

Ed Schroeder on Kingdoms and The Kingdom. A July 4th Special

Colleagues,

At some point in this past Easter season Ed Schroeder found himself reading the following in a Sunday morning bulletin:

“In our liturgy today we stand on the threshold of our Lord’s ascension into heaven, and the conclusion of his ministry among us, and the beginning of humanity’s work to build God’s dominion on earth.”

Ed went home and wrote a note to the Lutheran folks responsible. I got to see it. It strikes me as worth sharing, especially on this present threshold of America’s annual July 4th celebration. The notion of America as somebody’s special project with redemptive significance for the rest of humanity is deeply ingrained in the national psyche. Earnest American Protestants have a long history of identifying God as the Somebody who is pushing it. Today’s Protestants of a politically conservative bent work are still working hard to keep that tradition alive. I think, for example, of the megachurch pastor in my neighborhood who, some years ago, sent around a mailer that featured a family photo of him, his wife, and their several adopted children all draped in leather jackets with an American flag theme. That some of the children were obviously born in other parts of the world seemed somehow designed to cinch the point: God saves through America.

This sort of thing embarrasses liberal Protestants. They find it unseemly to assert that this particular nation could be quite

that special. They trumpet its failings. Still, for all their raging at America's sins, they keep clinging as fiercely as anyone to the underlying Protestant premise that God is waiting for human beings to get their wits together somewhere on earth, causing righteousness to appear with peace and justice abounding for all, a bit of liberty thrown in for good measure, I suppose.

Now a premise is one thing. A promise is quite another. It's with this in mind that you'll want to read what Ed had to say in his note. After that, enjoy the fireworks this weekend, thanking God with modest and grateful hearts for First Article gifts.

In another matter, one of you kindly drew my attention to a mistake I made in last week's post. These days the preferred shorthand tag for the Greek-English lexicon I pointed you to is BDAG, as opposed either to BAGD or BADG, both of which appeared in my copy, the latter by mistake. The current tag came into vogue in 2001, when the third edition was published. Fred Danker was the sole editor of that edition. He revised extensively, and added much by way of new material to the earlier editions. The new tag is meant to honor that. I sit gladly corrected.

Peace and Joy,

Jerry Burce

On Kingdoms and The Kingdom

by Ed Schroeder

A liturgist's assertion: "Today we stand we stand on the threshold of our Lord's ascension into heaven, and the conclusion of his ministry among us, and the beginning of humanity's work to build God's dominion on earth."

Ed's response:

That final clause proposes a substitute, I think, to the Reformation-era Lutheran confessors' claim for what the Kingdom of God is.

That Kingdom-of-God term was as much a conflict-point with the established church of Europe's 16th century as were the cardinal vocables: justification, grace, and faith. Rome had already built an impressive Kingdom of God. "Not what Jesus had in mind when he spoke of Kingdom-of-God," the Reformers said.

They based this, no surprise, on New Testament texts where the creation, continuing existence, and fulfillment of Kingdom-of-God is never in a sentence where humans are the sentence-subject. Humans are always on the receiving end, the objects, with God, God-in-Christ, as the subject, the actor/prime-mover of the action. This is easily verified by reference to Luther's explanation of "Thy kingdom come" in his two catechisms in the Lutheran Confessions.

One sees it also in John's gospel (18:33-38), where Pilate can't comprehend what Jesus is talking about when the topic is "my kingdom." "Not of this world," Jesus says. That doesn't mean it's on planet Mars, but that humans can't create the kingdom he is bringing. But Pilate is himself a kingdom-creator. He knows that humans can do this. No wonder the disconnect. Jesus' kingdom, so Jesus claims, is God's kingdom, of God. Pilate—and Pilate's world too—have no antennae for that sort of regime. That's especially so when you move to the substance of the Kingdom-of-God that came with Jesus.

Basic to this is that the core of that kingdom's "coming" is God (in Christ) now "ruling" sinners with mercy. When "forgiveness-of-sins" (= the simple synonym for "gospel," thus Luther) is occurring, it's always God the forgiver doing the action. And

the image of building, as in “building the kingdom,” already misleads into Pilate’s conception of kingdom. No wonder that image is alien to the Kingdom-of-God vocabulary of the NT.

Kingdom-of-God is God in action forgiving sinners. No human being can be substituted for the subject in that sentence. It’s the One sinned against who is the actor if/when sinners get forgiven. That’s why “God’s dominion” is a bad translation for the Greek “*basileia tou theou*.” Dominion carries a dominating notion of authority, ruling “over” people, thus clean contrary to “management by mercy,” a point Jesus seeks to make “perfectly clear” in a (last-ditch?) effort (Matt. 20:20-28) where Christ’s sort of “*basileia*” (“ransoming sinners”) is what the disciples don’t yet grasp. They’re still with Pilate.

It was my spouse, Marie, who noted the disconnect between those words in the Sunday worship folder and Martin Luther’s own in a devotion we recently read. “That is why we do not pray: Let us come to Thy kingdom, as if we should run after it, but thus: Thy kingdom come to us. For the grace of God and His Kingdom, with all the virtues thereof, must come to us, if ever we are to receive it. Of ourselves we can never come to the kingdom, just as Christ came from heaven to us who are on earth, and we did not ascend from earth into heaven, to Him. When God reigns in us, we are His kingdom. That is blessedness.”

Not only were these two conflicting views of Kingdom-of-God near the center of the Reformation era church conflict, it is very much so in today’s multi-denominational global church. The minority voice now (as then) is the Reformers’ confession above. “It’s all about God forgiving sinners. It’s a God-and-sinners relation event. And cosmic was that event. It took the death and resurrection of the second person of the Deity to make it happen.”

The majority voice, the “dominating” voice today, works implicitly with Pilate’s notion of kingdom—sometimes flat-out explicitly. “Humans—people of faith, people of good will—can make the Kingdom-of-God happen here on earth. The agenda: restore the frazzled world of sinners to an Eden-like world of peace and justice. Jesus shows us the way. Forgiveness of sins? Oh, yes, of course, there is that too. But the core agenda of the Kingdom-of-God from New Testament times till right now is humanity’s work to build God’s peace and justice dominion on earth.”

Is that not a different Jesus from the one in the previous paragraph? I think so. —EHS