

On Teaching Theology – A Slice of Life.

Colleagues,

A few days ago two dear friends, Fred Danker and Bob Schultz, in reducing the stuff in their filing cabinets have found copies of two things I wrote in ancient days, items I had completely forgotten. So they sent them to me. Bob even suggested that the item he found should have a wider audience. Even though I'm a bit antsy about passing it on to you, I'll do it. Antsy for a number of reasons. One being that it's a conflict report giving you only my view of what happened and not that of "the other side."

Antsy also in that it reveals the unhappiness (aka failure) in my first venture after official retirement, namely, a January-to-December-1994 guest-lectureship at Luther Seminary in Adelaide, Australia. And what was that? Toward the end of the first semester some of my students petitioned the administration to send me back home—and I didn't have a clue that this was happening. Not smart. When I finally caught on, I sent the memo below to all my students.

Peace and Joy!

Ed Schroeder

The Queen's Birthday (6/13) 1994

**An Open Letter to my 4th, 5th, and 6th year
Students at Luther Seminary, Adelaide**

From Ed Schroeder

My interpretation of what happened this past semester.

1. I began the semester presupposing that by this time in your seminary careers you too saw the Lutheran Reformation's biblical hermeneutic (Law and Gospel [hereafter: L/G]), as well as its central axiom (justification by faith [hereafter: JBF]), to be as radical today as they were in the 16th century—and that we could build on that in our class.
2. I learned that in “your own theology” (I’ll use this expression, although I know it is an imprecise generalization) these two scarcely functioned as such. For your own theology these two were indeed distinctive Lutheran accents, but just two of the longer list of Lutheranism's distinctive doctrinal teachings. They had no over-arching significance for all the rest.
3. As one of you reminded me over and over again: “yes, these are fundamental Lutheran accents but they must be kept in balance with all the other elements in Lutheran theology.” Not until late in the semester did I come to understand that this constant call for balance was antithetical to the Reformers' central axiom. Question: What is there to “balance” with JBF or L/G? One might say that the 16th century opposition to the Augsburg Confession—from both the RC side and the Schwaermer/Left-Wing side—was no more than a call for the Reformers to keep their radical proposal “in balance” with items that these critics held dear. The Reformers' answer to that was no.
4. Related to that was a picture of Lutheran theological education, a way to teach theology, that I learned I could no longer do, although upon reflection I remembered that it was the kind of seminary education I had when I was a seminarian in the 1950s.

5. Here's the picture I now have of what you were expecting, of your image for a seminary class in systematic theology. Seminary education in ethics and doctrine is like shopping at Foodland [=the supermarket near the sem] for groceries. You push your cart down the various aisles with one of the store clerks at your side. As you go down the aisles marked "Sanctification" and "Ethical Issues" you examine as many of the different brands on the shelves as you can, given the time constraints of the semester. The clerk explains to you what's in each of the brands you pick up to look at, its plusses and minuses, and then recommends one (with a brand-name label "Lutheran") as the best buy and tells you why. Here and there down these aisles is a section of merchandise labeled "Lutheran." When you come to that section you follow the same procedure, noting the merchandise under the various Lutheran labels, some of them church denominations—your own Lutheran Church of Australia [LCA] or those in the USA [LCMS, ELCA]—some of them individual theologians: Hebart, Sasse, Hamann, Walther, Elert, Thielicke, Braaten, Bertram. Once more while in this Lutheran aisle, as time allows, the professor-clerk picks up item after item and gives you his critical evaluation. It gets a bit dicey, however, when we approach your own LCA section in the Lutheran aisle. You've become accustomed to taking all (mostly all?) of your previous purchases in the Lutheran aisle from the LCA shelves. And when the clerk mentions that, for this or that item, there might be a better product on some other Lutheran shelf, you are not cheered by the proposal. Some of you begin to wonder why this clerk is even on the LCA payroll to conduct tours in this supermarket.
6. I know that supermarket pattern of education. I am the product of it. But I don't do seminary education that way. One of the most important reasons for moving to a

