

Christ Fulfills God's Law on Good Friday

Colleagues,

Here's an item from the CORE folks, major critics of the ELCA's slippery slide into anti-nomianism [= disregard for God's law], that calls for comment—and correction, I think.

At one of their web-sites <http://lutheranspersisting.wordpress.com/david-yeago-facing-reality-in-the-elca> we read this:

“There is a Reformation slogan that sums up the impossibility [of the ELCA's position] here: ‘What the law demands, the gospel bestows.’ The law demands righteousness, the gospel bestows righteousness, and it does so by bringing Christ to us and us to Christ. He is the living fulfillment of the law, the one in whom all that the law requires is fully and unquestionably realized. His righteousness covers our sin, when we become one with him by faith, but at the same time, he lives in us, which means that righteousness dwells in us, alive and triumphant, and we begin to live a new kind of life. But if the gospel bestows what the law demands, then without agreeing substantially on what the law demands, we cannot agree on what the gospel bestows. And pushed to the end, such disagreement will easily turn into disagreement about Jesus Christ and his saving righteousness.”

“Lutherans persisting” is in that URL address, but the constant drumbeat of these persists for a “third use” of God's law—using Moses as mentor for how to follow Christ (as if the former had been raised from the dead to coach us

instead of the latter)—is persistently leading Lutherans in the wrong direction That's not just my idea. Here's a quote from a Swedish Lutheran: "The third use of the law, which was afterwards cultivated [among Lutherans], gave an authority to the law even where there was no sin, and thereby the new age was brought under the rule of the old . . . where the taskmaster of the old aeon no longer puts to death but rather gives life, a sort of surrogate life instead of the life of the Gospel." (Gustav Wingren: The Living Word [1949/1960], p. 145)

Back to the paragraph above. Confused –literally, “fused together”—here are law-righteousness and gospel-righteousness, two very different sorts of right-ness. Apples and oranges. Qualitatively different: OK-ness achieved by my performance vs. freebee OK-ness offered to failed-performers by Christ. This righteousness is grounded in Good Friday by virtue of Christ's performance and transmitted to non-performers simply (sola) by the non-performer trusting the offer.

And even here, the two performances are qualitatively different. Law-righteousness comes via moral effort; Gospel-righteousness comes via Christ's dying for sinners. That's not even so much “what he did,” as it is “what was done to him.” The “law of sin and death” did him in. On Good Friday Christ is not primarily the “agent” in the ancient meaning of that word (the subject of the sentence), but the “patient” in the ancient meaning of that word (the object in the sentence). Not the “doer” of the action, but the one “done to” by the action. On Good Friday Christ is not “doing” the law; the law is “doing” him, doing him in. He WAS crucified.

Gospel-righteousness is NOT Christ's own “law-righteousness,” his own perfect performance in keeping all the rules. Christ-

trusting sinners are “right” before God—that’s Gospel-righteousness—not because HE kept all the rules and then transferred this law-righteous achievement to sinners. Christ’s “fulfilling the law” centers on Good Friday. Here it is not perfect moral performance, an “ethical” fulfilling of the law, that he carries out, but court-room righteousness “fully” administered to him, juridical “fulfillment” of the law’s death sentence for sinners. He receives and willingly accepts the law’s death verdict on sinners, as a sinner. To that extent he is an active subject. But his action is not ethical performance. Instead it is his acceptance of the law’s action on him – in his body on the tree. That’s how he “fulfills” the law, fully receiving the law’s death sentence for sinners. That’s the righteousness that gets offered to sinners: Christ’s death sentence exchanged for our own. Law fulfilled. Filled full. It is finished.

If the Gospel bestows what the law demands, then, as Wingren reminds us, the law has the last word, and the Gospel fits into the process as God’s way to let the law have the last word and still have sinners come out alive. But that can’t be right. A “Reformation slogan”? Surely not Luther’s Reformation. Maybe Calvin’s?

Fundamental text here is Romans 8 at the very outset.

“There is now no more condemnation [of unrighteousness] for sinners who are in Christ Jesus.” I.e., they are righteous. How so? “For the [new] ‘law’ of the Spirit of life in Christ [that incredible Golgatha/Easter transaction, that sweet-swap] has set sinners free from the law of sin and of death.” Here’s how it unfolded. “God, by sending his own Son into human flesh to deal with sin now reigning in human flesh, by this way saw to it that the just requirement of the law [sinners must die] might be fulfilled in us.” Christ’s execution as friend of sinners

fulfills the law's death sentence for all those who entrust themselves to him. They enjoy the sweet swap. As Christ-trusters their own execution as sinner is already behind them. Their new "rightness" consists in constant Christ-connectedness. "Walking" while Christ-connected constitutes "walking according to [his] Spirit."

Since the law is always "a law of sin and death," to "walk" in its way, to "set one's mind" on the law as the "way to walk," is death, "hostile to God," "does not submit to God," "cannot please God." Paul puts all that under his umbrella word "flesh." Flesh is inescapably law-bound, with death sentence and execution, aka the law's sort of "justification" for sinners, yet to come.

Paul's summary sentence is this: "To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit [of Christ] is life and peace." That's the bottom-line difference between law-righteousness and Gospel-righteousness. When the Galatian promoters of that "other" Gospel tried to fuse the two righteousnesses into one, Paul's terse word was: If that can be done, then Christ died in vain.

For Lutherans this difference was classically spelled out in a well-known Luther essay on Two Kinds of Righteousness. It's a variation on Luther's drumbeat on the absolute necessity to make the distinction between God's law and God's gospel when interpreting the scriptures. Not to do so, so say the Lutheran Confessions, is to lose both.

