

Luther's New Home in the Episcopal Church USA? Maybe, Maybe Not.

Colleagues,

An In-betweener last February alerted you to the "Luther Renaissance" going on among Episcopalians in the USA. That brought a response from one of them, Jady Koch, who's on this Crossings listserve.

" I'm happy to call myself an Anglo-Lutheran any day. Thanks to Gerhard Forde (and his students), there has been a complete revival of Law/Gospel preaching and teaching in the Anglican church. We've had two Law/Gospel conferences in New York already and are looking towards another in April 2010. You all are cordially invited: <http://www.mockingbirdnyc.com/Mockingbird/Events.html>. "

Mockingbird Ministries is their monicker. [For which I ask Luther's catechetical question: What does this mean?] That April conference begins today. Two Crossings board members (code names, Joshua and Caleb) tell me that they are attending. When they're back from spying out the land, we'll ask them to tell us what they learned.

When you google that MM name, interesting things appear. One example from a Baptist: "The most interesting blog out in the Christian/Reformation blogosphere is Mockingbird, the front page to the world of Mockingbird Ministries. Dead on, provocative stuff with the strong scent of Luther's Law/Gospel cookbook in

every post. In addition to being Lutheranized Anglicans, Mockingbird has a major connection to my current theological hero, Paul Zahl. I believe we're looking at . . . a significant voice that balances engagement of the culture at many levels . . . with Lutheran-flavored Reformation Christianity."

When you go to the Mockingbird site itself you find the Zahl name in abundance. Not only Paul, but his sons John, David and Simeon are also in that number—also on this weekend's conference program.

Then a couple of weeks ago a pastor in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada asked me what I thought of Paul Zahl's book, GRACE IN PRACTICE. A THEOLOGY OF EVERYDAY LIFE. Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans. 2007. xi, 267 pp. I told him I'd never heard of it, but I'd take a look. So I did. Perplexed, as you'll soon see below, about this Anglo-Lutheran's theology of grace, I consulted my own "source" in the ECUSA, an Episcopal bishop who happens to be a graduate of Concordia Seminary (St. Louis)—and thus once-upon-a-time a student of Krentz, Bertram, Hoyer for exegesis, theology and liturgy.

He tells me: "Paul Zahl is a major batter for the angry right, the very angry right, in the ECUSA. He famously draped his cathedral (no longer there) in black after the 2003 General Convention. He just as famously mysteriously resigned from the seminary of which he was briefly dean and nobody has ever said a word. He is, in short, a mysterious figure."

Back to the Canadian request and Paul Zahl's book. What attracted him to Zahl, he told me, was this:

"I really like the book because his main thesis is that the law

is totally ineffective to produce change or good behavior in a person. It can only reveal our sin and failure. Our natural reaction to law is to want to disobey and rebel against it. Grace is what he calls "one way love" and he says that grace alone has power to heal and motivate the believer and produce transformation. He says we bring people into the church by grace and then try to preach the law into them to disciple them. He believes that is an error and does not work. Preaching law deflates and diminishes the believer and preaching grace uplifts and restores them motivating them to serve God and others. After preaching for 30 years myself, I know that law is a very poor motivator. I believe that since our emphasis is on grace as Lutherans, this book is of interest to us."

Well, that got me "attracted" too, but when I finished it, I was scratching my head. Appended below is what I sent back to Canada. Paul Zahl is a mystery indeed. Is that the case for other Anglo-Lutherans? Maybe Joshua and Caleb will find out and tell us.

