

Are Lutherans really “Strong on Justification,” but “Weak on Sanctification?”

Colleagues, One of you recently asked my opinion on the generally accepted wisdom that Lutherans are “Strong on Justification,” but “Weak on Sanctification.” You gave me a quotation attributed to a prominent voice for renewal in today’s LCMS: “A major weakness of traditional Lutheran theology has been providing people with guidelines and inspiration for spiritual growth. We are strong on justification but weak on sanctification. Many Lutheran congregation members are eager for ‘solid food,’ but often they only get the ‘elementary truths’ and the ‘milk’ of the Gospel in our congregations (cf. Heb. 5:12-6:1). They want to get beyond the assurance of salvation by grace and get to real growth in commitment and service.”

I have no data about what “many Lutheran congregation members are eager for,”

but I do have some thoughts about “We are strong on justification but weak on sanctification.” And the “we” I take to designate Lutherans in both the LCMS and the ELCA in the USA.

Are we really “Strong on justification?” I doubt it. What evidence would prove or disprove that “we are strong on justification”? Can “weak on sanctification” be part of any package that is “strong on justification?” I don’t think so. The absence of fruits of faith doesn’t simply say: the fruits are absent. Absent fruits signal the absence of faith. Since faith is what justifies, what is there about us Lutherans that is “strong on justification?”

The colleague who posed the question, and disagreed with the quotation above, put it this way: "While we Lutherans have been very good about proclaiming justification by grace through faith [hereafter JBGTF] we (collectively speaking) have not fully understood it, entrusted ourselves to it, or practiced it..." Ay, there's the rub. Just what are we talking about when we say JBGTF? My take is that throughout American Lutheranism no one denies JBGTF. It's a shibboleth. JBGTF? That's what the word Lutheran means. But here the arch-Lutheran question arises: What does this mean?

Seems to me that even the notion of "proclaiming justification by grace through faith" is a a no-no.. Proclaiming those words JBGTF—which is what many USA Lutherans may indeed do— is precisely NOT proclaiming the Gospel of Justification. Hustling folks to get them to say: "I believe in JBGTF" is not proclaiming the Gospel. It's getting them to believe a doctrine. Do hearts start trusting Christ's promise when they "believe" JBGTF? Well, maybe. But then again, maybe not. And if not, then such belief does not justify anybody. Believing doctrines is allegedly the Missouri Synod's hangup. But it's also the hangup of the ELCA. The major difference is that in the ELCA there are other doctrines that we're "strong" on, largely ethical doctrines, whilst the LCMS is "strong" on faith-doctrines.

But that's a mis-focus for faith. Therefore it leaves us "weak," not "strong" at all, on justification too.

The object of Christian faith, the reality that faith trusts, what Christian faith is "in"—is never a doctrine. Not even a "true" doctrine. Faith's object is the promised forgiveness offered us in the crucified and risen Messiah. And that object, the promise, is what's to be proclaimed. Not JBGTF. When folks do indeed trust that promise, the CONSEQUENCE is "JBGTF."

It's probably wise to avoid ever using the words JBGTF from the pulpit, lest folks trust the shibboleth and not Christ. Possibly even worse, trusting that by trusting the shibboleth God says they're OK. Where in the NT anywhere is JBGTF what gets "proclaimed"? Paul may argue with his critics about JBGTF theology, but when he gets to proclaiming, he claims that there was only and always one thing he ever proclaimed: Christ and him crucified.

Somewhere in the classic Gritsch/Jensen book on "Lutheranism" they talk about JBGTF the same way. I don't have a copy at hand, so this is from my fading memory. Never preach JBGTF, they say, but preach Christ's promise in such a way that the upshot is sinners made right with God, and thus set free, by trusting that promise.

We LCMS and ELCA types do NOT have a good track record on "proclaiming JBGTF," because we have not done what the Gritsch/Jensen axiom calls for. More seriously, we have not done what Christ calls for. The absence of sanctification amongst us is the best signal for BAD JUSTIFICATION-PREACHING, i.e., BAD PREACHING OF THE GOSPEL, even as we hustle each other to recite our arch-shibboleth of JBGTF.

The quotation above says: "They want to get beyond the assurance of salvation by grace and get to real growth in commitment and service."

