

“Is Anybody Out There Listening?” Part Two

Colleagues,

A number of responses came in on last week's ThTh post. Here are four of them.

Peace and Joy!

Ed Schroeder

1. From Ron Neustadt, pastor, St. Mark Lutheran Church, Belleville, Illinois
Is anybody listening? Something that just occurred to me: the type of fishing that Peter, James, and John practiced did not involve bait, as far as I know. It was rather a matter of casting nets. Without lapsing too far into allegory, I wonder if that has implications for the fishing Jesus authorizes us to do, i.e. it's not a matter of finding the right kind of "bait" that will be attractive (and then spending a lot of time and energy on that bait – evangelism methods and programs), but a matter of enveloping people with the Promise, trusting that the Holy Spirit will draw them in by means of that net, as Jesus promised.

I don't have much more to add, except the observation that people, like fish, are not stupid. They know when you're trying to "hook 'em," and they swim the other way. No wonder. I would, too. But "hooking them" is not our job. Loving them is. And how can we love them if we keep the Promise (that they are dear to God for Jesus' sake) to ourselves?

Thinking that it is up to us to “hook ‘em” doesn’t seem to me to put much confidence in the power of the Good News. (“For I am not ashamed of the Gospel; it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who trusts it ...”) Besides that, it is the Holy Spirit who generates that trust, not we.

Peace and Joy,
Ron

2. From Jerry Burce, pastor, Messiah Lutheran Church, Fairview Heights, OhioEd, at the end of last week’s ThTh you tell us:

“Richard Koenig of Cromwell, Connecticut, tells me of ‘an event I hope we will be able to pull off up here, a one day event of reflection on The Future of Justification.’

And then he asks: Got any thoughts? I did. Like this . . . Richard, I suggest you ring the changes on a theme something like this: The contrast between folks in a culture that is ho-hum about the Christian Gospel of justification before God and the 24/7 drive of each of us to ‘be right.’ Justification—proving that I’m right, that I’m OK – is THE AGENDA of everyone’s life.”

A thought from this end—

If Dick or anybody is looking for secular evidence of the assertion above, have them check out a 10-yr. old Robin Williams movie called “Final Cut.” It’s all about justification – a futuristic fantasy about how folks might try to wind up with the big “OK” stamp on their lives. (Come to think of it: Dick’s conference title perfectly describes the flick – The Future of Justification (Secular-style. An Approach).

Also: just noticed that FX, the cable channel, is launching a new TV in mid-March. Title: "Justified." I'll be making a point of checking out an episode or two.

Jerry

3. From Brian Days, ELCA Synodically Authorized Minister, Beardstown, Illinois I liked what you had to say there in TT609. Do they even want to hear it? I watch the kids' lives fill up with sports, school and social calendars full of have-to-do's and can't-miss events. Parents and other adults are kept quite busy with their own things and are far too happy to show up on Sunday for an hour and call it good. And those are the ones that will say they are involved in their church. The others are the Christmas and Easter guests that are on the books but can't find the church the other 363 days of the year.

I count myself as blessed that my eyes were opened. I don't HAVE TO serve our Lord with every day I have, I GET TO! So I will run the race until I'm called home. Scattering seeds wherever I go, on whatever soil I may be standing on.

In Christ,
Brian Days

4. And then from the other side of the planet, Australia, these words from Neal Nuske, veteran teacher at St. Peters College in Brisbane, Queensland. [In Aussie parlance "college" is what you do before you do "university."] RE: Does anyone out there want to hear our Good News?
Answer: Yes.

Why?

Crossings as Cognitive Re-configuring

Greetings from one appreciative Aussie 'down under.'

Each Friday I turn on my Staff Room computer and go immediately to Thursday Theology!

Such is life 'down under!' It has been a valuable and refreshing experience for me to regularly re-configure the coordinates of Reformation Lutheran Theology in light of mutations and variations that can at times obscure the central focus of Luther's key insights.

I have been reading Crossings-Thursday Theology for over a decade. It is great 'to be brought up to speed' about issues related to clarifying the meaning of the words 'Law' and 'Gospel'.

The clear distinctions between these two critical theological concepts can dissolve easily, then result in a mutation, a new form of theology and praxis.

Geographical isolationism can produce such mutations, as can working in the context of a religious based, Secondary School educational institution.

It is in this context that the 'Two-Kingdoms' insight of Luther is in need of regular revisiting and reviewing because students can easily –but mistakenly– equate the organised life of their school experience as 'the gospel.'

Or, they can be led to believe that the values which guide an institution are Christian values, ergo 'gospel.' This happens because schools may promote themselves as Christian schools.

Consequently, students equate their experience inside such institutions as an example of Christian life.

Unfortunately then the freedom of the gospel, a theological concept so filled with liberation and joy, can be destroyed.

My theory is that institutions who have their *raison d'être* and existence for the sake of God's work in the world (*creatio continua*) in the 'Kingdom of the Left,' schools etc., cannot be governed by the gospel.

Whenever that is attempted, then the Gospel will become a new Law.

In other words the Law destroys the message of the Gospel in that particular community.

For this reason 'gospel' is not 'religion' nor can it be institutionalized or claimed to be a guiding organisational administrative principle governing the life of an institution. If so, then Gospel disappears beneath the Law.

Calvin attempted to make the gospel a guiding organisational principle, or a fundamental Christian value which he believed could socialize the citizens of Geneva into the Christian lifestyle. As a result, the Gospel became Law.

So the constant underlying question that governs the way I read Crossings is the simple yet profound question:

What are we talking about when we use the word 'gospel'?

Fortunately Crossings has, as its focus, that concern.

While I am no longer in the ordained ministry nevertheless I still read and reflect upon theology.

Many thanks from one currently living in a country experiencing fires, floods and droughts -but no blizzards!

P.S. When I subsequently asked Neal about his daily work at St. Peters, I got this:

I am teaching Senior Classes fulltime in the area of Study of Religion, and Theory of Knowledge for the IB [International Baccalaureate] Diploma Program. In both areas there is ample scope to continue theological reflections.

For example, I have written Units on Sacred Texts and Hermeneutics, Religious Fundamentalisms, Science and Religion, Intelligent Design or Un-intelligent Design, Religion and Anti-Semitism, Indigenous Spirituality etc. These Units are for the Senior Classes and are part of the State-based School Curriculum (The Queensland Studies Authority).

I also teach History, mainly Australia's Involvement in the Pacific War.- – – Currently I am reading works on the response of the churches to Fascism during WW2 and plan to further develop a Unit on Bonhoeffer for the graduating class, namely Year 12 Study of Religion.

Keep well. Regards from a very humid Brisbane.

Neal Nuske,
St Peters Lutheran College