

“God Loves You” or “Christ Forgives You” – Which One is Gospel?

Colleagues,

Timothy Hoyer, ELCA pastor at Gloria Dei Lutheran Church, Lakewood NY, is not a timorous Timothy. Though you might get the opposite impression upon meeting him. Perhaps a clone of “Clark Kent, mild-mannered reporter for The Daily Planet,” you might think. Not the full Timothy. He has been featured on ThTh posts before—often in response to some less-than-Gospel mantra circulating in his denomination, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. He has a law-gospel-distinction antenna that works like a mine-detector. Well, he’s at it again. He sent this in to relieve “Uncle Ed” —he’s the son of Marie’s brother—a bit in my continuing cyclops affliction. And he’s playing hardball, challenging the goodness of the widely-cherished mantra “God loves you.” Now wait a minute, Timothy, we want to say. That’s a direct quote from the Bible! Especially St. John’s Gospel and First Epistle. What could be wrong with that?

Though he doesn’t make explicit linkage to Bonhoeffer’s own classic caveat about “cheap grace,” that is what Timothy is saying: “God loves you” talk in our day is grace-talk, sure, but it is cheap grace. For the same reason that Bonhoeffer cited in the Lutheranism of his day. It’s grace without a cross—both Christ’s cross and the cross he invites us to shoulder as we follow him.

But what about all those passages in John? Check them out. There is no God-loves-you talk in John’s theology without the cross-qualifier. Classic John 3:16 says it plain and simple: “God

loved the world IN JUST THIS WAY [says the Greek] that he sacrificed his Son to rescue us who are perishing and link us to the Life that lasts." I John 4:10 ditto. No sloppy "agape" from God for sinners. "Costly" grace, costly love.

But I'm usurping Timothy's turf. Read on.

Peace and Joy!

Ed Schroeder

P.S.

One of my brightest and best sem students from Ethiopia (way back in 1995) has just registered for the January Conference. He's Dinku Lamessa. Dinku is now National coordinator

Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus
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EECMY is the fastest-growing Lutheran church in the world, now the largest Lutheran church in Africa. Their "church-growth" secret? This mantra: "If you're baptized, you're a missionary." And those "merely" baptized believe it, and do it.

I hope a bunch of you can be with Dinku and the rest of us for this festival. Specs on the Crossings website.

"God Loves You" or "Christ Forgives You"

When "God loves you" is the gospel, then faith is not given because Christ is not proclaimed; the law is shriveled; there is no inner struggle, and so people think that there is no

daily moment-to-moment need for Christ. After all, God loves them.

'God loves you' is used as a gospel by ELCA institutions. Luther Seminary in Minnesota has as its theme, "God Is Calling You." Outdoor Ministries' program for 2007 has as its theme, "Listen! God Is Calling." The proclamation that God is calling can be good news only if the gospel is "God loves you."

However, even with love, the calling of God can cause fear. Adam was afraid when God called him. "But the LORD God called to the man, and said to him, 'Where are you?' And he said, 'I heard the sound of thee in the garden, and I was afraid...'" (Gen 3.9-10 RSV).

Adam and Eve had fear because they did not love or trust God. Their love and trust had been switched from "in God" to "in the serpent." The serpent's word mattered more to them than God's word. The serpent's words of "you will be like God" were better than being created, placed in the garden of Eden, and being gifted with, "You may freely eat of every tree in the garden, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat."

Adam and Eve's consciences were troubled. "I was afraid, because I was naked." They were troubled because they did not have trust in God, not just because they ate the fruit, but because they had taken their trust away from God. Trust, once taken away, cannot be put back. It is forever broken.

So, how can the gospel be, "God loves you"? That gospel is proclaimed when the law is shriveled from "For in the day you eat of it you shall die" to "That's okay. God loves you just as you are." The law is made to be fake. The law does not really warn that we shall die nor cause us to die. Worse, God, who spoke the warning, is made to be a liar. "God loves you"

changes the law from a curse into a list of rules to help you do what is right. If you break a few, that's okay, just try harder next time.

Even death is made into God calling you home to a better place. God so appreciates our effort to try harder that God gives us heaven.

Christ is not needed. God loves you.

Then Christ has died for nothing.

