

Measuring sermons to see if they're Gospel

Colleagues,

Thanks for the good words from many of you following Robin's report (ThTh 73) that I was both hospitalized and having a birthday in the same week. That's a new form of "simul / et" for this Lutheran. Now continuing the antibiotic therapy here at home, I'm getting better and so I'm back to the computer for this ThTh 74.

Big news on the ecumenical scene during these days has been the Lutheran/Catholic ceremonies ratifying The Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification [JDDJ] in Augsburg, Germany on Sunday Oct. 31. We had a parallel "them and us" service of holy hoopla at the RC Cathedral here in town last Sunday afternoon, Nov. 7. I got out of the hospital just in time to hobble over there to witness it all.

It occurred to me during those days in the hospital that JDDJ, now a common yardstick twixt both of our communions, is also one that "they" could use in measuring us. And that led to this: suppose we Lutherans started to use that JDDJ criterion, now so ecumenically public, to check out our own congruence to the theology once confessed at Augsburg in 1530. And that led me to realize that a conversation I'd been having with an ELCA pastor this year was doing just that. It's all been by snail- and e-mail since we've not had a chance for face-to-face. It started when I was in the congregation where he was the preacher. Thereafter I dropped him a note.

I. "You may not have noticed. In the sermon you preached to us last week THE NAME did not get mentioned until the closing votum of the sermon's final sentence. More

accurate would be to say: my ears didn't hear it get mentioned until that concluding commendation. That was not the case with the text from St. Paul which we studied earlier at our meeting: ten times he 'drops the name'—noun or pronoun—in just eleven verses. Preaching the Gospel implies such name-dropping, doesn't it, not for reasons of etiquette, but for reasons of hooking up to the power of God for salvation. Can you preach a Christian sermon with just God-talk, but no Christ-talk? I've heard folks maintain that, but I disagree."

II. Later in the exchange, getting feistier, I said:

1. Granted you had an OT text for the sermon, where THE NAME wasn't mentioned. Yet grounding a sermon on the name and power of God, of Yahweh, qualifies it to be good enough for the synagogue, but not yet Christian proclamation, I'd say.
2. Back in Seminex days we discovered in the Augsburg Confession & Apology the Reformers' 'dipstick' for testing all theology—sermons included. That dipstick has two sides. One, does the sample being checked 'necessitate Christ?' Two: does it offer people the promise that God wants them to have and that faith can receive?
3. Necessitating Christ entails more than just name-dropping, of course. The dipstick checks whether Christ is necessary for carrying out what the sermon proposes. Or could the hearers carry through on the faith or action a sermon was urging, even if Calvary and Easter and Pentecost had never happened?
4. So student sermons, essays in systematics, et al. were given the "dipstick test." Stuff that did not pass the dipstick test was returned for repairs. I heard your sermon needing repairs. You don't. That's what I suggest we ought to talk about.

III. That elicited these words from the preacher in a July letter waiting for us when we got back from Bali a few days ago: "Briefly, in preaching I am concerned about two things: about a careful understanding of the text, using our best historical critical resources to evoke its particular meaning for us; and that the text be preached in the context of our confession of the Holy Trinity. Yes, we are always grounded in our Baptism into the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, but sometimes a specific text will call forth an emphasis on the Spirit or the Father. But no one Person of the Trinity will make sense without the other. (Here I follow Bill Lazareth.) It is in the rich wholeness of the interaction of baptismal identity, gathered community of human creatures, preached Word, and Spirit working that we live life more fully in the Risen Christ."

IV. And that prompted this long piece which I sent off earlier this week. I've just come back from three months of pastoring. That meant preaching for 13 Sundays in a row and doing Bible study with my members each Friday evening. So preaching the Gospel and studying Biblical texts is not just an academic item for me.

Lutherans are talking about JDDJ and Augsburg 1999 these days. That teases me into teasing you with Augsburg theology of 1530f. to nudge you into taking another look at what your paragraph says. Such peskiness on my part probably doesn't surprise you, even though you may now and then wish that I would just go away. But you did in this July letter (still) designate me a "valued colleague"—so here goes.

1. You and I may not be talking about the same issue. From your paragraph above I could deduce that you hear me beating the drum for getting Jesus (or his

honorific title "Christ") mentioned in every sermon. And since I didn't hear either of those vocables mentioned in that sermon, you thought that I was griping about this "real absence." Is that what you hear me saying?

