

Luther's Birthday and American Politics

Colleagues,

Something else was in the hopper for posting today to commemorate Martin Luther's 521st birthday yesterday and his baptism a day later on November 11, the day of St. Martin of Tours. That's why his given name is Martin. Had he been born/baptized one day later, we'd be remembering Lebuin Luther or even Nilus Luther, the saints for November 12, the former a student of Alcuin, the latter of John Chrysostom. Had his Mama waited a whole week to deliver him, we'd have either Mawes Luther, or Odo Luther or Romanus Luther. Thank you, Mama Margaret, for your pro-choice of Nov. 10.

That was the plan, but then the election came along. So the Luther piece can wait. It'll keep.

The accepted wisdom says our presidential election revealed this:

"Christians in the U.S. today do not simply disagree on a hierarchy of values. They read the Bible quite differently and express their faith in Jesus in radically distinct ways. I award Thomas Friedman, columnist of The New York Times , with the pithy phrase of the week past: We are 'two nations under God.'" [from the Sojourner's website by David Batstone]

Despite a seeming national consensus on this, I want to make the case that nothing has changed. That these two nations under God (and the two candidates of last week) are linked—yea, imprisoned—by the same Folk Religion of God Bless America, [FROGBA]. If you've been reading ThTh since 9-1-2001, you

already know why. FROGBA is an “other” Gospel, fundamentally “other” to the Christian Gospel of the crucified and risen Messiah, even though Jesus gets cited by advocates of that other gospel all the time. So what else is new? “Other-gospel” Christ-promoters are all over in the epistles of the New Testament—in every one of the place-name letters of Paul (Galatia, Corinth, Rome, Thessalonica, Ephesus, Colossae, Philippi) and in the person-named letters of Peter and John.

So questions such as: Does this candidate pray or doesn't he? Does he publicly do God-talk or doesn't he? Does he trust that God is guiding his life or doesn't he? Is he committed to doing God's will or isn't he? are all irrelevant for the fundamental Christian question. For the people who pushed Jesus toward his cross the answer to all those questions was yes. And in the days before they executed him Jesus excoriated them for the falsity of their praying, the un-faith in their God-talk, their blind commitment to doing God's will. Final evidence? It was this faith-based politics that compelled them to crucify the Son of God.

Faith-based, shmaith-based! Faith in what? That is the Christian question. What gospel animates the faith? What Gospel are we hustling?

First off, a parable.

Two men went up to the (television) temple (of America) to pray. One a Democrat, one a Republican. They prayed thus: Each besought American voters to select him as high-priest of the nation. Both told the voter they were faith-based persons. Both invoked God, the God of Christianity, as the one in whom their faith was grounded. Both concluded their pleas to the voters with “God bless America,” the mantra of the nation's folk religion.

Both were patently faith-based candidates—and not ashamed to say so, although one did so more often than the other. Yet that difference in public profession of faith was really no surprise. They came from two different families in American Christianity—Evangelicals and Roman Catholics. Each was speaking from the ethos of his tradition. American Evangelicals (the home base of one of the men) are taught to talk faith in public—even pray in public. The other man (a Vatican II Roman Catholic) was taught to do faith-talk in private, rather than public, circles, often in the privacy of the confessional one-on-one. For such Christians the public arena is for deeds, less so for creeds. But when public words were called for both did go public with faith-talk, Christian faith-talk, in these two major traditions of today's American Christianity.

Pushing a bit deeper—

For one the faith-talk, though expressed on the outside with ease, was fundamentally “interior” reality. It focused on his personal piety, his own conversion, his God-relationship, his prayer-life, his confidence that God had called him to the task at hand. And that task at hand was to be resolute in the fight against evil, the clearly biggest threat to our nation today. For the other there was scarcely a word of his faith's interiority, although “I once was an altar boy.” For him the focus for faith-talk was “exterior” stuff, “deeds” that needed to be done by people of faith in the body politic of America, and in the wider world, on deeds that needed to be UNdone with a “wrong war, at the wrong time, in the wrong place.” This is also a faith-based conviction that “by their fruits ye shall know them.”

Although their texts were different, and the Christian heritages they came from were different, both prayed the same prayer. Both prayed the Pharisee prayer of Luke 18:9-14—and both encouraged America to pray along. How so?

The fallacy of the Pharisee prayer in Luke 18 is not the “I-centeredness” of his praying. It is not impious. It is faith-based prayer: “God, I thank you.” The tax-collector’s prayer is I-centered too, also faith-based: “God, be merciful to me a sinner.”

But the “I” in the two prayers is different. Radically different.

The Pharisee’s heresy, says Luke in introducing the story, is that the he is an “I” who “trusted in himself that he was righteous,” and needed no repentance, as did that other despicable guy, “standing far off” [from righteousness], the companion of “thieves, rogues and adulterers.”

The “I” of the other guy is different. Yes, he is indeed despicable. He doesn’t deny it. The righteous Pharisee has described him rightly. He does indeed “need” repentance, and he does repent, ‘fessing up in the petite petition he blurts out: “God, be merciful to me, a sinner.” He “goes down to his house justified,” says Jesus, and the “good guy” does not. How come?

The pay-off is not the “rightness” of his “I” compared to the other. It’s not “humility pays off, while self-righteousness does not.” It’s all “faith-based.” But we see two very different faiths in action in these two prayers: Faith in God’s mercy for sinners and faith that I am not a sinner and thus don’t need any mercy. Which is, of course, nonsense throughout the Bible. Since the days of the primal human parents “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” If anybody ever “goes down to his house justified,” “they are now justified by God’s grace (a.k.a. mercy) as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus . . . effective through faith.” (Rom.3:23ff.)