The witnesses of Christ tell the details of Christ's suffering and death with enormous emphasis. Christ died for a reason, a serious reason. That reason was that we had taken our trust away from God and as the consequence God had sentenced us to death. The law exists to accuse us of stealing our trust from God, not to just tell us what is right. The law exists to tell us that God has put the curse of death on us. The problem is not that it's hard to believe that God loves you when life gets tough. The problem is not that God loves you as if it is God and us against life, God and us against the bad things of life, against evil, and against death. No, life is from God, the bad things are of God, evil is of God, and death is of God.

Only God's forbearance, God's looking over our theft, God's promise to make things new between God and us again keeps God from giving us ten disasters an hour. Luther says: "To the others, who would like to keep their conscience clear, we have this to say: God has thrown us into the world, under the power of the devil. As a result, we have no paradise here. Rather, at any time we can expect all kinds of misfortune to body, wife, child, property, and honor. And if there is one hour in which there are less than ten disasters or an hour in which we can even survive, we ought to say, 'How good God is to me! He has not sent every disaster to me in this one hour.' How is that

possible? Indeed, as long as I live under the devil's power, I should not have one happy hour. That is what we teach our people" (Luther's Works, Vol. 46, Whether Soldiers, Too, Can Be Saved, Page 117).

"To keep our conscience clear" is why people proclaim "God loves you." But it is to make our conscience clear without using Christ, and thus without realizing how much of disaster we are really in.

The problem is that God "has thrown us under the power of the devil." God is against us thieves. The Gospel of Christ forgiving us by his death and rising is how we are saved from the disaster of God throwing us into this world under the devil. Christ redeems us from the devil. Christ is God's new way of dealing with our stealing our trust from our relationship with God. Christ ends God's curse, ends our stealing, buries them, and then creates us brand new, to live by forgiveness and love instead of by rules and a hiding of the disaster with the words, "God loves you."

By Christ forgiving us, we face, at the same time (simultaneously sinner and saint), God's curse and Christ's forgiveness, we face stealing faith and having faith, law and grace, the old person who steals and the new person who is forgiven. We face our desire to steal for ourselves and renouncing ourselves, we face doing things because we are threatened by a curse and we face the freedom in Christ to act in love as he did. We face the call of the curse cursing us when we steal or no cursing if we don't steal; and we face its opposite call which is the call of mercy. We face death and resurrection. In other words, every moment is cursed and every moment is forgiven. There are two valid calls calling us. Both calls are God's calls. The first call is God's judgment and curse. The second is Christ forgiving us. Which call calls us

more loudly into its relationship with God?

When "God loves you" is proclaimed, there are no two claims, just God's love. There is no law and Gospel, just mush. There is no death and resurrection, just "God proves he loves you by Jesus dying for you." Thus, Jesus' death is not an ending of God's judgment, but only proof of God's love that has always been there. "God loves you" makes Jesus' death and rising another and a last attempt by God to try and convince us that God does love us. That makes us no better than a teenage boy telling his girl friend, "You say you love me. Prove it." God then has to do all sorts of antics to prove his love. And we decide whether God has proved it or not. We have thus kept our trust to ourselves. There is no need for us to hear the gospel, to be given faith. There is no faith in the call of mercy over the call of the curse. And faith is the only answer that gets us God's love.

And when disaster becomes tragedy, "God loves you" is ineffective good news. It only makes people ask, "Then why is God letting this happen to me? God must not love me. What have I done to deserve this?" No comfort of the conscience is given.

The two claims we face cause a struggle within us. Which one do we trust? Faith in Christ, in God's mercy, in resurrection, in mutual love, is created in us when we hear Christ forgives us. All the time we are hearing that we are cursed and judged, that retribution is how life works, that fairness and justice are best. All those things make us feel naked. We hear them all the time because they are real, and valid, and from God. Only the spoken word, the speaking of Christ's promise, the giving of that promise in the Lord's Supper, counteracts the opposing words. Thus, we need to hear them, faithfully, so that we do not weaken and become subject to unfaith, to our own way of stealing.

The original disciples lived hearing God's curse. One day Jesus came to Peter, to James and John, to Matthew, and he called them. "Follow me." They did not hide. They did not fear. They immediately got up and followed Jesus. His call overcame the call of God's curse, and now overcomes the call of "God loves you."

Christ's mercy calls you. Christ's death and rising call you. Christ's forgiveness calls you. "You are witnesses of these things." Those are calls ELCA institutions can use.

Timothy Hoyer