

Lutheran Hermeneutics—A New Contagion?

Colleagues, Now everybody's trying to get into the act! The Crossings board—way back a year ago—decides to put together an international conference on Lutheran hermeneutics (a.k.a. The “Aha!” for reading the Bible that “moved” Martin Luther into Reformer mode). It's a three-day affair here in St. Louis end of January. [There still is room.] Well, actually it's across the Mississippi River a few miles into Illinois at a spiffy Roman Catholic retreat center, “Our Lady of the Snows.” [What would Blessed Martin say!? Even more, Katie Luther who “escaped” from such a place?!].

Then comes the news a couple months ago that the ELCA is putting together a task force of major leaguers to do the same thing—a long-term study.

Just before year's end comes a fancy PR piece from the Lutheran School of Theology in Chicago announcing their 2007 Leadership Conference (February 2007) on the same topic: “Active engagement with challenging texts. Exploring biblical texts using the Lutheran theological tradition to discover compelling interpretations for today.” Granted, that's replete with current PC boilerplate: “engagement . . . challenging . . . exploring . . . tradition . . . discover . . . compelling . . . for today.” OK, so they went to the byways of Madison Avenue rather than the Biblical Maran-atha to get their PR prose But let's acknowledge the good intent. They want to talk about Lutheran hermeneutics, what's distinct about how Lutherans read the Bible. LSTC wants be helpful for Lutherans alive now.

It's hard for me to bite my tongue and NOT say “why don't y'all just come to our Crossings get-together in three weeks?”

Especially hard today, since just yesterday I said “enough already” and finished the text of my own presentation for that Crossings January conference: “The Augsburg Aha! for Reading the Bible. The Gospel is a Promise. An Honest to God Promise!” In all humility I could be more open-minded—and surely more modest. But it’s not just my shtik at the Crossings get-together. The three other plenary presenters at the end of January promise more of the same—linking that Reformation Aha! (law/promise hermeneutics) to church, world, and what should be going on at Lutheran seminaries. Added to that is the scad of small group focus-topic sessions. Plus listening to Crossings colleagues (as of today’s registration from Singapore, Ethiopia, Ghana, Australia and Germany) report on the health of the Augsburg Aha! in their local contexts.

The LSTC conference teases us to come and look at “difficult” biblical texts, texts that are “challenging.” So challenging that even “using the Lutheran theological tradition” there are “NO EASY ANSWERS.” Those are the three words in big bold type on the brochure. That’s the LSTC conference theme. And then the flyer lists eight tough texts, texts that, I imagine, will be worked on in the conference to help the participants get SOME answers, even if they are not EASY ones.

But you don’t have to wait till February at LSTC. You could do it yourself. Suppose you did utilize the Augsburg Aha! for hermeneutics on these texts, what answers would you get? Seems to me that there are, if not “easy,” then nevertheless “clear” answers, clear Gospel answers for preaching/teaching these texts. The un-ease often lies not in the difficulty of getting the message of a text, but after having gotten a text’s clear message to then follow its rubrics which regularly take the way of the cross. Dying in order to live, winning by losing, is indeed not “easy.” But it is also not impossible. We have Christ’s promise for that.

First caveat for preaching biblical texts is to remember that there is no mandate from Christ to “preach the text” or even to “preach the Bible.” Christ’s farewell assignment was “proclaim the Good News to the whole creation.” [Mk.16:15]

So the task is to do just that—and even do so when there is no Good News in the text itself. That’s dicey. Those are indeed “hard” texts, and the lectionary does not avoid them. So how to preach the Gospel from a Gospel-less text? In the Lutheran Confessions there is one article [Apology to the AC IV] that actually spells out how to do just that, how to “add” the “Gospel promise” when a text is Gospel-empty. Talk about chutzpah! That may be the most daring application of law-promise hermeneutics. Let’s look at the “No-easy-answers” texts [hereafter NEA texts] through the law/promise lenses and see what comes into focus—easy or not—including texts that are themselves Gospel-empty. Only one of these eight NEA texts gets referenced in the Lutheran confessions. So there is some precedent there for using Law/promise hermeneutics in reading them. For the remaining seven it’s untouched territory. So let’s see if we can touch it.

John 14:6b “No one comes to the Father except through me.”

The NEA quality here, I imagine, is Jesus’s “me only” claim. “So what about all other world religions and the billions of folks who have followed in their train for millennia? Don’t other world religions give their adherents connection to God?” Law/promise [hereafter L/P] hermeneutics says Yes, and then asks: “What sort of linkage? Law-linkage to God or promise-linkage to God?” That then necessitates spelling out what promise-linkage offers, and then checking the “gospel” in other religious options to see if they do indeed offer the same Good News. Luther is applying this L/P hermeneutic in his Large Catechism at the end of his exposition of the Apostles Creed, as

he reflects on other religions.