2. You then, by contrast to that, want to make sure that Christian sermons are Trinitarian, with no person of the deity getting all the attention to the detriment of the others. Thus, for you, if a given preaching text focuses on the first or third persons in the triune coalition, a sermon is sufficiently Christian to let that name/person be the God-referent throughout the homily. Not mentioning the second person in the divine partnership does not detract from the OK-ness of a sermon as Christian proclamation.
3. You may also be signalling your displeasure with "Jesus only!" preaching where a Christo-monism seems to be the deity invoked. Perhaps that is your point when you say "Here I follow Bill Lazareth," but I'm not sure what your reference to Lazareth implies.
4. My concern in our discussion is not to hype "Jesus only" homilies. I've heard (suffered under) such preaching where Jesus got all the kudos, but the message was flatout legalism. So "Jesus only-ism" guarantees nothing. Nor am I saying that "just mentioning the name Jesus (or his title)" is the test for genuine Gospel proclamation. Name-dropping also guarantees nothing. To insist on that could amount to a legalism of another sort.
5. What I suspect we may disagree on is just what fundamentally-essentially-constitutes preaching the Gospel. What is the dipstick, the objective criterion, to poke into a sermon to determine

whether it's the Christian Gospel or not? When is a sermon proclaiming THE Gospel, and when is it not? It could also be that we're not on the same wavelength about whether THE GOSPEL has to be there as grounding for any sermon that claims to be Christian. I want to say yes to that. But then I'd have to spell out what I mean by the gospel.

6. For a definition of "gospel," what I learned in Erlangen [summer semester 1953!], continues to be compelling. Here's what Elert taught us: according to NT usage of the term the gospel is both "Bericht und Anrede," a report and a message personally addressed to us. The Gospel is indicative and hortatory language. As indicative speech the gospel reports about Jesus in such a way that the word of God is perceptible in him. And that word is God's "word of reconciliation" (2Cor 5:13). As hortatory speech the gospel applies the Christ-report to the audience. To the reportorial element is added the appeal to the hearers: "we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God." (2Cor 5:20).
7. Your paragraph above points to 3 concerns for preaching. Your concern (A), that texts be exegeted as you describe with the goal of "evoking its particular meaning for us," is one I, of course, share. Ditto for (B) "preaching in the context of our confession of the Holy Trinity." Ditto for (C) "no one Person of the Trinity will make sense without the other two."
8. My point in all this, as I've said, centers on the word Gospel—or to use Melanchthon's preferred term at Augsburg, "promissio." Our call as preachers is to preach the Gospel, the Gospel that is God's promise. The three rubrics mentioned in #7 above do

not (yet) touch that topic. Nor do those 3 rubrics, when fulfilled, guarantee that the outcome will be the Good News. Those three checkpoints will also let a legalist sermon pass through the sieve, a sermon hyping an “other” gospel.

9. Specifically with reference to (A)–exegeting Biblical texts–Melanchthon at Augsburg in 1530f. is driven (almost) to despair in Apology IV about the “wrong” way the scholastics/confutators do their exegesis. But it’s not their grammatical-historical methods he doesn’t like. It’s the theological lenses they use while doing textual exegesis that he complains about. In text after text they do “evoke its particular meaning for us,” but, he moans, there is no Gospel that comes out at the end. His own analysis is that they “add” opinio legis to what the text actually says. This “lawish opinion”–that the law could save sinners, “if only they would ...”–is etched onto the scholastics’ reading glasses, and distorts their exegesis and their preaching therefrom. In Apol. IV Melanchthon consciously applies a “Gospel” dipstick to their exegesis. That dipstick [mentioned above in this ThTh text] for measuring their exegesis is two-sided: Christological & pastoral. Umpteen times in Apol. IV he concludes: they waste the merits and benefits of Christ and (consequently) they have no comfort [no Good News] for sinners who are listening to their preaching.
10. Their exegesis is otherwise “orthodox” according to the ancient church’s two great dogmas–Trinitarian in its God-talk and Nicene-Chalcedonian in its Christology, but Good News it is not. The message they come up with is not the Gospel, the Good News

that is the mark of apostolicity. It is not "Christum treiben."