Peace and joy!
Ed Schroeder

Dear Pastor X,

I've just finished reading Zahl's "Grace" book. I've never been so discombobulated by a book before. He starts out sounding so Lutheran—law & gospel, first and second (but no third) use of the law. Simultaneously sinner and saint. God's law always accuses. Wow! He knows the lingo! But then when he gets to "Grace in Politics," he says that Luther's notion of God's two kingdoms was a big mistake. "Luther's 'two kingdom' theory is the least credible section of Luther's theology. It is a well-

meaning attempt to keep to some idea of human distributive justice, even while the grace of God is offered pride of place in eternal or ultimate justice. It conveys the impression of a rationalization. It has the feel of bowing of the knee, for some sort of short-term or utilitarian gain, to the powers that be. As a theologian of grace I have always felt uncomfortable with Luther's theory. IT reads like a compromise." (188)

"Least credible, well-meaning, conveys the impression of a rationalization, has the feel, always felt uncomfortable, compromise." Those are not terms of substantive analysis and argument. Zahl does not understand why Luther talks this way in his political ethics.

So I wonder, since law and gospel and their distinction is the very foundation of ML's two regimes concept, why doesn't he see the connexion? Or did I misread his law and gospel distinction presentation? Is what he's presenting NOT Luther's understanding of the distinction? And why for him are all political/economic institutions bad? St. Paul claims, and the AugConf says so too, that old-creation institutions are God-created—and intrinsically GOOD STUFF.

Tolstoy thought you could govern a nation with the Gospel, without law and its enactment of recompense. Elert in his own Ethics has a chapter on Tolstoy's political ethics of "Grace-alone" and scores Tolstoy for being an "unbeliever" with reference to the power of evil in the world. I.e., Tolstoy had no Devil in his universe. Just bad people, not principalities and powers, were the nemesis to the good society. Is Zahl "soft" on the Prince of This World?

If the first use of the law is invoked by Zahl as OK at several places. why then is it not OK when civil governments practice it? Since it is GOD'S own first use, why is it a no-no for God

to exercise the first use of God's own law through God's designated agents in secular society?

Does Zahl think that the law's "always accusing" and its coercive "pressure-to-practice-justice-and-you-will-be-rewarded, do-the-opposite-and you-will-suffer-hurt" does not really come from God, but from some other source. Just human source? And because it's human beings who construct it—fallen humans—therefore it is not good from the very start? Is that what he's saying? Not so Augsburg 16.

And it's not just in politics, but throughout the entire world of God's Left Hand (the old creation) that Zahl promotes his "grace-ethics." Look at those sections in the Table of Contents: Grace in Families, in Marriage, in Politics, in War and Peace, in Criminal Justice, in Relation to Social Class, at the Mall. Sure, Christ-trusters carry their graced-selves with them in every one of those locales. But God does not operate in those locales by the Grace that we're just celebrating from Good Friday and Easter Sunday. It's God's own "good" law of preservation, recompense, protection, support, yes, the "law of love your neighbor," that operates in these places. That's simply a given for Lutheran law/gospel theology. Why can't Zahl see that?

He refuses to accept the anti-nomian label when he practices grace instead of third-use law at the level of ethics. I agree with that, though I sense that he doesn't distinguish between grace-ethical-imperatives and law-ethical-imperatives. Is Christ's "new" commandment for him the same as the old commandments? I think he says that more than once.

You, pastor, in your paragraph above constantly refer to "grace" as mover for ethics "for the believer." Zahl has "grace" as the mover for ethics everywhere—believer and non-believer. That

can't be the Grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, since only one of those two have any access to it.

OK, not antinomian there, but is he anti-nomian, however, in his first-use understanding? Seems so. At least ANTI in his conviction that this "first use" cannot be God's own using of God's own law to preserve the fractured creation—by the mechanics of the law, which are in simple language the carrot as reward for good behavior and the stick for bad behavior. There is no Biblical warrant for claiming that grace will preserve a world populated with sinners.

Granted, no one gets reconciled to God by such "first-use" procedures, but that's not God's first agenda in the old creation. There God is "adapting" (says Luther) his strategy—a "Plan B"—for working with humans who have now become sinners. Now after the fall, humans, all of them, are constitutionally self-interested. [Aug. Conf. II. Original Sin. "SINCE the fall of Adam, all human beings . . ."] So in "Plan B" God's law speaks to just that sort of person: Do good and your self will be rewarded. Do bad and your self will be diminished. It's in your best interests. And since you are radically self-interested, GO for it.

