

Yet the good news is even better, for we get to see this unveiling of promise already by faith. We get to see the revealing of *Mi-cha-el* fighting for us, defending us over any and all accusation, making not only heaven holy but us as part of holy heaven. Trusting

that God's Champion has authority over all other authority, even that of divine accusation, makes us agents of victory and hope by faith. "They have conquered him by the blood of the Lamb by the word of their testimony, for they do not cling to life even in the face of death." Who is this "they" but we ourselves, together with all the saints, who see through all that we would hold on to in life—the reason we deceive—by finding that even in the face of death there is life that comes through him who died for us and is risen from the dead!

This is how we see the revealing through to its completion. Seeing in the revealing of God's wrath our own dying-deceptive being with all its final accusation, we also get to see the revealing of God's solution in Christ who conquers the accusation and frees us to see ourselves as those who are no longer deceived, proclaiming the testimony of the conquering Lamb. We are seen in a new light, a new glory, regardless of how the world or the devil may see us. And seeing this truth by faith, we see the unveiling of ourselves among the saints of God.

## *S* is for Singing

"Rejoice then, you heavens and those who dwell in them!" The struggle of faith goes on as we stand side-by-side with *Mi-cha-el*, our friend; but not without a song of victory. The very struggle is one of planting His Seed for a new vision and a new hope, a new heaven and a new earth, over this devastated, deceived, and accused world.

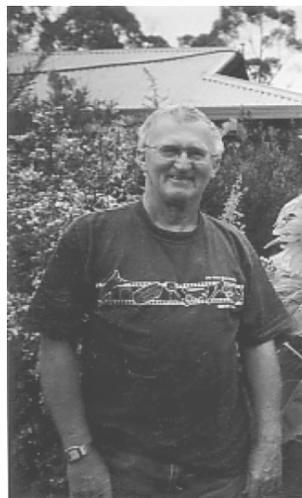
Singing the tune of Jesus the Christ means singing the tune of the life and wholeness that has become ours through him, who has conquered for us, through his own blood and death on the cross. It is a song that takes us from death into life.

Consider now how close heaven comes to us all by faith. We already sing along with the heavenly host. In fact, we become like the angels of heaven ourselves. For what is it that the holy angels do but bear the testimony of the good news, rejoicing in the victory of the blood of the Lamb.

We get to celebrate with Michael and all his angels. That's an unveiling, an Apocalypse, that's worthy of rejoicing. *mhoy*

## *I-N-G-S* is for "In (Papua) New Guinea, (there's) Strelan"

There is no deception when we are "Honest to God." Crossings is hosting an "Honest-to-God Gospel for Today's Church and World" international conference this coming January, 2007. There's still plenty of time to register, and you can do so on-line at [www.crossings.org](http://www.crossings.org).



*Joe Strelan*

Niedner (Valparaiso University), Robert Kolb (Concordia Seminary, St. Louis), Marcus Lohrmann (ELCA Bishop), and Robert Schultz (Elert scholar). See ad, page 4, for the list of outstanding presenters.

In addition, we are offering a pre-conference on Monday to learn the "Crossings method." Leading it will be an entertaining trio, our own Jerry Burce, Ed Schroeder and Sherman Lee.

Two keynote speakers are home-grown, Ed Schroeder and Kathryn Kleinhans. The other two come from the international church: Rudolf Keller (Lutheran Church of Bavaria, Germany) and John (Joe) Strelan (Lutheran Church of Australia). We thought we'd whet your appetite by telling you more about our speakers. In this issue, we feature Joe Strelan. Here's his story, told in his own words:

"Seventy years ago my father wanted to call me Martin, since I share a birthday with **that** Martin. But my mother prevailed with 'John'. Not that it mattered:

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everyone calls me Joe. I have six brothers and 3 sisters. Five of us are pastors. Our father must have been a quiet role-model. We have some interesting family gatherings.

I inflicted my first sermon on a helpless congregation when I was a few months short of my nineteenth birthday. Since then I've been practicing how best to share the gospel which is my lifeblood...51 years and counting.

God has given me plenty of learning opportunities: I started my ministry in an Australian parish and finished in an Australian parish; in between: a few years in a mission circuit in the highlands of Papua New Guinea (PNG); and then a seminary lecturer in Papua New Guinea, Australia, Germany, and Canada over a period of 30 years or so. I did my doctoral studies in St Louis; my dissertation was on the history and theology of Melanesian cargo cults. I've written half-a-dozen books (on cargo cults, vocation, commentaries on Ephesians, 1,2,3 John, and Revelation), many journal articles, and lots of book reviews.

In PNG I was one of two foundation members of Martin Luther seminary faculty. After one year we were joined by Bill Burce (Jerry Burce's father); Bill and I were colleagues for 20 years. Later I served for ten years as 1<sup>st</sup> Vice President of the Lutheran Church of Australia (this was punishment for being on the

golf course instead of at Pastors Conference, when I was nominated). I can't say I enjoyed being VP, but it did give me an understanding of the struggles of many pastors and congregations, an awareness of how few pastors and people actually translate the freedom of the gospel into the responsibilities of the everyday, and a view of the national and global church which influenced my thinking about what matters and what doesn't matter in the church.

Now in retirement I preach occasionally, teach occasionally, write, make 'things', garden, play golf, read, and visit the grandkids (times four). I met Bronwyn in PNG. We've been married 41 years, and have 4 grown children: a professor of psychology, a pastor, a busy mother, and a flight attendant. Bronwyn's favorite interest is working on a Camp Quality puppet team."

When I had first invited Strelan to share his story for our Crossings readers in this newsletter, I asked him which name he preferred to go by, John or Joe. He wrote back that he really didn't care, but even his wife Bronwyn didn't know his real name was John until their wedding.

Truth be known, his name is angelically joined with the Name above every name, Jesus the Christ. And we are all the more grateful for his partnership with us in the gospel, even joyously so this Michaelmas!

*mhoy*

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