“These articles of the Creed . . . distinguish us Christians from all other people on earth. All who are outside the Christian community, whether heathen, Muslims, Jews or false Christians and hypocrites, even though they believe in and worship only the one, true God, nevertheless do not know what God’s attitude is toward them. They cannot be confident of his love and blessing. Therefore they remain in eternal wrath and damnation, for they do not have the Lord Christ, and, besides, are not illuminated and blessed by the gifts of the Holy Spirit.”

Especially in John’s Gospel, the Moses-God-connection and the God-as-Father-connection Jesus claims to offer is the point of constant conflict as Jesus moves to his “it is finished” at Calvary. Judaism’s best offer is still qualitatively different from Jesus’s offer. John is feisty in making it “perfectly clear” in his prolog in chapter 1: “Law was given (by God) through Moses; grace and truth came by Jesus Christ.” That’s still the yardstick for measuring the “best offers” of world religions today.

Four of the 8 sticky-wicket texts are about ethics, living the life of faith, three of them from the mouth of Jesus, one from St. Paul.

Mark 10:21a

Sell what you own and give the money to the poor.

Mark 10:44

Whoever wishes to be first among you shall be slave of all.

Matthew 6:39

But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also.

Philippians 2:4

Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others.

What's the NEA quality here? It can't be to understand the message of the texts themselves. They are all simple imperatives, only nickel words. The NEA aspect, I imagine, is the question: But can you survive when you live that way—turning the other cheek, tending to the welfare of others over your own self-interest, excelling by being the slave of all, radical divestment and relinquishment?

Major clue from the Augsburg Aha! on these imperatives is first of all to ask: are they law-imperatives or promise-imperatives? What's the logic/grammar of the sentences? Is it: "IF you do such and so, THEN God will do such and so?" Or is it: "SINCE God in Christ was doing such and so for you, THEREFORE you follow in the same promissory fashion in your doings."

You'll notice that the promise-paradigm "adds" the promise to the imperative. In fact, all of these four imperatives are promise imperatives in the context where we find them. God-in-Christ is the "since" for everyone of them. In Christ God was "selling" his own and giving him to us impoverished sinners. In Christ God wished to be slave/servant of us all. In Christ God was turning the other cheek, and we did indeed strike it, yes, strike him down. In Christ God was looking not to his own interests, but to the interests of others.

If the text selectors would have gone just a few more words after that "sell all...give to the poor," we would have had the "added" promise already there. For Jesus concludes the "sell/give" mandate with "then come, follow me . . . and you will have treasure in heaven."

Law/promise hermeneutics for ethical imperatives is the

foundation for Luther's reading the world, the Biblical insight about the ambidextrous deity. In the old creation God works with the left hand. In Christ and the new creation, it's God's right hand.

What makes promise imperatives sticky is that they are to be lived out in God's old creation where God's own law-regime is regnant. Law and promise are not synonyms. So tension and conflict is to be expected. Promise-imperatives finally "work" by continuing trust in the promise. That's "faith alone."

Bob Bertram had a show-and-tell way to illustrate these two hands of God. He'd put the word DEXTRA on the blackboard, the Latin word for the right hand. Then he'd hold his two hands apart and say:

"D is for different (the two hands are not the same)." Then bringing them together palm-to-palm he'd say: "E is for equivalent (yet they resemble each other—five fingers, one thumb)."

"X is for the cross where God's two hands intersect" and as Bob held his hands together, his right-hand fingers would cross over into the fingers of the left hand and start overturning it.

"T is for truss. God's right hand supports, holds up, trusses the good work of God's left hand," and Bob's right hand (fingers still interwoven) would move below the left to support it.

"R is for replace. Slowly God's right hand operation (aka Christians at work in the world) replaces the fabric of the left-hand operation. Forgiveness replaces even legitimate recompense."

A is for antiquates. "Finally God's right hand antiquates God's own left hand. It's old creation—finally old hat—and the new of new creation, new covenant, new commandment, new obedience is what lasts on into eternity."

NEA for those ethical tests? Not really. The specs are clear. The tough part is to trust the promise while following the specs. But the added promise in the "sell/give" text is the grounds for such trust. "Follow me, even if you don't get all the goodies. However, following me you DO get all the goodies."

John 3:16

For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but have eternal life.