11. The Lutheran take on the Trinity, as I read the confessions, especially the stuff in the Large Catechism on the creed, goes like this: Christian concern for the dogma of the Trinity is not to do God-talk that is "true." Instead the Reformers are pushing this sort of Trinity: to talk about the true God in such a way that it comes out as Good News for sinners. The dogma of the Holy Trinity proposes "God-talk that is Good News." That's what the hassle on the Trinitarian dogma in the early church was all about, according to the Reformers. Arius' heresy was not simply that he got the God-facts wrong when he was reading the Bible. His Trinity was not "good" enough, not "new" enough, to be adequate "for us and for our salvation," to use the lingo of the Nicene Creed. Arius' Trinity was not "good enough" Good News, and so gets rejected at Nicea. The Nicene creed proposes a "better" Trinity, one that is good enough and new enough "for us and for our salvation."
12. I now recur to your items (B) & (C) above "that the text be preached in the context of our confession of the Holy Trinity," and that "no one Person of the Trinity will make sense without the other two." Don't you too think that Augsburg constrains us to do more than see to it that no person of the divine triad gets short shrift? Aren't we confessionally committed to proclaiming Trinitarian theology as the Good News about God for sinners? Thus the Gospel-dipstick—what is Good News, what is not—becomes the criterion for whether our Trinitarian preaching is Christian God-talk, whether it is THE Gospel, or no

Gospel at all, or an other Gospel.

13. Melanchthon in the Apology had to respond to the needling of his critics that many Biblical texts—when exegeted with the best scholarly tools of their day, and now ours today as well—simply don't mention Jesus Christ at all, and that even more texts had no “promissio” in them. So what does he say to such “Just preach the text” proposals? He says thus: when exegeting a text (= preaching a sermon on a text) where there is no promissio at all present, we “must add the promise.” Why? Answer: the double dipstick. Add the promise to promise-empty texts so that a) the merits and benefits of Christ be not wasted, and b) sinners receive the promise that the Triune God wants them to hear. Almost as an aside he can also say: Add the promise so that the sermon comes out as Christian proclamation—and not Jewish or “sophist.”
14. The hassle in the JDDJ discussions about “justification as THE criterion” for doctrine is but a variation on this, I would suggest. In AC and Apol IV “justification by faith alone” [JBFA] is offered as a synonym for both of the terms, Gospel and promise. The Gospel is a promise. Promises call for the promise-receiver to trust them. The faith that justifies is always a “faith trusting God's promise,” which is synonymous with “faith in Christ the Promissor.”
15. JBFA is not the one BIG doctrine we Lutherans insist on. Rather it is the criterion for all teaching and preaching. That's what JDDJ says. JBFA urges preachers to “present your message in such a way that what you seek to elicit will be to get your hearers to trust God's promise.” Can anyone

articulate that promise and commend it to sinners as trustworthy, without naming the Promissor, the Name that saves? I can't. And even if we could, why would we want to? Just to give the other Trinitarian members "equal time?" Would they be pleased with that? Not according to the NT texts that I can think of at the moment.

16. Not mentioning that Name at all fails the JBFA criterion test. Since no one gets to the Father [=gets justified] except by him, as John's Gospel affirms, proclamation that bypasses explicit use of the Crucified and Risen One will get no one to the Father. It's not Gospel. That is the case no matter how many times the Father's name is otherwise invoked in a sermon.
17. And the same is true of the Holy Spirit—especially in John's Gospel where Jesus so explicitly ties the Holy Spirit to himself. That is one aspect of what is "good and new" in John's words about the Holy Spirit, the Spirit's own constant Christ-connection, the Spirit's own "Christum treiben." Paul in his theology does the same. The consequence for Christian proclamation is that any proclamation of the Holy Spirit that bypasses the One to whom the Spirit testifies is promoting some other spirit, not the Holy Spirit. We need to remember that the root Hebrew meaning of holy is "different." The big difference about the Spirit interior to the Trinity is that this Spirit's holiness engages in "holy-ing" sinners by connecting them to Jesus the Christ.
18. In this sense, all preaching normed by JBFA gets done a) "in the context of our confession of the Holy Trinity" b) using, not wasting, the merits and benefits of Christ, and c) offering sinners the Good

news they need—all of which, says Paul in Phil. 2, glorifies God the Father.

19. A sermon about God and God's ancient people [like yours from an OT text], when it is Christian kerygma, necessitates a third party—not just a name dropped, but as a resource used. In the rhetoric of Apol. IV: it necessitates Christ. I can't see any other option for Augsburg Confessors—in 1530 or in 1999. Can you?

Pax et Gaudium!

Ed