

Mixed Messages

Colleagues,

ThTh 462 analyzing the Lutheran pastor's message to the survivors of the Virginia Tech massacre drew some response. Most responders thought the pastor did proclaim an "other" Gospel.

1. Sorry to say, but you are just too on target.
2. It was even worse live. I watched on one of the networks. I figured we'd hear from you about this.
3. I hope Pr King hears you and takes to heart what you said. Is that the ministry that's coming out of Lutheran seminaries these days? Mee genoito.[=Frequent phrase from St. Paul, usually translated "God forbid."]
4. My first thought after he finished speaking was "If this is all he has to offer, why do we even bother with campus ministry."
5. Some will say, "Ed, you are too harsh. This was a multi-faith/no-faith community badly wounded and what they needed was comfort, not a call to repentance and not a narrowly Christian message that could divide." I think they would be wrong; this was an opportunity for Paster King to say, "Here is what the Christian – the one who is hitched to THE Promise – can tell you about this:" and then tell them.
6. I heard the whole talk—nothing about God let alone Christ. I was embarrassed. All the other religion speakers—Islam, Buddhist, Jew—sorry to say—made a lot more sense.
7. King's "sermon" is not unlike many I've heard in the ELCA.
8. I was steaming when I got the ELCA news release, and for the same reasons—calling something Christian that was basically afraid to name the name. It is amazing, this close to Easter, that such an Easter-less message was

given.

But others thought otherwise. Some said: Yes, he did proclaim an “other” gospel, but you didn’t do right in what you wrote.

Examples:

- A. Weren’t you breaking the 8th commandment, which in Luther’s Small Catechism calls you “to defend him, speak well of him, and put the best construction on everything”?
- B. You added “a personal attack, innuendo” to the (rightful) exposure of false Gospel.
- C. Your response to Pastor King (TT462) was correct but I found it harsh.
- D. I’m concerned about whether there might be a better way to communicate this critique—perhaps timing, perhaps a gentler turn of phrase—so that it can be heard.
- E. Unless I missed the All-Important good news you always tell, I felt you were not as pastoral to the empty pastor as you might be.
- F. I agree with your assessment of Bill’s remarks. However, I ponder the timing. I would have recommended going public with a critique after 30 days or so.
- G. I write only to question your TIMING. After this horrific event, when we all are struggling to find words, I find your open musings so soon are very ‘unloving’ and extremely insensitive. How easy it is in St. Louis where you have the luxury of distance to discern the events of Blacksburg, VA. I’m not saying you are not right, . . . but question the sensitivity and gravity of the stress and pain of the moment.
- H. The convocation was a media event. What more could you expect than P.C. rhetoric – especially from the allegedly Christian speaker? “All the more so with the world’s #1 snake-oil-salesman also on the program.”

I. One of you told me that King's Gospel was good gospel indeed (at least, good enough) for the immediate aftermath. "Real" Gospel would not have been heard. But this colleague called attention to something that had never crossed my mind, namely, the crazed killer himself—of all things—as God's voice to America. In the message he left us after the massacre (which text EHS has not yet seen in full)—in, with, under its mental madness—he's one of God's prophets, excoriating the lovelessness and hedonism at VT and thereby the entire nation. Analogous to God (in Isaiah) calling the murderous Assyrian emperor the "rod of my anger." But as a madman Cho will never be listened to by his (and God's!) intended audience. Ditto for any Christian attempt by a Lutheran campus minister to proclaim repentance (and then absolution) at the site.

To most of the eight above I have responded, sometimes longish-ly. Once I'd thought about passing those responses on to you ThTh readers, but it would be too much. But here's one, responding neither to kudo nor to critique. It's in response to a pastor from Australia. He's trying to cope with the sticky-wicket of God's hand in the massacre. We've already had a couple of exchanges. Here's the most recent one.

In a message dated 4/25/07 5:21:47 AM, he writes:

Aussie: *Your response immediately brought to my mind Luther arguing similarly [sc. God's hand in everything, even the horrors] in 'The Bondage of the Will,' and I've always been impressed by that writing.* **EHS:** *As I recall ML is even more brutal about God's hand in everything that happens in creation, even in God's letting the devil (who is finally GOD'S devil, since there are not two Gods in the cosmos) get away with wholesale destruction.*

Aussie: *I will look closer at Deut 32:39. That one is more of a struggle for me, but it gets to the heart of my question: Exactly how is God in the mix when it comes to Virginia Tech?*

EHS: *There is either One God, or there are two or more. That's the Deuteronomist's claim. The Canaanites opted for two. Made more sense. The Deut. opts for one. Sounds mad. But he says that the God he's speaking for says the same thing. So he's not making this up. That's the same option confronting us at VT, isn't it? One God or two? Pastor King seemed to take the double option: Light vs. Darkness and no one deity beyond them, declaring "Both Light and Darkness are MY creatures." Biggest "real absence," of course, was not naming the Name of the one who Shines into the darkness and wins. When that one remains nameless, Darkness wins, despite the contrary claim of the campus pastor. I'm not making this up, either. It's in the NT.*

Why do you (we all) feel so compelled to get our God detached from it, when that God says the opposite? Sounds bizarre for us to feel called to defend God's reputation in the very face of his claims that we think incriminate him. Can't God see that that is bad PR? But who is on the bench, and who is in the dock in this world courtroom? That's gotta be a symptom of some malady of ours, doesn't it? We've got a problem, not finally about VT, but about our de facto deity, isn't that what it amounts to?