different model, I have found, is that the supermarket model of theological education is almost useless for the practice of pastoral ministry. For pastoral work you don't get much help simply from learning the skills of theological shopping and making the right selections from the shelves in the theological marketplace. For pastoral work you need skills in how to cook meals in the kitchen—even after you have filled your grocery basket with items (mostly?) from the Lutheran shelves. Just having your pantry full of Lutheran labels will guarantee nothing about what you put on the table to nourish Christ's people. And it may even deceive you into thinking: "all I have to do is take the box from the shelf and put it in front of the hungry members to eat. Of course, I tell them how nutritious it is and why it's the best buy. Thus I do for my parishioners what the store clerk did for me when I was at the sem."

7. Not so. Pastoral ministry is cooking in the kitchen and serving the food to Christ's siblings. Therefore seminary education is practice-time and scrimmage-time to learn how to do this. The role of the seminary professor is to show you how to mix/bake/cook the ingredients and how to serve them.
8. In this picture seminary classes in dogmatics and ethics are "practical theology." The teacher's task is helping students learn the skill of practicing Christian doctrine and Christian ethics in what you are "cooking" in the kitchen, and then learning the skill of how to serve it so that it nourishes (and doesn't poison) the eaters.
9. In our class on Sanctification this gave the syllabus the shape of Gospel-grounding & Gospel-praxis for each component piece of the dogma of the Third Article of the Christian Creed. In the Ethical Issues class that meant: rightly distinguishing the law and the gospel as we

applied the Word of God to ethical issues. The first 8 weeks were the Grounding: in-the-kitchen-practice using L/G and JBF with “evangelical” theologian John Stott’s book on Christian Ethics as our ongoing alternate option, whom we consulted recipe-by-recipe as we went through the standard ethics “cookbook.” The last 8 weeks were Praxis for “serving” such a L/G ethic in the 18 different issues that the class members selected for their own major papers.

10. For both of the courses as we went along I assigned biweekly 2-page mini-papers, so that I could see what & how you were cooking as we went along in the semester. Seldom did I ever put a letter grade on any of these. Instead I offered “kitchen-counsel” so that the next time you baked something it would turn out better.
11. My own job-description is that, although I could be the store clerk (for I do know what’s on the shelves), I’m doing something else in the seminary classroom. I’m a chef called to teach you how to cook and bake, to show you how to function in the kitchen so that you can become a master chef yourself. When one of your 2-page concoctions turned out awful, I usually told you so, and then also recommended ways to improve it. Whenever you did come up with a super-prize-winning-Pavlova [=Aussie super-dessert]—and many in the Sanctification class did as time went on—I signaled that with my words of hoopla.
12. The Ethical Issues class had very few such high moments. Doubtless if I had described to you what I’ve written above about store-clerk and kitchen-chef some of you would have come on board. But it took me quite a while to realize that with this Ethical Issues class I was in the Foodland store here at Luther Seminary and what I was trying to do was run a class in a kitchen. No wonder there was chaos. No wonder you gritched when I “changed the

assignments.” What I thought I was saying was: “Instead of trying again to bake this 2-pager (which seemed generally to have flopped), see how you can cook up another 2-page recipe that I just thought of last night.” While I was looking for more samples from you to help you improve your kitchen-craft; you were hearing “now we’ve gotta push our cart around the store a few more times.”

13. Since I’m committed to the model of the chef’s-class-in-the-kitchen, I purposely didn’t pay much attention to the inventory on the store shelves in the ethics aisle, only referring to them in passing. Thus it is no priority with me to cover the waterfront in these areas—either throughout past history or on the contemporary scene. Nor was it a high priority to highlight LCA doctrinal or ethical statements, or even those from my own church in the USA. The LCA ones most of you already knew from your life and study up until now. My own ELCA documents are different, but not of any greater worth for pastoral work, I think. It is my conviction from my own experience that “statements” made by church bodies (even “good” statements) are of almost no significance for the nitty-gritty of pastoral ministry.
14. Instead I was constantly pushing you to work in the kitchen with the Bible and the Lutheran Confessions as our primary theological resources, “doing” Bible according to the L/G hermeneutic and “being” confessional according to the yardstick of JBF. Wasn’t this the place where our clashes came, namely, hermeneutics and justification-by-faith? We were all in favor of L/G and JBF. But the way I used them was (at best) different from what you expected, or (at worst) wrong in your judgment. I did not go for “balance” in using the L/G hermeneutic for getting at the Biblical message, nor in applying the JBF yardstick for everything in doctrine and ethics.

