

Can One “Preach” the Law? An Interchange, Part 2

Colleagues,

Last week we sent you [a swap of notes](#) between Ed Schroeder and Martin Lohrmann on the question of whether the verb ‘to preach’ is appropriate for talk from a pulpit (or, as in lots of places these days, a “platform”) about the Law of God. As the second round of notes will confirm, the question is less abstruse than it will seem on first hearing. Just by the way, if any homegrown German speakers among you would care to have their own crack at turning Werner Elert’s terminology (see below) into useful English, we’d be glad to hear from them.

Peace and Joy,

Jerry Burce, for the editorial team

Ed Schroeder, replying to Martin Lohrmann—

The deeper background of my own take on this is, no surprise, my teacher Werner Elert. Sixty years ago (sic!), in 1953, I was listening to him live during the Sommersemester at the University of Erlangen, with Bob Schultz and Dick Baepler sitting next to me. “Die drei Amerikaner aus Missouri!” Bob was already working on his doctorate under Elert. Dick and I (he later spent a lifetime career at Valpo) were still at Concordia Sem, St. Louis, but had snuck over there as exchange students to get the Lutheran confessional goodies that Jaroslav Pelikan (young Turk at Concordia for just a couple of years, and we were there for them) had told us we could get from Elert without the bane of verbal inspiration.

From Elert we learned what the Law/Gospel mantra was all about. It became Schultz's doctoral dissertation, "*Gesetz & Evangelium in der luth. Theologie des 19ten Jahrhunderts. 1951.*" (I just googled the exact title and got 1210 hits!)

Yes, the Gospel must be proclaimed. And if "preach" is the best English word we have, then so be it. But why not "proclaim" as our preferred term, since "preach" in our argot is so loaded with expected "you gottas"? "Don't preach to me!!!"

That was Fred Danker's constant drumbeat, with New Testament rootage: "Don't preach. Proclaim." One of the two good-news terms turned into verbs in NT Greek is *kerygma*, a proclamation, an announcement, something a herald brings to people that they didn't know/hear before. But of course what gets brought is THE specific Christ-message, not just any "religious" info. And even *euaggelion*, as Good Message, might now have an analog in our lingo since "message" has become a verb in our cyber-culture. But here too the referent is THE specific Christ-message as something not present or heard before. Not just any message.

[Concordia's great homiletics professor] Richard Caemmerer had helped us seminarians see the real "Aha!" about the Gospel. But it was with Law that we got our eyes opened in Erlangen sixty years ago, and specifically in St. Paul's humongous exposition of the term throughout all his epistles. But it's elsewhere in NT writers too. Yes, a new take on Torah/*nomos*/law which isn't readily found in the OT. But that should not surprise us after Christ has come to exegete the law rightly—specifically for the Hebrew law-experts themselves, and scandalously so—and finally to terminate it.

Elert's German rendering for the reality designated by the term law was "*Gesetzmässige Existenz*," rendered into English as

“nomological existence.” That’s an egghead neologism if there ever was one. But still it says what is meant: “life totally enwebbed by God’s *nomos* [law].”

The full reality of nomological existence is spelled out *in extenso* in Elert’s ethics book, *Das Christliche Ethos*. The first third of the book is “Ethos unter dem Gesetz,” i.e., “the quality of human life totally enwebbed by God’s *nomos*.”

And that’s the first reason why “*nomos*” doesn’t have to be “preached.” It’s already there, in full force. It’s the neurological network running the whole shebang of the old creation.

Elert heard Paul (but not only Paul) signaling that there are three distinguishable webs within the operational network of nomological existence. He called them “Gefüge,” which is tough to render into English. For now, my term is web. Seinsgefüge, Sollgefüge, Qualitätsgefüge.