I wonder. If preaching offers "assurance of salvation by grace," another of our Lutheran shibboleths, I wonder if the Christic promise is being proclaimed at all. Seems to me better to say that Promise-preaching aims to bring sinners to confident trust in Christ—and keep them there. There is no "getting beyond" that. Or if there is, what is "beyond" confident trust in Christ? What is "real growth" that goes beyond this? What is the

“solid food” that supercedes this “milk” of the gospel? Placing add-ons onto the Gospel is the Lutheran definition of heresy. Gospel-plus is what the Galatian legalists were promoting. Paul called it an “other” Gospel.

[Footnote: The Reformers hyped “by faith” (missing in this “assurance” phrase) and not “by grace.” Their critics were all committed to “by grace.” The fight was about faith. Are you 100% A-OK with God “only” by trusting Christ’s promise, or not? One side says yes, the other no. And then the Reformers twisted the knife. Not only is Promise-preaching and faith-trusting the ying-yang of justification, it is the core axiom for sanctification as well! More on this below.]

Suppose we put the best construction on what the author of the quote above was hoping for, possibly even crying for, namely, faith active in love. In old terms, sanctification. And what he was bemoaning is the widespread paucity thereof among US Lutherans. And not just US Lutherans.

That raises the same question that confronted the Lutherans at Augsburg. Their critics hollered at them: “Where are the good works in your version of the gospel? We go to God’s law to fill out the package and get folks to attend to ethics. What we hear you saying all the time is faith, and faith ALONE. When to you ever get around to sanctification?”

Bob Bertram liked to say that this challenge was the real center of the famous Article on Justification (#4) in Melanchthon’s Defense [apologia] of the Augsburg Confession. As Melanchthon framed it: “How to commend good works without losing the promise?” His answer: Go back to square one. If good works aren’t happening, then the promise has been lost—and along with it faith too. And when faith is gone, so is justification.

To get “fruits of faith” happening again, you need to get faith

happening again, and there's only one way to get faith to happen. Offer the Gospel-promise –milky or not. To commend good works, proclaim the promise. Use it or lose it.

Of course, that analysis and proposal was not Melanchthon's invention. He claimed it was straight out of the New Testament—in lots of places. When sanctification-fruits are not showing up on the tree (so says Jesus) the whole tree is sick. You don't "preach" about fruit-bearing under the false perception that the tree is otherwise healthy, that the "rooting" in JBGTF is basically OK. Not so. The rooting is rotten. Fruitless = rootless. JBGTF never happened. Or if it once did, it's long since died.

Needed is to re-root the tree so that it "naturally" bears fruit. "Roots of faith" produce "fruits of faith." So says Jesus. And no surprise, that's the apostolic axiom too. That's what Paul does to/for the Galatians ["you've gotten hooked into an OTHER Gospel, so I've got to go back to square one and proclaim the REAL GOSPEL, the promise, again so that maybe you'll trust it this time—at least for a while. And then the 'fruits of the Spirit' (chapter 5) will come. Nothing else will produce them."]

Ditto for Paul writing to the Corinthians ["You've glombed onto a theology of glory, so I'll have to start all over with you back to square one, the theology of the cross. And then, not until then, will you be able to get to I Cor 13."]

Enuf for now. There are two leftovers, at least. One is the matter of just what such "fruits of faith" are. Is there a list? These and these only qualify? I think not. Especially if, ala Paul in Galatians, "freedom itself is the goal for which Christ has set us free," then how would you draw boundaries for fruits of Christic freedom? Dostoyevsky teases us with Sonya in his

“Crime and Punishment,” a prostitute for Christ’s sake. Is this her sanctification or damnation? Some other time.

Number two is the distinction between law-imperatives and grace-imperatives when it comes to fruit-bearing. I.e., USING, not LOSING, the promise to “get to real growth and service.” That topic has showed up more than once in past ThTh postings. If curious, do a search on the website: <www.crossings.org>

TWO FOOTNOTES

A. Crossings website. Webmaster Tom Law has run the logs for website traffic during 2004. I’m overwhelmed by the numbers.

1,538 hits per day average. Over half a million for the year.

422,575 pages downloaded by website visitors.

105,448 distinct computers served.

B. In Crossings’ relief effort for survivors on Nias Island off the west coast of Sumatra \$2,250 was already wire-transferred last Thursday. Contributions may be made via PAYPAL @ the Crossings website <www.crossings.org> or by check to the Crossings office, P.O. Box 7011, Chesterfield MO 63006-7011.

Peace & joy!

Ed Schroeder