So many of the pages in the book are about human behavior, human interactions where supposedly "grace" does the job that the law calls for, but cannot achieve. Yes and no, I'd say. Appealing to sinner's self-interest, the law does indeed work to promote better behavior. Not redemption, of course. But that's not God's agenda with his left hand.

Is Zahl's God only one-handed? Not ambidextrous? Sounds like it.

And constantly the "good world," the "good behavior," that Zahl strives for is 99% ethics, namely the replacement of concupiscence with non-concupiscent behavior. His imperative is

simple: live by the grace principle instead of the law principle. In AC/Apology II the BIG bad stuff about sin is the first two of the trio—no fear of God, no trust in God, and (then) concupiscence (=curved back into oneself) as the consequence. If you don't fix the first two, you can't change the last one.

In all those zillion of movies, novels, TV shows Zahl uses as examples—many of them very effective—I don't remember a single one where the good guy/gal example moved from “no fear of God” to “fear of God,” from “no trust in God” to “trust.” Wherever they got the “grace” to act differently, it did not come from a new God-relationship. So it mustuv been a grace that is available apart from faith in God restored by Christ. Is Zahl's “grace” available apart from any connection with Good Friday and Easter? Sure sounds like it.

Where then might it come from? Luther would say “from human reason.” God-given human reason, but still a “grace” very different from the grace of our LJC. It's the grace present and accessible in the old creation, creation “under” law. Zahl continually claims: All law imperatives to get people to do good invariably elicit resistance. But that's simply not true. “Do this and you'll get a reward. Do the opposite and you'll get hurt” is the very fabric on which the old creation runs. Joyfully, willingly. Granted, nobody gets redeemed via carrot/stick behavior, but it does work to keep a planet full of sinners from moving directly to chaos and catastrophe.

Thus whatever “grace” entered the scene in these many examples Zahl gives us, does he ever connect it with a person's new faith in the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ? Does this grace in the examples move folks first to fear and trust God—and THEN as fruit thereof to purge their concupiscence and replace it with Christic Agape? I don't remember any single example doing that,

but I may have missed it if it did happen. Seems to me that over and over again it is that “other kind of grace” that is already available to sinners in God’s first creation.

Zahl’s definition of grace as “one-way love” is, I think, not adequate for portraying SAVING GRACE. The kind of love that God’s LAW calls for—and that sinners can indeed do—is also a one-way love. Love your neighbor—that’s a one-way commandment. Even if he doesn’t love you back. The yardstick for that is something you yourself know very well—even as a sinner—namely, “as” you yourself wish to be loved. It’s Kant’s categorical imperative for ethics—which Zahl cites approvingly. What Kant’s imperative commends is not the ethics flowing from faith in the grace of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Over and over again Zahl refers to the “grace principle.” Nowhere in the OT or NT is God’s “Chesedh” or “Charis” a principle. For Kant the categorical imperative is indeed a principle. Zahl’s notion of “grace principle” is something I need to think about. Given Luther’s [Latin] definition of grace in the Bible as “favor Dei”—God’s favor to sinners—can that be called a “principle”? Don’t think so. Grace is not God’s “principle” with sinners; it’s God’s Christ-connection with sinners. Remove the Christ-connection, and there is no abiding principle. A very different God-connection persists.

Juergen Moltmann is Zahl’s Doktorvater, he tells us. On consequence was that “Moltmann made sure that I struggled with the political and economic implications of grace.” (p.x) If this is what Moltmann taught him, it didn’t come from Luther and the Augs. Confession.

Over and over again throughout GRACE IN PRACTICE is about ethics, a highly psychologized and pragmaticized grace to achieve something that “works” to get good behavior. Faith gets

almost no treatment at all in over 250 pp. Evangelical Anglicans may have learned much from Luther, but seems to me Zahl has not yet gotten to the center of the Augsburg Aha!

When you ELCIC folks read Zahl, as you told me you intend to do this month, be on your toes and follow the counsel of I John 4:1.

Peace and Joy!

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