15. In the Sanctification class a few students eventually became happy campers as we came to semester's end. In the Ethical Issues class I know of only two.
16. About one-third of the way through the Ethical Issues class I finally detected that you were stonewalling me as your primary response to my teaching. Interpreting your silence at first as confusion, I sought to "make perfectly clear" what I was trying to do. Hence my oft-repeated axiom: Lutheran theological ethics is not concerned to help people do the right thing, but to distinguish law and gospel rightly when applying the Word of God to ethical matters. But in vain. Only when it hit the fan did I finally catch on that silence was a passive-aggressive response, that anger, not "what's he talking about?" was your message to me.
17. All of the above throws some helpful light on component pieces of the clash in the Ethical Issues class. Item: Our peace-making sessions on Scripture. After the free-wheeling and wide-ranging discussion of my article on Lutheran hermeneutics and Bertram's "Hermeneutics of Apology 4," came still the question: "Yes, but how much of the Bible do you believe is actually inspired?" To my ears that question said: "Questioner has not understood one thing I have been trying to say." Questioner was thinking: "Ed is saying all these nice things about Lutheran hermeneutics in order to skirt the fundamental question. So I'll ask him point-blank: How much?" My own on-the-spot conclusion was: "Questioner doesn't trust me. No matter what I say, he won't be satisfied." Item: the double session on third use of the Law. The debate was not between "us" who hold to the third use and Ed who doesn't. Instead it was two different readings of Formula of Concord article 6 that were in conflict. My drumbeat throughout was to make distinction between L & G (as the

preceding FC 5 does) and comprehend the role of God's law in the life of the regenerate from that starting point. From this I read FC 6 to say: the law still speaks to the Old Adam in every Christian, but not to the new-born self. For the new-born self FC 6 says the Holy Spirit's leading and Christ as Lord are the ethical resources. My proposed label for that was "second use of the Gospel."

The other view held that the law has no accusatory force for re-born Christians and that they can thus use it without danger for ethical guidance. Even though St. Paul warns the Galatians about "returning to the law" after they've come to faith in Christ, he's not talking about this kind of third use.

Isn't this just another variation on the debate about L/G hermeneutics, and about how to apply the yardstick of JBF to ethics? I think so.

Item: my continuing comment that John Stott's use of the Bible was biblicism. I didn't understand why so many of you thought that such a label was "name-calling" and you wanted to be more gentle toward Stott. I use the term as an objective tag for one particular way to use the Bible for doctrine and ethics. I anticipated that L/G Lutheran seminarians wouldn't argue with that, especially after I showed you this constant hermeneutic at work in Stott's book.

Not until XX [=very bright student, who, as I later learned, led the procession to the principal's office for my dismissal] once remarked that "we've been taught that Stott is quite close to our Lutheran position," did it dawn on me that in criticizing Stott I was criticizing what you considered to be your own hermeneutics, and that you thought it was genuinely Lutheran. Biblicism may well

be mixed in with the hermeneutics of many denominations, but it is a clear alternative to the L/G hermeneutic from the Lutheran Reformation.

If the term Biblicism had been in vogue in Luther's day, he would surely have used it to identify the RC's and the Schwaermer's use of the Scriptures—even though these two seem to be, as he said, “foxes running in opposite directions.” The trouble was, Luther noted, that though running in opposite directions, their tails were tied together. Though they quoted the Bible furiously, they both used it wrong in the same way – making no distinction between Biblical law and Biblical gospel.

