

A Mixed Report Card on “Damn is Not a Dirty Word” and “Preaching from OT Texts”

Colleagues,

A mixed report card came in for recent ThTh posts.

The “Damn is Not a Dirty Word” post (ThTh 517) received about an equal number of thumbs-up and thumbs-down. Though the thumbs-down were mostly focused on Jeremiah Wright as an unworthy messenger (“evil man . . . narcissistic . . . psychopath . . . liar . . . racist”) and not on what I thought was THE THEME for the ThTh 517 offering. Namely, is the verdict accurate that God has ceased “blessing” America, and is now giving us up to “OK, America, THY will be done,” which is the meaning of the Biblical four-letter word “damn”?

Those hard words for Jeremiah Wright still sounded like “if you don’t like the message, kill the messenger” to my ears.

Someone asked my opinion on whether this nation deserved the “damn-diagnosis.” In responding to that one I punted. “Not my job. Judgment in world history, we confess, has been turned over to someone ‘who sits at God’s right hand from whence HE shall come to judge the earth.’” Besides, it’s not smart to usurp Jesus’ job. His assignment to us was to read the signs of the times—using the clues he gave for such reading—and live in faith in the face of those signs. Yes, and from the very first time he’s quoted as saying that, some have read the signs one way, some another way.

I did get carried away a tad in responding to the suggestion

that Jeremiah Wright might be a “narcissist, almost a borderline personality in the strict sense of both words in the DSM.” [DSM = Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, the handbook for mental health professionals that lists different categories of mental disorders and the criteria for diagnosing them.]

That prompted this from yours truly: “And so was his OT namesake, and almost all the other OT prophets we now venerate as canonical. They’d all be in the DSM. Paul of Tarsus too—obsessive-compulsive if there ever was one. For narcissism Elijah is the OT superstar. Hebrew word that we translate as prophet (“nabi”) means exactly that, the OT pros tell me. A DSM candidate.

Or maybe he’s just a sinner, but so what? Was there ever a human God-messenger (except for Jesus) who was not? But that didn’t last for long as he appropriated that sinner-label so native to us and appropriated it for himself.

Why does it make any difference that the Jeremiah whom God has sent to us might be weird, a DSM listee? Why should Freud triumph when it comes to listening to God’s messengers? Theologians of the cross seldom ever passed the sanity tests of their age—or of the age’s sages. Why should it be different now?

There’s no Biblical precedent that I know of which instructs us: “Don’t kill the messenger (unless he’s a nut) if you don’t like his message.”

Didn’t the Donatist heresy decision (Augustine the guru for the eventual verdict) settle this once and for all? The personal defects of the proclaimer (even his/her unfaith!) do not invalidate the proclamation. The proclamation is validated by its conformity to the Word of God. I think it applies *expressis verbis* to J. Wright.

As you can see, I'm opinionated on this one, maybe even "narcissist, possibly a borderline personality in the strict sense of both words in the DSM."

[Yes, I did get carried away.]

Concerning ThTh 518: "Preaching from OT Texts," a communique for Armencius Munthe in Sumatra, Indonesia.

1. A number of you did hear a "Macedonian call" in the message from Armencius asking for diagnosis/prognosis text-study assistance. The Crossings board of directors did too and they're working on it. Anybody out there in the club want to donate a plane ticket?
2. Right in the middle of that comes a similar message to <info@crossings.org> couple days ago from a pastor in South Africa. "You Crossings people are a real find for me, here in South Africa. I'm pastor of a Lutheran congregation . . . trying to find people doing law-promise theology. You 'guys' seem to know a lot about this, so I'd like to learn from you all I can. Will you help me, please? I work in a congregation of 130 members, made up of all the various races living in South Africa It is really exciting to be here, where integration is happening before my eyes, but how to proclaim the Gospel (sola gratia) here, while surrounded with 'Pelagians or semi-Pelagians' in a very pluralistic culture, is what this congregation is trying to figure out with my help (and now, hopefully, yours too). Have you any suggestions? Our resources are tiny, unemployment and crime are our main social problems, many are in a daily struggle just to survive. It's good to read your writings and I am sure glad that I have stumbled onto your website. Thanks for that! Greetings from the South!" Is that Macedonian again?

Anybody want to donate another plane ticket?

3. Old man's musing. The serendipity of these South Africa and North Sumatra overtures made me think of Teilhard de Chardin, (1881-1950) and the word "noosphere" [no-uh-sphere] which he popularized. [Well, "popularized" may be saying too much, but noosphere is in my 1997 tenth edition Webster.] The noosphere, he proposed, is the next stage of cosmic evolution (after "geosphere," the inanimate world, and "biosphere," the life-saturated world). The noosphere is the "sphere of human thought" being derived from the Greek ("nous") meaning "mind" + ("sfaira") meaning "sphere," in the style of "atmosphere," a "thought-sphere" encompassing the already life-saturated world. These near-instant exchanges between people in South Africa, North Sumatra and North America are probably not what Teilhard had in mind. I think he thought that noosphere-hardware/software would evolve within the human head, or heart—or somewhere on the inside. Yet had he lived into the internet age, he would surely have seen cyber-sphere as something close to "noosphere now." Just in case you didn't know it, Wikipedia says: "Teilhard is often called the patron saint of the Internet."

But all of that is a digression from last week's "Preaching from OT Texts."

4. First reponse was this one. "Can you help me with the word 'paranaesis' in ThTh 518? I can't find it in my NT Greek lexicon, nor in any of the systematic works available to me. What does it mean?"

To which I had to admit my mistake, so I told him:

No wonder. I misspelled it! Big booboo. And my super editor wife didn't catch it either. What are your copy-editor rates?

Should have been “parainesis,” the noun drawn from the verb “paraineo” (to advise, exhort). See Acts 27:9 & 22. [In Luke 3:18 it is a variant reading for the verb “parakaleo” (to speak words of encouragement), from which come the nouns “paraklesis” (encouragement) and Paraclete (the encourager).] Hence as a noun “parainesis” signals “exhortation, counsel, advice, recommendation.” In short, all the promise-based ethical “urgings” that the NT is full of. What Elert calls “grace-imperatives”—very different from “law-imperatives.” I think I learned it in NT classes back in Germany ages ago. Maybe it’s not used much in Anglo-Saxon Biblical scholarship.

Thanks a bunch. I’ll have to “fess up” in the next number of ThTh.

5. Another response enjoyed the simplified explanation of our Crossings six-step procedure offered to Armencius. It was my retelling of Bob Bertram’s original “Aha!” for hearing the diagnosis and prognosis within Biblical texts. So good, said this senior woman theologian, that “I’ve sent it on to all my kids.” I happen to know there are six of those.
6. Then several pointed questions from someone who’s new, he says, to Crossings stuff, but (mostly) likes what he’s reading. However, there were items in my reading of the Old Testament where he found Biblical texts saying YES to where I said NO—and vice versa. I responded to each item he raised, and intended to send on to you that exchange to close out this Thursday’s post. But I now notice that it’s four pages long. So I’ll save it, D.v., for next time. Stay tuned.

Peace and Joy!

Ed Schroeder