Let's look at the "Lutherans persisting" paragraph above line for line. It needs some work.

"There is a Reformation slogan that sums up the impossibility [of the ELCA's position] here: 'What the law demands, the gospel bestows.'"

I don't know of any place in the confessional documents of Lutheranism, the Book of Concord, where that slogan is proposed or recommended. There may be some such a statement somewhere, but I don't remember ever having seen it. And because of the confessions' drumbeat not to con-fuse legal righteousness with Gospel-righteousness, they shouldn't have said it, if they actually ever did. My hunch is that its heritage is Lutheran Pietism where moral righteousness (doing the works of the law) and Gospel-righteousness (enjoying Christ's sweet swap) occasionally were fused.

"The law demands righteousness, the gospel bestows righteousness, and it does so by bringing Christ to us and us to Christ. "

But those are two different righteousnesses. What the Gospel offers is NOT what the law demands. One demands the death of the sinner, the other offers sinners life. Those are not identical operations. Life and death are not synonyms.

"He is the living fulfillment of the law, the one in whom all that the law requires is fully and unquestionably realized."

Yes, but the focus of the fulfillment is not Christ's ethical perfection, but this receiving our death sentence. That is what the law "requires" for sinners, and yes, it was fully and unquestionably realized on Good Friday. But that does not sound like what the sentence above wants to be saying, as the followings sentences show.

"His righteousness covers our sin, when we become one with him by faith, but at the same time, he lives in us, which means that righteousness dwells in us, alive and triumphant, and we begin to live a new kind of life."

Careful here. Just what IS "his righteousness"? According to

Pauline witness (and not only Paul) the “covering” is not Christ’s moral achievement to cover our moral failures. The big “cover” is not a cover of our sin, but a cover of us sinners—“covering” our death sentence for us. Yes, this does come “by faith,” but, once more, the first event of that faith’s “oneness with Christ” is that our death-sentence is swapped with the one whom we trust. The first step “when we become one with him by faith” is that “We have been buried with him by baptism into his death.” It’s the Good Friday connection.

When he then “lives in us,” it is not his ethical-righteousness (he did everything that God’s commandments call for) that inhabits us, but Christ’s Good Friday/Easter righteousness, aka Gospel-righteousness. When “we begin to live a new kind of life,” it is really BRAND NEW. It is NOT that we now succeed in law-righteousness where we’d previously failed. But BRAND NEW in that it is in a different category, from a different source, with a different mindset—a different reality—from any and all law-righteousness.

In the rhetoric of Romans 8, it comes with the “mindset” of God’s Spirit, not the mindset of God’s law. With Christ as Lord and Master and being led by the Spirit, where is there any need for recurring to Moses’ rubrics for righteousness? If so, for what? What is incomplete about the Gospel’s double gift (Christ and the Spirit, 2 Cor.3:17) for “living the new kind of life” that Moses and the law could even supply? Mt. Sinai is clueless about the new righteousness that got hammered out on Mt. Calvary.

“But if the gospel bestows what the law demands, then without agreeing substantially on what the law demands, we cannot agree on what the gospel bestows.”

The premise in the first half of the sentence is untenable. It

implies the same “substance” for both God’s law and God’s gospel. According to Romans 8 that’s the equivalent of saying death and life are synonyms. There might be a smidgin of truth in the second half of the sentence. At least if reworded to this extent: Until we see what the law REALLY demands—i.e., the death of the sinner as its primary demand—and understand the commandments as God’s “addendum” (so Paul claims) to hold this death-demand in front of our nose—then no matter what we might agree upon with reference to the Gospel, it makes little difference, since it won’t address the law’s ominous “justification” awaiting all of us.

“And pushed to the end, such disagreement will easily turn into disagreement about Jesus Christ and his saving righteousness.”

That is indeed where many denominations are today—ELCA included. Disagreement about Jesus Christ and his saving work. But that’s not where we “will easily” wind up. Isn’t this already the elephant in the living room? We are already “pushed to the end.” And grim as those words may sound, that could indeed be a very good thing. Back to square one. Just what IS the Good News about Jesus Christ and his saving righteousness? According to Article X of the Formula of Concord it sure looks like we are in a *tempus confessionis*, a time for confessing. American Lutheranism could do worse than go to work today on a formula of concord. Just what is the Good News about Jesus Christ and his saving righteousness?

And it’s not just us USA Lutherans with this elephant in our living room as we seek to be Lutherans persisting. At the big Lutheran World Federation gathering in Augsburg, Germany, just one year ago this very week, that was the sub-text throughout. Just what is the saving work of Jesus Christ? In other words, just what IS the Christian Gospel? It never succeeded in getting direct attention at Augsburg 2009, but was addressed constantly

in the Kaffeeklatsches. At Augsburg 1530 it was front and center. [For ThTh reports on Augsburg 2009 GO to: <https://crossings.org/thursday/2009/thur040909.shtml> and <https://crossings.org/thursday/2009/thur042309.shtml>].

If Christ-confessors, Lutherans included, could wrestle that one to the ground—that is, to the original ground from which it once arose—that would be a good thing. Sure, we’ve got trouble. But as Bob Bertram often told us: When trouble comes, don’t let the trouble go to waste. His posthumously published book’s title suggests the way to be Lutherans persisting. It’s “A Time for Confessing.”

Peace and Joy!

Ed Schroeder

P.S. Come to think of it, next week’s ThTh post, God willing, will speak to this agenda. Scheduled for ThTh 616 is Richard Koenig’s review of John Piper’s book “The Future of Justification. A Response to N.T.Wright.” Piper examines eight of Wright’s “head-turner” claims about justification, one of which is “Justification is not the Gospel.” Stay tuned.