

# #779 Musings on Ministry and the Holy Spirit

Colleagues,

Being under the gun this week, and having already conspired with co-editor Carol Braun to dose you twice with more of Ed Schroeder, I trolled old files of my own and came up with this. It's a snippet of a paper I wrote as a DMin student in the early '90s. The task was to articulate one's "working theology of Christian ministry." So charged, I followed the lead of old teachers like Ed, turned to the Augsburg Confession, and took it from there. Here is the first of four theses—"confessional principles," as I described them in the paper—that emerged from that exercise. It seems germane today to reflection about Pentecost, the question being, why and to what end is the Holy Spirit kicking up all that fuss in the ancient Jerusalem of Acts 2? Of course, hard on the heels of Pentecost comes Trinity Sunday, than which no day in the entire year is less welcomed or more mangled by the Church's preaching corps. With that in view, you might find the concluding musings about kerygma and dogma to be of some interest as well. It ends, as you'll see, with a confession of sorts. I thought for a moment to cut that out, then changed my mind. Perhaps it nudges some others toward a bit of self-reflection. If so, God be praised. As for the rest of the "I's," "me's," and "my's" that litter the piece, the nature of the original exercise required them, and I'll trust you to endure them in that light.

Peace and Joy,

Jerry Burce, for the editorial team

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**Thesis: The purpose of Christian ministry is to provide the means by which the Holy Spirit can engender justifying faith in Christ. (AC IV, V)**

This is the Pauline and Johannine conception restated, namely that ministry serves the purpose of Christ and the God who was/is in him, namely that all people should be drawn to him as believing ones, i.e. in a relationship of trust. The content of this trust is that God is entirely gracious in Christ, through Christ, because of Christ. The presence or absence of such trust is the ultimate life-and-death issue. It determines whether, in the classic parlance, a given person is justified or not; whether God opts to see in her, *propter Christum*, the precise quality that is Christ's, and to act accordingly (thus the meaning of "imputed righteousness"), or whether he chooses instead to deal with that person apart from Christ, on the basis of her own historical quality as a human being to whom the Ten Commandments apply.

Three observations:

First: I realize all too well that this reading of the purposes of God, Christ, Church and ministry will strike hordes of Christians, and among them sub-hordes of fellow Lutherans, as impossibly narrow, particularly in this latter day when synoptic Kingdom-of-God themes (too often badly read in my view) have been given a preeminent role in theological discourse. It may help somewhat to point out that this matter of the individual's justification through faith is to be conceived of not as the entirety of divine purpose (hardly!) but rather as its compelling focus in the immediacy of the ministering moment ("Now is the acceptable time!") Thus with Jesus, whose historical speaking and doing among the human beings he

encounters, whether before or after the resurrection, is aimed always at provoking or enticing faith in him as the Christ and Son of God, the one who has come to seek the lost and to save them [1]; thus also and therefore with the apostles and with those who follow in their ministering succession, to the present day [2]. In this conception the eventful moment of justifying trust, discovered by God in the heart of this, that, or the other person, is the precise point in present time toward which all of God's triune acting in the past is directed. It is also the *sine qua non* of all that God intends to accomplish in the future, be this the future of tomorrow and the day after or the future of the eschaton [3]. Hence its definitive role in setting the agenda for God's ministers.

Second: it is of paramount importance to note the crucial distinction between the Holy Spirit as the effective cause of justifying faith and Christian ministry as supplier of the means by which the Spirit's work gets done. Or to put that in another, more immediate way: it is important for me as a minister to remember that my task is to summon faith in Christ, not to create it. Always the temptation is to forget this, and in so doing to re-commit the original sin of abrogating for myself a responsibility that is God's alone. It is always easier, of course, to identify this sin in others than to confess to its presence in myself.

