

Assorted Gospel Tidbits—Some from Luther, Some from Others

Colleagues,

“Summertime and the livin’ is easy,” Bess (of Porgy and Bess) sings to us in that American classic opera. Revised Schroeder version of that libretto is “Summertime and I’m just a tad lazy.” So herewith some tidbits that have accumulated on my desk—not all of them from Luther, but most. The Luther items come from my attempt to find documentation in his own writings for what I’ve said he was doing in hermeneutics. Which is, that he was consciously replacing the nature-and-grace hermeneutics of scholasticism with the law-and-promise hermeneutics, that “Aha!” he found in the Bible itself, that he once called his own “breakthrough.”

A number of you have made suggestions where to look, but I haven’t found (yet) him saying that flat-out, so I keep on keeping on. But I have found interesting stuff in some of the Luther stuff you have recommended. So I pass these gems on to you.

Peace and joy!

Ed Schroeder

I. LUTHER STUFF

Law-Gospel Distinction—a Very Thin Tradition You (will) find nothing about this distinction between law and gospel at the universities, among the professors, or the

theologians—not even in the church fathers. Augustine knew a bit of it, but Jerome not at all. Where this distinction is not preserved, Christian doctrine cannot be preserved either.

Luther: Galatians Commentary (1531) commenting on Gal. 3:19.

Pull That Little Foot Back Under

Anyone who believes in Christ is righteous and holy by virtue of God saying so, lives—and already is—in heaven, is enveloped in the heaven of mercy. Yet while we rest in the father's lap, clothed in the finest garment imaginable, it sometimes happens that our feet come out from under that garment, and Satan seeks to bite them in whatever way he can. Like a child we kick and scream. We are still flesh and blood, and the devil is still there.

Yes, we are holy and free in faith, but not so in our flesh. We still have feet that need washing, for they are dirty, and therefore Satan is able to bite and torment us until those feet are clean. What to do? Pull that little foot back under the garment! Otherwise you will have no peace.

Luther: Third Disputation against the Antinomians (September 1538)

One Is Your Master

In matters of faith you must build on God's word—solid and certain—so that if I myself should go crazy and recant or deny my own teaching, you would not depart from it. Instead you would say: Even if Luther himself or an angel from heaven taught something else, let that be anathema. For you must not be Luther's pupil, but Christ's. It is

not enough for you to say: Luther, Peter or Paul said this. No, you must in your own conscience perceive Christ himself as the teacher, and unwaveringly sense that it is God's word, even if the whole world fights against it. So long as you do not have that sense, you have not yet tasted God's Word. You are still "hanging your ear" on a human mouth or human pen, and not from the depths of your heart on the Word. You still do not know what Matthew 23:10 is saying. "Call no one on earth your master, for only one is your master, Christ." "The master teaches in the heart, yet does so through the external word of his preachers. They press it into the ear, but Christ presses it into the heart."

Luther: Receiving Both Kinds in the Sacrament (1522)

Promises, Promises, Promises

[And here a bunch from the final pages of Luther's Lectures on Genesis, his last major effort as Doctor in Biblia at Wittenberg University. They focus on this equation: "Gospel = Promise," sometimes also portrayed as an "Aha!" for him that was a long time coming.]

Our flesh...resists faith and the promise. It wants to be a lawyer only, not a theologian. But legal justice does not lead us into heaven. No, the promise and faith do this.

In the past, in so many churches, religious bodies and schools of higher learning, no statement or doctrine has ever been heard about the Word. Today, with the light of the gospel restored, whenever we hear the Word mentioned we understand it to be the promise. At that time...nothing at all was taught about the promises.

If you do not trust the promise, you have nothing. Through

faith and the promise, however, you already possess the kingdom of God.

I certainly would have had to perish had I not been set free by God. For I knew nothing about the promises My experience was like that of the monk who was surprised that so many doctors in the papacy had never taught anything about the promise of God.

Formerly, when I was a monk it was by no means customary to speak of a promise. And I give thanks to God that I may live at this time, when this word "promise" resounds in my ears and in the ears of all the godly. Whoever hears the gospel easily understands the divine promise, which was obscure and unknown to all the theologians throughout the papacy.

But it is the chief subject of all Holy Scripture to know and understand God when he makes a promise.

Fear and faith should exist in the hearts of men, because a promise and faith, like a threat and fear, are correlative. There is no promise if faith is not present; and, on the other hand, there is no faith without a promise.

