

Bible Reading in the ELCA

Colleagues,

On this date in the year 1930 I took my first breath of fresh air. “Farm fresh” that breath was, for I was born in the farmhouse where my Mom and Dad had started their married life the year before. The first birthday of the Great Depression had just passed. But I didn’t know that. Fact is, I grew up not even knowing there was one. I thought everyone wore hand-me-down clothes and lived from the family vegetable garden and fruit-tree orchard. All our neighbors did. Later I learned such things as Dad selling hogs for 2 cents a pound at the “yards” in Chicago, bringing the \$600 check home to hand over to “Ike” Larson, Swedish bachelor farmer (sic!), who owned our place. It was all he had pay the \$1000 annual rent. “OK, Henry,” Ike said, “the rent will be \$600 this year.”

My kids keep telling me I should write this stuff down. Maybe when I retire, I’ll do that. But this posting is labelled Thursday Theology. Even though my natal date this year is a Thursday, it’s not (yet) theology. So let’s shift to that.

Every Thursday last month—there were five of them—Marie and I joined some 20 folks to read and discuss

the ELCA’s recently published manual [Augsburg Fortress 2008] to promote Bible reading in the denomination. Its title: OPENING THE BOOK OF FAITH. LUTHERAN INSIGHTS FOR BIBLE STUDY. The sessions were organized by our local Lutheran School of Theology here in St. Louis.

Three weeks ago—in ThTh540—Pastor Chris Repp from across the Mississippi in Illinois had weighed that ELCA manual and found it wanting. Better said, “found it missing,” namely, missing the

main ingredients in the Lutheran recipe for reading the Bible. And what's so bad about that, Chris showed us, was not that we Lutherans didn't get our kudos, but that the Gospel suffers, is itself emaciated when we are told such things as: "Lutherans believe in the Bible." [No, Christ and his mercy-promise is what faith clings to.] Or again, "The Bible is a means of grace." [No, the "means,"—the actual transfer mechanisms—whereby Christ's promise gets to people are the pipelines that Christ himself authorized. Never "The Book," but always "promise proclaimed and promise enacted in the sacraments." What Bob Bertram liked to call the "One-Gospel-and-sacraments." And the reason for "narrowing down" the grace-mediators to just ONE thing? So that the promise gets offered to people so they can trust it. Hence the Reformation watchword "faith alone"—promises work only when trusted.]

Well, we read the manual plus Chris's critique during those 5 Thursday evenings and came to the same conclusion that he did. Also at the point where "Law and Gospel" shows up. It's all over the place. But it keeps popping up as a mantra. It gets recited, yes, saluted, as a major "Lutheran insight," but then ignored (with one exception) when we are shown how to be Lutheran about Bible study. It's a shibboleth, but not a tool to be used, a key for unlocking the scriptures. Conclusion: that manual "needs work," namely, a major revision.

Dawn Engle's question at the end of the last evening's session won't go away: "Isn't anybody going to give us anything better in the ELCA than this Opening the Book of Faith?" A recent proposal in that direction sent to Augsburg Fortress, the ELCA publishing house, came back to me with a polite "Thanks, but no thanks."

So here's something that may be what Dawn was asking for. And on today's date for me it has its own nostalgia. It comes from 55

years ago. I was 22. In the summer semester of 1953 three of us young “Missouri-Synners” (Bob Schultz and Dick Baepler the other two) were at Erlangen University in Germany hearing Werner Elert’s lectures on “Der christliche Glaube” (the Christian faith). For one week or so the topic was the Bible.

It was Elert’s custom at the end of each lecture session to give us summary sentences to write into our notebooks. During the lecture we were “just” supposed to listen. A few minutes before the bell rang he would “tell us what he’d told us” and say it slowly enough so we could write it down. He called them “feste Sätze” (solid sentences). In his “Der christliche Glaube” textbook—679 pages—the section on the Bible takes up 100. My “feste Sätze” from his lectures on that segment, translated into English for my own students in days gone by, are four single-spaced typed pages.

Here’s the outline:

Chapter 2: THE WHAT AND HOW OF GOD’S REVELATION

#11 The Gospel (7 Feste Stätze)

#12 Faith (4)

#13 The Fateful Character of God’s Law (4)

#14 The Concept and Dialectics of Revelation (5)

#15 Faith’s Knowledge of God and “Natural” Knowledge of God (3)

#16 God’s Way of Revealing Sinners (7)

#17 What Now Can Be Said About The Holy Scriptures (15)

Let’s see if I can give you the first 7 with a bit of context and commentary as a birthday present today. If two or three of you ask for it, I could, d.v., do more.

Peace and joy!

Ed Schroeder

#11 The Gospel

1. The “kerygma” [authorized message] of the Christian church according to the unanimous testimony of the original witnesses is called “Gospel,” a message of Good News. The connection between that kerygma and Church dogma [teaching] is this: Dogma specifies the ingredients that must be in the message in order for it to be Gospel. The “must” (the “you gotta”) aspect of dogma is not addressed to believers: “this is what you’ve gotta believe.” Instead “dogma” is addressed to the messengers who are hustling the message: “Here’s what you’ve gotta be “messaging” if it is to come out as Christian Good News. In the ancient church there were only two dogmas—one about the Trinity, one about Christ. Trinity is the way you need to be messaging about God if it is to come out as Christian Gospel. The Christ dogma says: Here’s the way you’ve got to be messaging about Jesus of Nazareth—100% God and 100% human—in order for it to come out as Christian Gospel. Christians do not believe the dogma. They believe (trust) Christ. Dogma is addressed to the preachers and teachers. It designates what must be said for there to be a trustworthy Gospel at all.
2. The word “Gospel” is used in two ways in the NT. It is both a report (indicative sentences: “Here’s what’s happening.”) and a message personally addressed to us (imperative sentences: “Hey you, listen. This is about you!”) The indicative sentences are most frequent in the four written gospels of the NT, the “Hey you” imperatives in the apostolic epistles.
3. Concerning the indicative sentences, two items First, indicative Gospel sentences report about Jesus in such a way that the Word of God is perceptible in him. John 1

designates Christ as God's "logos," the Word of God. Paul in 2 Cor.5:13 says this Word is the Word of reconciliation, God being reconciled with sinners.

4. Second, the human speech of the apostles is also called God's Word because the person of Christ (same as above) is the substance and content of that speaking. Insofar as later proclamation—all the way down to our day—has the same substance and content, it too can be labelled "The Word of God."
5. Concerning the imperative sentences: The Gospel becomes imperative sentences when the report about Christ, the indicative, is applied to the hearers and readers: "Hey you" With this in mind the written gospels report how Jesus himself called his hearers to come to him and listen (Matt. 11:28). When we move to the NT witness of the apostles, we see how they regularly add an appeal, a "hey you..." to their own presentation of the report about Jesus. Example: 2 Cor. 5:20. Paul reports on the "word of reconciliation," and then adds the appeal—the "Hey you"—to the hearers: "We entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God."
6. The imperative element expresses the fact that the substance and content of the Gospel is meant for the hearers. Its aim is to strike them, to lay claim to them. "This Gospel is talking about you."
7. All of the messaging coming from the apostles is the means—media, pipeline—for making the reported Christ-event audibly available. The apostles witness to the reconciliation that has happened in Christ. Their testimony does not create it. It had already happened before they came onto the scene. So the hearers are not asked to "believe" the apostles. They are entreated to trust the Christ whom the apostles tell about—in their own indicative and imperative sentences.