

#797 The Passive Church. An Argument in its Favor.

Colleagues,

We lapsed. We missed not one, but two weeks of posting, and even in this third week we're days overdue. It was bound to happen at some point, I suppose. Your editors (three of us on the team) have full-time jobs with demands that flow and ebb, and none of us belongs to that class of super-mortals who churn out quality stuff at the drop of a hat. (Mozart put it crassly: "I write music the way other people piss"—or so I heard in a "Great Courses" lecture by composer Robert Greenberg. Luther might well have said the same thing as he produced theology for the ages. He wrote like a cheetah runs. If I keep pace with an injured snail I count it as a good, productive day.)

Anyway, apologies. And with the apologies, a piece of refreshment from someone else with a track record of whipping up pretty good stuff in consistent and timely fashion, namely your former and worthier editor, Ed Schroeder. He's writing here to an old friend about Theodore Graebner, one of the Missouri Synod's leading teachers and theologians in the first half of the last century. Those were years when the "social gospel" movement was all the rage in mainline Protestant circles. Graebner was not a fan. The conversation between Ed and friend centers on his "drumbeat" assertion that "the Social Gospel is No Gospel." This would startle and dismay lots of U.S. Lutherans today, especially in the ELCA. It strikes us in turn as all the more reason for passing along Ed's sympathetic appraisal of Graebner's views, anchored in Ed's own drum-beating assertion as to what the Gospel is (and isn't), and what the Church is finally for.

Counter-views? Send them in! Your stretched and busy editors are always glad for contributions.

Peace and Joy,
Jerry Burce, for the editorial team

Ed Schroeder to a friend, about Theodore Graebner's "The Social Gospel is No Gospel"—

Graebner was half-right, it seems to me, with his drumbeat. But why does he sound so un-nice to my ears? I wonder.

Seems to me that I've been on a parallel bandwagon now and then during my ThTh days, as I've needled the N.T. exegetes who now seem to dominate when Kingdom of God is the topic. Their image is a "return to Eden" and that's what they in reading the NT Gospels see "clearly" that Jesus was up to. 'Course he failed, and Roman empire and Jewish society was no patently different after he left the scene. Even so, we are called to make it happen. What Jesus hath not done, we are called to bring to pass.

Somewhere back in my ThTh posting days, seems to me, I did a review of the term 'church'/'*ekklesia*' in NT texts. And I found that with only the exceptions in Revelation, '*ekklesia*' never appears in the nominative case, as the subject of a sentence. Ergo, *ekklesia* never DOES anything. It's always in the objective case (direct or indirect). Things happen TO it or VIA it. It is a "passive" noun.

Which makes sense when you understand *ecclesia* as the gathering. Things happen at the gathering, but the gathering doesn't go out and do anything. The folks gathering and then dispersing from the gathering are, of course, doing—and called to do—all sorts of things, but the action at the gathering (birds at the bird-

feeder) is just feeding and chirping to one another. Thereafter they do indeed fly off into their callings and do all sorts of stuff. But the bird-feeding at the feeder is a stationary event.

The place in Revelation where *ekklesia* does something, if I remember aright, is when the “gathering” at this city sends a message to the gathering at that city. But never does any one of the “gatherings” become a noun that addresses the world.

If the NT never assigns tasks to “the gathering,” not even the task of “preach the Gospel!!!”—then by what authority (who authorizes us?) to engage in such talk as “the church must do this, ought to do that, is called to such-and-so?” Where are the NT texts? Whose are the ears who are to be hearing such mandates?

What are we talking about nowadays when we say “church”? Who/what is “the church” in our standard parlance? Is there any NT rootage for such a notion at all? If the NT gives scant support (none at all?) for our church-as-active-noun-in-the-subjective-case-acting rather than acted upon, “agent” rather than “patient” in the philosophical meaning of those two terms—where does the support come from? Have we so transmogrified the term ‘church’ into something else that we have no antenna for what the apostles meant way back then when they used the term?

If that is so, has the Gospel’s free-course been aided or burdened by it all? And have God’s left-handers been helped or hindered in their callings (whether they trust God’s Christ or not) by calling “the church” (whoever that is) to be their allies?

God’s got left-hand workers on the job in his creation apart from any Christ-connected folks being there. “Law written in their hearts” generates a modicum of justice and “care.” Christ-

connected folks, as fellow-worldlings, have the same assignment already from birth, AND the additional one of gospel-redemption promotion to generate the new creation. At their gatherings, their “ecclesia-ings” they get juiced up for their double jobs. But the gatherings didn’t do those jobs, any jobs; the gatherers do.

Was Graebner—with all his warts and wrinkles—trying to tell us this? “The church” has received no left-hand kingdom assignment from Christ. Christ-disciples have already had those assignments from birth. Re-birth in Christ doesn’t contradict those already-from-birth assignments, but rather supports them.

Reminds me of Bob Bertram’s visual aid when speaking of God’s ambidexterity. He’d put the word DEXTRA on the blackboard, Latin word for right (hand). And then take it letter by letter with hand motions. Left and right hands clasped side by side, thumbs up.

- D – is for different The two aren’t the same hands. Thumbs on different sides, etc.
- E – is for equivalent, both complete, same pattern and equally shaped and operative.
- X – is for Christ , the supreme right-hander coming on the scene, initially going under the left-hand, as Bob turned the hands so the right was below the left.
- T – is for (initially) the right hand “trussing” (=supporting) the good work of the left-hand, but then
- R – it begins to replace this and that component of the left-hand agenda. [Forgiveness replaces equity justice for sinners. Ditto for peace. “Not as the world gives do I give you peace.” For the world’s peace (left-hand stuff) is not bad stuff, the “peace and justice” mantra of today. Actually good and godly, but it’s not Peace with God which the left-hand world can’t/doesn’t give.] Hands now turning

so that right is coming up over left. Finally right hand (now completely on top and left hand dropping away) the right-hand.

- A – antiquates the entire left-hand agenda, even the good and godly left-hand items of old creation. God's right-hand, the new creation in Christ renders God's old creation finally passé. That agenda is God's forever and only agenda. Not Eden restored, old creation rehabbed, but a new creation. If anyone is in Christ, she is already there, we are told.

Is that what Graebbie was trying to do for/with the LCMS? Was it a lost cause then? Is it still now, not only in the LCMS? If the "A" line above is true, it is not.

Cheers!

Ed