The promises of God call for faith and these two, faith and the promises, are correlatives. For without a promise we cannot believe and without faith the promise amounts to nothing and is abolished.

The histories of these Old Testament saints should be preferred to all chronicles of the achievements of Hannibal, Scipio, and Alexander the Great. Although these chronicles were held in high esteem among Greek and Latin authors, they are by no means to be compared to these. For

they lack this glory of a divine quality; they have no promise.

[Luther is frequently arguing with other interpreters of the book of Genesis—both Christian and Jewish theologians—whom he thinks misread the Hebrew text. Over and over again his major complaint is: “they pay no attention to the promises.”]

The scholastics have enveloped the text of the Bible and the altogether beautiful light of the promises in horrible darkness, so that no one could understand or know the doctrine concerning Christ and his kingdom.

But we have the promises. [Luther cites four texts from the Psalms.] On these promises we rely and we are confident that God has been reconciled to us and hears our sobs and prayers.

A few tidbits from more recent voices:

II. THE PLATZREGEN IN MADAGASCAR [From a retired (but not really!) pastor in Chicago] June 7, 2007 Yesterday we returned from places afar, including Madagascar. Amazing . . . stuff like going to a Antananarivo Lutheran congregation at 6:15 a.m. on Pentecost Sunday morning and finding the place already packed out for the 6:30 Service – 3500 people in the sanctuary and more gathering outside, ready for Lutheran liturgy, hymns, Eucharist, good sermon (I got it via translation from a lady sitting next to us) and space in the 3 hour service for casting out demons. That was the first Pentecost Sunday service; the second followed at 11 and # 3 at 3 p.. Pentecost Monday is also celebrated – 189 confirmed, 29 baptized, and 11 weddings. There are things happening among Lutherans in Madagascar...

III. A "JUSTICE" AHA!--AND THEN A BETTER OFFER?Dear Ed,
Your letter to the editor of The Lutheran [ThTh469] is overly long, as you pointed out. You could have been more succinct if you just pointed out that a Kingdom of God, with "a world of peace and justice" would not be much fun for God. Because to fulfill the "justice" part, all of us would be in hell, and God would be all on his lonesome. But it would be "peaceful" with all that emptiness.

Really, my dear, give it up. The Lutherans left you a long time ago. Come on over to the Presbyterian Church in America. Theologically, you're already pretty much there, in a scary sort of way. LOL John Knox was really a fun kinda guy.

Fondly, Your armchair lady-theologian in Mississippi

IV. ANOTHER "CHRISTIAN MESSAGE" AND THE VIRGINIA TECH MASSACRE[For the VTU conversation we've had recently, a Lutheran pastor, now retired after decades in campus ministry, just sent in this 304-word homilette. His addenda to the original Christian Message that was offered at the University's convocation the day after the massacre are in CAPS.]

We gather this afternoon for many purposes: to weep for lost friends and family, to mourn our lost innocence, to walk forward in the wake of unspeakable tragedy. We gather to share our hurts and our hopes, our petitions and our prayers. We gather also to drink deeply of religious streams which have refreshed parched peoples for generations. We gather together....Weeping, oh yes, we weep with sighs too deep for words, out of inexpressible pain--but also affirming the sovereignty of life over death.

CHRISTIANS THROUGHOUT THE WORLD JUST CELEBRATED THAT

VICTORY ON EASTER. THE RESURRECTION OF JESUS CHRIST THAT FIRST EASTER MORNING WAS GOD'S PROCLAMATION THAT DEATH DOES NOT HAVE THE FINAL WORD. ALL THE GOOD FRIDAYS OF THE WORLD CAN NEVER BE THE FINAL WORD. THERE IS LIFE AND HOPE BEYOND DEATH AND DESPAIR. GOD'S LIGHT IN CHRIST ULTIMATELY OVERCOMES ALL DARKNESS.

At a time such as this the darkness of evil seems powerful indeed. It casts a pall over our joys, joys as simple as a glorious spring day on the drill field. Yet we come to this place to testify that the light of love can not finally be defeated. Amid all our pain, GOD'S light shines in the darkness and darkness has not overcome it. We can not do everything, BUT WITH GOD'S HELP we can do something. We can not banish all darkness but we can, by joining together, TRUSTING GOD'S PROMISES, push it back. We can not undo yesterday's tragic events, but we can sit in patient silence with those who mourn. As we share GOD'S light, one with another, we can reclaim our campus. Let us deny death's power to rob us of all that we have loved about Virginia Tech. Let us cast our lot with GOD'S PROMISE OF hope in defiance of despair.