It’s all faith-based. But the “to be, or not to be” question is: What is the faith based on? Which faith-basis are we talking

about? One faith-basis justifies. Others do not. That is both the scandal and the hilarity of the Christian Gospel.

Back to America.

Both presidential candidates avoided the faith-basis of the tax-collector. And that was no wonder. They were speaking for all of us. They were confessing our American faith, FROGBA, The Folk Religion of God Bless America. It is also thickly layered in American Christians, in the faith confessed across the board from Evangelicals, through Lutherans, and over to Roman Catholics.

FROGBA is our American version of the Pharisee heresy.

Our national prayer goes something like this:

1. God, we thank you that we are Americans, and not like all the rest of the people in the world, especially those evil people who are out to destroy us.
2. "They" are evil people; we are righteous.
3. We do not need repentance, but "they" surely do.
4. All the blessings we've received from you are evidence that you count us righteous.
5. We constantly sing "God bless America" to proclaim our faith-based convictions.
6. Our leaders—both in churches and in government—never mention the word "repent," for we don't need any.
7. We are good people, your beacon of light to the world—to displace the darkness of evil empires, of axes of evil.
8. We trust that you have made us that "Light" spoken of in John's Gospel, and as our president said not long ago, we trust "that the darkness [the terrorists] will never put out our light."

Neither Kerry nor Bush told us anything in their campaigns to dislodge the "faith-basis" of FROGBA. In terms of Jesus'

parable, all their rhetoric about “the American people” was Pharisaic. Nary a word about repentance needed for “this great nation.” Though they looked like two angry foxes running in opposite directions (a metaphor Luther liked), their tails were tied together. Tied together by the strong cord of FROGBA, allegedly America’s “In God we trust,” but de facto America’s faith in America. Even when it got godly, it was the “God, I thank thee” of the Pharisee “I.” And that “I” is a false God. Trusting it is trusting a false Gospel. No matter how intensely we Americans confess that faith, we’ll never get down to our houses justified by the God who runs the justification business.

The Biblical role assigned to political leaders, God’s left-hand agents, is akin to that of the OT prophets in one specific respect. Whatever else the OT prophets did, they also interpreted history to the Israelite nation. Most often their nation was blind and deaf to what was happening—and so were its leaders—both in the palace and the temple. My Doktorvater Helmut Thielicke taught us this about the prophets. Historical events are themselves mute. They do not on their own carry messages. Storms, famines, rich harvests, floods, rain at the right time, locusts, sunshine—even wars—“happen.” But they are not self-interpreting. They need to be “worded.” God-appointed leaders in palace and temple were called to be the ones “wording” for their people what God was doing in the bane and blessing of their personal and national lives. But when they became blinded to their callings, they were blind leaders of the blind. God sent prophets as emergency agents, “seers” who could see what God was doing in the random chance events of history, and then “word” it to the folks who didn’t catch the message from the events themselves.

They were seldom popular with their audiences, for the gist of the events they worded was “repent . . . stop what you’re doing. Turn around. Go the other way.” There were competitor

prophets—usually on the palace payroll—who offered more consoling and comforting interpretations. Their message, says Jeremiah, is “‘Peace, peace,’ when there is no peace.” The NRSV caption for that section of Jeremiah is “The Blind Perversity of the Whole Nation.”

Americans have chosen a prophet to lead them who is blind to our national need for repentance. Whether Kerry would have been better is not obvious, but that question is now moot. I expect the next four years to bring more of the grim consequences of our nation’s God-problem. As Augustine, and Luther, and Jesus and the OT prophets all proclaimed: “Except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish.” There is no good news for people whose faith is based on the Pharisee heresy—no matter how often they chant the God Bless America mantra. Such prayers are akin to wailings of the Baal-prophets in their stand-off with Elijah on Mt. Carmel: “they raved on . . . but there was no voice, no answer, no response.” (I Kings 18)

Another teacher of mine, Leonhard Goppelt, taught us that Jesus give two calls to repentance, one a “condemning” call, the other a “saving” call. The condemning call went to Pharisee types who “needed no repentance.” See Matthew 23 for a whole chapter of such rhetoric exposing how “lost” they were. The saving call went to the tax-collector types, the patent sinners listed by the Pharisee in the parable. For those folks Christ’s call was “Come unto me” and “Be of good cheer, your sins are forgiven” and “Follow me.” Both calls entail a turn-around in order to come home to God. Goppelt showed us this in the Lukan parable of the prodigal son and his righteous brother. The distance that the prodigal had to travel from the “far country” to the Father’s house was actually SHORTER than the distance that the elder brother had to travel, even though he was working in the field right next to that house. How so? The prodigal had only to leave his unrighteousness behind to come home. The elder brother

had to leave his righteousness behind in order to come home to the Father's mercy. That's a much more wrenching journey. But the Father's house is the same for both and both are invited to come home.

As the Year of Luke comes to an end in a fortnight, these two Lukan parables are Christ's good news for us Americans too. In the face of our own self-engineered Apocalypse Now, Jesus' saving call to us is "Repent and believe the Good News." If our born-again president doesn't get around to it, then those who "see" must step in for him.

Peace & (yes) Joy!
Ed Schroeder