I imagine the NEA here is for the implied question: why then isn't everyone saved if God loved the entire cosmos? This text is cited four times in the Lutheran Confessions. All four are in the Formula of Concord, the last document in the collection, from 1577. The L/P distinction surfaces. In the law God wills to preserve creation by the rule of just deserts. Good work is rewarded, evil action punished. Since the incurvature of sinners is for self-preservation, more good will be done by sinners than bad. Despite the shaky basis, preservation will proceed. In the promise we encounter a different "will" of God. To be merciful—instead of retributive—to sinners. John 3:16 is cited to document that this promissory will is humanity-wide. No sinner excepted.

Why then doesn't the world wind up non-perishing? It's the "sola fide." No one is forced to trust the promise. God's offer is "Here, catch!" For mysterious reasons (the mystery of wickedness) some prefer to hang on to what they already have in

hand. Thus the “here, catch” offer falls to the ground before them. Sola fide is not a requirement. It is the correlative of the promise. When a promise isn’t trusted—in marriage, for instance—the promise fails to achieve its goal. Not because the promise wasn’t valid, but because the receiver didn’t trust it. In the Gospel God’s promise is equally vulnerable.

Ephesians 5:6

The wrath of God comes on those who are disobedient.

I suppose two items are the NEA of this one. What is the wrath of God all about? and who is, who isn’t disobedient?

C.S. Lewis had an “easy” answer on the wrath of God—though I don’t think he had the Augsburg Aha! in mind as he said it. “There comes a time after a sinner’s long refusal to say to God, ‘Thy will be done,’ that God finally says to the sinner, ‘OK then, THY will be done.’” It’s not God being cranky. But as in Romans 1 & 2 it is God “giving them up” to their own agendas. Paul calls that (Rom. 1:18) “the wrath of God revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and wickedness of those who by their wickedness suppress the truth.”

Who is, who is not, “disobedient?” The Eph. 5 text is a repeat of the Romans word about God’s wrath. But when obedience is under discussion in Paul, he makes a distinction. There are two kinds of obedience and two kinds of disobedience. But before we go there, we need to note what “obedience” and its opposite are. The English word comes from Latin, “ob-audientia.” The root term is “audience,” from “audio,” listening. So “ob-audienting” is listening “ob,” listening “toward” someone, someone’s words. Therefore the crucial element is: What message are you “ob-audienting?” And, by now you’ve guessed it. You can ob-audience a law message, or you can ob-audience a promise-message, and the listening-toward will be as different as the messages are. To

“ob-audience” a law message, you do what it tells you to do. To “ob-audience” a promise is to trust the “Here, catch!”—and act accordingly.

The disobedience in this Ephesians text could come under either rubric. Paul is excoriating “works of darkness,” which God’s law condemns. But here in addressing Christians Paul tells them that such behavior is also dis-obeying the promise. You can’t obey the promise and practice darkness at the same time. The two options are either/or. Here Paul actually invokes the standard “promise-imperative” paradigm (Eph. 5:8): “SINCE (though you once were darkness) in the Lord you are now light, THEREFORE live as children of light.” He grounds this ethical admonition not in the law with its sanctions and rewards, but in the promise itself: You are now “in the Lord,” so live the way you are. Both threats and rewards are out of the question.

Romans 2:11

For God shows no partiality.

I can’t divine what the NEA issue is here. Perhaps it’s the question: why do some get saved and others not? I’ll have to wait and see what the LSTC folks come up with.

Summa.

There are difficult passages in the scriptures. No debate there. But there is an old Reformation axiom that the “clear passages interpret the unclear ones.” “Clarity” in this axiom refers not to grammatical clarity, but to “clear” promise passages. Those “clear ones” interpret the unclear ones, the ones where the promise is hidden, or “unclear.” It’s a variation on Melanchthon’s axiom that when preaching/teaching any segment of Scripture, if the promise is absent, you add it. For the promise is clear now that Christ has been raised from the dead. In resurrecting Jesus God ratifies him and the forgiveness he

offered to sinners. This promise is God's last word.

Law/promise lenses may not illumine every biblical text—e.g., Jude 9: “Michael and the devil disputing about the body of Moses”—but they do focus Bible-reading so that THE light shines into dark places. They refract the spectrum of God's promissory rainbow for those who sit in darkness and the shadow of death.

So hurray for LSTC and their NEA conference. I hope they do indeed glomb onto “THE Lutheran theological tradition” as they “explore difficult biblical texts.” If they succeed in doing that, they will indeed “discover compelling interpretations for today.” That's not MY promise. I'm just echoing SOMEONE ELSE's.

Peace and joy!

Ed Schroeder

P.S. If you can't wait till mid-February for the LSTC event, come to ours two weeks earlier. Even apart from the comparative costs—we're less expensive—you can guess my prejudice about where you'll get the better deal.