Item: the flap about homosexuality. I anticipated that you did not need me to teach you about the LCA statement you yourselves knew. Our very first discussions verified that to be true. In addition, the reading assignment in Stott offered an extended argument of support for the LCA statement. What I was seeking to do was to have you read (and in one case listen to) other Christian voices on the subject. It all blew up before we even got to first base.

Here's what I remember about what happened. I prepared a computer-draft of the main points in the readings we did. With the very first one of them it hit the fan. I began with the quote by Aussie author Robert Hughes that homophobia is high in Aussie society. There was universal disagreement with Hughes, some of it expressed with considerable passion. Somewhere in the mix I said something to the effect that “methinks milady doth protest too much.” And wasn't your vociferous disagreement with Hughes an indicator that he might just be right? If Aussies can detect BS a mile away—as I've been told—I can detect homophobes at admittedly shorter distances, because

I am one – although I didn't know that until some of my own seminary students in the US told me they were gay. I then discovered how I shrink and shudder and wish they would go away. I should have closed shop on the whole topic on that very first day for the good of all concerned. But still working with my chef-in-the-kitchen model, I pressed on to see if we could cook up a Lutheran ethic on the matter by hearing out the other voices in the readings. That was a tactical mistake.

Although I understand that the word went around that "Schroeder says homosexuality is OK," my own perception is that I never got a chance to present "my" proposed Lutheran ethic on the subject. As far as I think I got was to show you evidence why the folks we were reading could come to the conclusions they did. My own proposal for a Lutheran ethic on the question is the lengthy SAIN SEX article from my stateside colleague Bob Bertram, distributed during our reconciliation sessions and never discussed.

Item: My alleged "cutting off" class discussion and seeming disinterest in student opinion. If we were doing the grocery-store model of education, there would be considerable room for student opinion on the worth and value of the products being examined. If the model is learning to cook in the kitchen (or learning how to play golf from Arnold Palmer) then the value of student opinion is less significant, sometimes flat-out disruptive, of ever learning how to prepare today's recipe. I am a crusty old curmudgeon and doubtless could be kinder in many a case. That this sometimes is flippant, coarse, and harsh to some folks' sensibilities is something I regret. Mea culpa. But it's not really done in meanness. I'm genuinely committed to teach all of you to do well in the kitchen,

whether you've got a high IQ or a more modest one. So even when I do it wrong in cutting off discussion, the conscious purpose is to get on with the cooking-class, to show you how to concoct today's recipe.

Once more, no wonder there were clashes. You thought you were in Foodland, I thought we were in front of the oven.

My last item: your class behavior. I've referred earlier to the stonewalling in the Ethical Issues class and your passive-aggressive responses that I caught on to late in the term. But there is one more item. If we had ever gotten around to the full list of items listed for our "let's talk" sessions, I would have liked to pursue with you your own behavior and ethics in the course of the semester. Even granting that we were frazzled by virtue of trying to do two different things at the same time, I see something important in the mix beyond that.

That is the critical response from your side of the desk that finally brought letters of complaint to the Seminary Council before anyone had ever spoken to me face-to-face. From the way I understand Luther's explanations in his catechisms, that looks like violation of the 4th and 8th commandments. And among Christians it sounds to me like violation of Jesus' own specifications for addressing conflicts within the Christian community (Matthew 18). In discussing this with a couple of you, I was told that such is not the case, or at least, it is not clearly the case. At present I am not convinced that what happened among us is not covered by those rubrics.

18. What about next semester? Many of you are slotted to be in my classes. From the Principal I've learned that each of you has an approved alternate choice if you wish to take

it. At present I cannot brainstorm a teaching model that merges the supermarket with the kitchen. The supermarket model by itself is just not my cup of tea. For the entire 37 years of my theology-teaching I've been doing "cuisine-art." Perhaps there is something even better than that. Maybe I'll discover it during my continuing education stint with the Aboriginal Lutheran pastors and evangelists in Western Australia during the upcoming inter-semester break. Stay tuned. Call in if you have some counsel.