Third: this is an appropriate point at which to reflect on the distinction between dogma and kerygma, a matter that has come to seem increasingly important as I have practiced ministry over the years. The assertions above concerning justification by faith [4] obviously belong to the dogmatic genre. They possess the character, that is, of descriptive statements, spoken at a reflective distance as if by an observer. Their purpose is to represent the Church's distillation, over time, of the Scriptural witness concerning the speaking, doing, willing, and

intending of God over against human beings, objectively and dispassionately considered. By contrast kerygma is passionate, directed speech, the purpose of which is to provoke a response in the "you" of a hearer. These two, dogma and kerygma, are necessarily related in content. On the other hand they are not and cannot be identical in content; and this, I have found, is particularly true with respect to this core issue of faith and justification. "Where God sees faith clinging to Christ, he justifies; where he fails to see it, he declines to justify." This is objective dogma. The kerygmatic counterpart: "God is ready and aching to see Christ's face in yours. That's all the excuse he needs to wrap his arms around you forever. So let him do it! Don't make him deal with you as you! You won't like that! Neither will he." Here the question of faith is implicit, as an anticipated outcome of the speaking. Were it to be made explicit, as it so often is, through a transporting of dogmatic formulations into the kerygmatic moment—"If you believe in Jesus, God will..."—then the kerygma would be ruined and the dogma violated, for the simple reason that the hearer's attention and faith would be drawn not to the trustworthy Christ but rather to the untrustworthy percolations of her own heart. On the other hand, were the question of faith in Christ to be absent altogether as in the popular "Don't worry! Be affirmed! God loves you for who you are!"—then the kerygma, separated entirely from the dogma, would be false, ignoring as it does in this specific instance the Scriptural witness to the wrath of God. To the reader who at this point is wondering why the great length on what seems to be so picayune and abstruse a topic, I observe that my ministry as presently called and ordered is preeminently kerygmatic in nature. As speaker and doer I am situated in the front lines, so to speak, of this all-important contention of God's to justify the ungodly through faith evoked by the Holy Spirit in the speaking and doing *pro nobis* of Jesus Christ [5]. Clarity as to how I speak and do is therefore of the essence.

When kerygmatic ministry ignores the difference between kerygma and dogma, it tends inevitably to become harsh and cruel. When it ignores the relationship between the two, on the other hand, it inclines toward vapid and saccharine emptiness [6], and this also inevitably. In both cases the resulting ministry is fundamentally untrue to the redemptive purposes of God in Christ—his aching desire (to put it metaphorically) to embrace estranged human beings in the strong arms of his good and wholesome love. I assert these things, by the way, specifically on the strength of my own experience as recipient, practitioner, and observer of the kerygmatic task. Of the two errors, ignoring the difference between dogma and kerygma and disregarding their relationship, I find myself intellectually susceptible to the former and prone in actual pastoral practice to the latter. In either case, God help me!

## Notes

[1] This is an exegetical conclusion, of course, that screams for extended demonstration. The reader will forgive me, I pray, if I forego that demonstration here in the interests of brevity and in keeping with the character of this present exercise as a personal statement of “where I am” in my thinking. As an example, however, see Mk. 2:5-6. See also Mk. 1:1, Jn. 20:31.

[2] Mt. 28: “Make disciples!”; Acts 1: “Be my witnesses!”.

[3] Cf. Paul’s telling (Phil. 2) of God’s ultimate purposes in Christ, “...that at the name of Jesus every knee shall bow...and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.” See too the expression of these same purposes in the first three petitions of the Lord’s Prayer, each of which evokes the eschatological vision of every human heart rightly related to God in a condition of unsullied trust.

[4] I use the common designation for this doctrinal nexus. In fact, I prefer the formulation “justification through faith,” for the reason that this seems to do a somewhat better job of

keeping faith from becoming an abstract end in itself. Cf. Will Herberg's assessment, in the late 1950's, that to hosts of religious Americans it mattered not what one believed concerning God, so long as one believed something. This is a notion that I continue to encounter frequently in my present ministry. From a New Testament perspective, of course, the faith which justifies is always and only faith in the Justifying One, i.e. Christ.

[5] Let this be noted as my understanding, at the most fundamental level, of my own present role in Christian ministry. I use the classic terminology here as a form of professional shorthand.

[6] The consequence of wishing to be all things to all people without the anchoring recollection that one is called in all things to represent Christ to all people. *Caveat*: dogmatically uninformed kerygma will also take a turn toward hardness, and if not sooner, then later. The ultimate function of dogma, after all, is to support and defend the Church's telling of the *Gospel*. No wonder, then, that where dogma is ignored, there the first and greatest casualty is the *Gospel* itself; and where the *Gospel* withers, there will thrive, as weeds in a garden, the thorns of the latest legalism.