Nomos/Law is:

1. The web of my being (Sein), the primal nitty-gritty of human life. It’s the web of human existence itself—all those relationships into which I am thrust when I appear on the planet. These are the “givens” of my particular life, which are different from the givens of any other human being.
2. A web of “du sollst.” These are the implicit/explicit “shoulds” that arise in these relationships. Zillions of them. The Decalogue, sure. But also the umpteen other demands/expectations that come to me day in, day out.
3. Qualitäts-gefüge. A web of evaluations where the quality of my life and actions get spelled out and communicated to me. Constantly, regularly, from the others in my many human relationships, and also from the non-human agents in

the creation.

God in all this is, of course, present.

1. As creator and “manager.” Schöpfer & Gubernator are Elert’s German terms.
2. As legislator (Decalogue, etc.).
3. As judge, verdict-giver—and finally executioner, executing the verdicts.

And when the good news comes, initially at number 3 with the new verdict: sinner guilty, yes, but forgiven in Christ, then comes good news at number 2: grace imperatives replace law imperatives. At number 1 new creation replaces old creation—even the wild prospect of the laws of space and time being abrogated, as we see hinted in the post-Easter appearances of Jesus recorded in the gospels.

Summa:

“Preaching” law? Bringing the law—THE OTHERWISE ABSENT LAW—into people’s lives during the sermon? Hardly. They’ve been stuck in it ever since they got up to come to church. And every minute since last Sunday. And....

To carry out the one-and-only proclamation task (preaching, if you insist), the Gospel-proclaimer—as pre-proclamation—exposes, pinpoints, turns the lights on to, the already operational law, overwhelmingly operational law. So overwhelming that Paul will call it a curse. And then gets to the point for which she’s in the pulpit: “Have I got good news for you!”

That’s why Bertram’s diagnosis/prognosis seems so “winsome” (his favored term) to me.

Diagnosis exposes, turns the lights on. Nomological existence is 100% on the scene. Folks are blinded from seeing it.

Prognosis is “Have I got good news for you!”

The “pre-proclamation” part of the homily is fundamentally a VISUAL one. Helping folks “see” what’s already there. As an M.D. does when you’re getting diagnosed at the doctor’s office. And for the homily, seeing down to the bottom of the well. Initial diagnosis, advanced diagnosis, final diagnosis.

Bob would often spec out the Ur-Greek behind the “gnosis” part in dia- and pro- as a visual phenomenon. Gnosis in Greek thought was “seeing” something that you hadn’t seen before. That was Socrates’ regular gig. He claimed never to have taught anyone anything. Just getting them to “see” what was already there—even in their own heads! (This idea is still present a tad in our English when you finally catch on to something. “Now I see.” It’s also in our term “insight.”)

Au contraire the prognosis, à la Bertram. Though it’s also seeing, it’s a particular seeing, an Aha!, that comes from HEARING something you hadn’t heard before. “Son, be of good cheer, your sins are forgiven.” Hearing this, you start to see/trust that you are indeed the forgiven sinner that you have been proclaimed to be. Bob even punned the “dia-” and “pro-” prefixes to “gnosis,” this way. Law is God seeing through us. Gospel is God seeing us through. The former is taking away our blinders about what’s already going on. The second is proclaiming to us a message that we could never have guessed from just having “seen” what God sees when he sees through us.

Cheers!

Ed

Hi Ed,

What I mean by “preaching the law” is the same thing as the

Crossings steps of speaking the “diagnosis” part of the message. The diagnosis needs to be publicly proclaimed. Yes, people live under the oppression of this killing law all the time, so that it is not good news to hear it. Still, the law and our sickness under it needs to be publicly diagnosed, preached, confessed, shared, etc. for the sake of applying the good news to our otherwise sin-sick (and law-sick) souls.

Although the word that kills belongs to God’s alien work, it is nevertheless also of God. “The Lord kills and brings to life; he brings down to Sheol and raises up” (from Hannah’s song in 1 Samuel). Because we are *simul justus et peccator* in this life, both works happen in us every day (as in Luther’s explanation to baptism in the Small Catechism). God willing, our sermons also belong to this larger work, so again I’m using the word ‘preaching’ as part of the entire sharing of the gospel.

All the best,
Martin