

Mid-summer items on Law and Gospel

Colleagues,

Mid-summer items on Law and Gospel– Item #1.

From Tom Droege, retired ELCA pastor in Atlanta, Georgia, comes this report of something I don't get to see at my current venue. Many of you on this listserve probably don't either. So I send it on to you FYI and FYE: for your information and for your enjoyment.

Dear Ed,

I can't resist sending you a few excerpts from Martin E. Marty's last M.E.M.O in the Christian Century, entitled Law without Gospel. He's commenting on permission to post the Ten Commandments in public buildings, including schools. He says, "Who worries about Lutheran consciences, or the distortion of Lutheran teaching that is implied by inscribing the image of the commandments on the classroom wall?" After briefly describing the distinction between law and gospel, he quotes the Lutheran Confessions. First the Apology (=Defense) of the Augsburg Confession (1531): "The law always accuses us and thus always shows us an angry God," and then the Smalcald Articles [S.A.](1537): The law is "the thunderbolt by means of which God with one blow destroys both open sinners and false saints."

Should we go along with the House bill and give children the law without the gospel? S.A.: "Some, who hate the law because it forbids what they desire to do and commands what they are unwilling to do, are made worse thereby..." "Others become blind and presumptuous, imagining that they can and do keep the law

by their own powers...Hypocrites and false saints are produced in this way.” and “Where the law exercises its office alone, without the addition of the Gospel, there is only death and hell...”Marty’s comment: “By posting the Ten Commandments without also posting the gospel of Jesus Christ, the government is . . . accusing children, showing them an angry God, a destroyer, and, if they have normal desires but no gospel, they will be made worse, blind, presumptuous, hypocritical, false, accused, bound for death and hell. Of course, we Lutherans may be wrong about law and gospel. But we do, or should, or did have rights of conscience to persist in our error.”

Just wanted you to know that Lutheran theology is alive and well in the states, whatever its fate may be in Bali.

Tom Droege

Item #2

Last Saturday here in Bali Marie and I had our weekly Bali cultural exposure event—a cremation. This is one of the “musts” for tourists. [Which we protest NOT to be, since we’re “working” here and are staying a whole three months.] And there were lots of “them” there. But the deceased’s friends and relatives (not mourners, since a cremation is a happy occasion) far outnumbered us gawkers and camera buffs. Each little clutch of us on-lookers, under the interpretative care of the hustler who had recruited us, learned as much about what we witnessed as the guide was able to put into English. Ours had considerable difficulty.

It was a four-hour sequence, 11 a.m. to 3 p.m. Starting at the home where grandma had died, with several gamelan orchestras playing in different parts of the family compound, the

procession eventually formed. The food offerings surrounding the casket in the family sanctuary were then hoisted onto the heads of dozens of women. Grandma too was brought from her place out into the street and elevated into the top story of a 20-foot funeral pagoda, black-clad men doing the work and two of them finally climbing to the top to stand alongside the corpse. The whole pagoda itself was already lashed to a 20×20 bamboo timbered platform. When the body was secured at the top and the two sentinals in place up there, the entire structure was hoisted onto the shoulders of 40 (?) men and the journey began. Leading the procession were a gamelan orchestra, then the offering-bearers, then two obviously special women in sedan chairs on the shoulders of men ("doctors of death," is what we thought our guide called them), then another contingent of women shaded by a long white runner attached to grandma at the pagoda top, then the pagoda (men at either side with long poles to elevate powerlines that would have snarled the pagoda), then the friends and villagers, hundreds of them, then us outsiders. We must have walked a mile or more down a main street before entering the cemetery where the last rites took place. There was elaborate ritual before ignition, as well as during the long time of the LP-gas assisted flames. During all this several gamelan orchestras played again and a twelve-man dance group mimed grandma's final conflict, we were told, to get her soul free from that cindering body and on to its future.

With our guide's help we understood this teensy bit—and that brings us back (you thought I'd forgotten) to law and gospel. Two pillars for what we witnessed were immortality of the soul and immutability of karma, the law of just deserts: you will receive the next time around the kind of body you deserve from the round you've just finished.

If the soul is immortal, then one component of human existence is immune to the Law of God. One segment of me escapes God's

critical evaluation. But, says Biblical theology, souls are just as creaturely as bodies are, and therefore always under the creator's evaluation. So this Christian theology of God's Law is contrary to, yes, even a critique of, the ideology of the soul's immortality. Granted, such immortality has always had its promoters in the church's history. Yet its roots in the western world are in Greece and not in Biblical theology. It might even be that Plato got it from folks further east here in Asia.

As Biblical Law contradicts the soul's immortality, so God's Gospel contradicts (literally: "says no to") karma's immutability. The law's cycle of recompense is breakable – but only in one way that makes a real difference. Christ, so we claim in the Christian gospel, is the end of the law. Its cycle is broken "for righteousness for those who trust Christ."

So Law/Gospel theology, the theology of the cross, says no to both of these pillars of the liturgy we witnessed last Saturday. In limping fashion we tried to speak to that theme when our Hindu guide asked us about our Christian religion on the topic of death. But what got through to him we don't know.

A couple days later I picked up this topic with Ketut Arka, a Balinese pastor who has become our friend. He granted the accuracy of these Christian alternatives to those two pillars, but it was not clear to me whether he thought this theology had value for Christian conversation with Hindus, nor whether he himself used such theology in his own pastoral work. Ketut is the one who earlier had told us that half of Balinese Christians had left Hinduism because of their encounter with Christ's power, his power to heal and to protect them from the ever-present powers of evil.

At root the power of evil is the power of death, and death has dread even for immortality-believers. Some of what we saw at the

cremation signalled that to us. So to have the Gospel give one confidence to fear death no longer must sound like good news indeed. The “need” to posit an immortal soul is always a coping mechanism, very plausible to old Adams and old Eves. And when Christians opt for that in place of the resurrection of the body (which really is in the Creed), they must not yet have heard the “better” Gospel arising from Good Friday and Easter. Or if they once did, they no longer believe it. So right now we’re thinking east is east and west and west, but here is one place where the twain do meet. Here’s also a place then where Paul’s doxology fits: “Thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.”

Peace and Joy!

Ed Schroeder