"Exactly how?" you ask. When you, colleague, will be able tell me "exactly how" God is in the mix in Amos' "laundry list" in chapter 4—"I did this, I did this, I did this...." then I'll have a clue for the "exactly how" at VT. Is this why Luther often talked about the stuff of creation as "masks" of God? I bet it was. God's on the scene, but it also looks like someone else. Can't be God! Seems to me that this is equal to the proper

distinction between law and gospel for Lutherans, namely, the distinction between deus absconditus and deus revelatus when Lutherans do “God-talk.” That distinction is fundamental for theologizing about VT. And it seems to me to be equally “fundamental” for “natural man/woman” to ignore that when talking about VT. We’re surfeited with such VT talk.

Where in all the public coverage of VT when God might have gotten mentioned, did you ever hear someone call on this hidden/revealed-God distinction? Even from church people? Even from Lutherans?

In Lutheran theological perspective VT was a massive encounter with deus absconditus (for the victims, for the survivors)—about whom we are unable (possibly even forbidden) to determine “exactly how.” Luther heard a big No! from God for us trying to peek behind the masks. Said so when he exegeted the OT text about Moses being (graciously) hidden in the cleft of the rock so that he could not see the face of God, see “exactly how” God looked. All Moses got was (that whimsical term) “posteriora dei”— as ML says in his Heidelberg Theses. “God’s hinder parts.” Between deus absconditus and deus revelatus in Christ—although it is one and the same God (Christians are “stuck” with monothelism)—there is a great gulf fixed.

I sense that with your “exactly how” question, you are asking a fundamentally cause/effect sequence question. God as creator is not hooked to cause/effect sequences. We humans may well be unable to operate otherwise. [Kant thought so.] That’s not what the Biblical word “Creator” means, nor the Hebrew create-verb “bara,” as I understand it.

As soon as you put God into a cause/effect sequence, as Werner Elert demonstrates in his dogmatics, you have to ask Who caused God? Which is akin to searching for some other God. And the

“real” reason for doing that is to escape the God who addresses us in the masks of creation—both the good ones and the horrible ones. The cause/effect series is endless. My hunch is that this is the reason why Tillich preferred to call God the “Grund des Seins,” ground of being. Not cause, but ground—where we come from, whatever it is that keeps us from splattering all over the place. “Source,” possibly, might be a fair English term, as in a spring flowing from some “Ur-grund,” most of which is unavailable for our examination. But then, of course, it is WE who are under examination—as Jesus noted at Siloam.

If I follow your logic correctly, because death is God’s agent (God’s left hand working), and as the gunman at Virginia Tech was death’s agent, then he is also God’s agent. Which means the back yard abortionist is also God’s agent as was Rudolf Hoess, commander at Birkenau. The 33 lives lost at Virginia Tech and 250 000 lives lost at Birkenau and the one million plus lives lost to abortion each year in the US are simply unfortunate collateral damage in God’s intended aim of bringing people to repentance.

“Simply” sounds a tad gratuitous. But more to the point, I’ll speak to your concluding words about “God’s intended aim”: Here you are short-circuiting, I think, the Biblical witness. ONE of God’s aims—so we believe because we believe Christ (and not just on the basis of some “generic faith” in God “niceness”)— is that “all should repent.” All are sinners, so no exceptions. Biblically, an “innocent” human, if we ever met one, would not (could not) die. For all generic sinners their death is the rightful, logical (theological) end of the equation. I.e., as AC 2 says “All men born after the fall of Adam . . . are born IN sin . . .which brings death.” So even for repentant and Christ-trusting sinners) death is still the “wages due.”

The difference between a Christ-trusting sinner and a Christ-distrusting sinner at the point of death is that, although both die a sinner's death (the only sort of human death there is), the Christ-truster has a connection to a Partner in that dying—and that Partner makes all the difference. As that Partner himself once described it, “though he die, yet shall he live.” Or, though he encounter deus absconditus, yet his faith in deus revelatus shall have the last word.

The Biblical word from way back in Genesis 2 is “when you become a sinner, you shall surely die.” The operational word there is justice, equity justice—in simple English “fairness.” Next to the scandal of the Gospel (and actually linked to it) is this scandal: There are no “innocent” sinners. The two terms hooked together are an oxymoron. That was the scandal where the Pharisees stumbled. They trusted that they were (mostly) innocent, so repentance was not for them.

From that Biblical base ALL human deaths are sinners terminating, going back—even more severe—being terminated, being sent (by You Know Whom!) back to the dust. Psalm 90.

Sounds grim, maybe even heartless. Unjust even, when measured “kata sarka,” by human standards. But there are warnings throughout the NT for using such yardsticks, and in the OT for pots that critique the Potter.

But, are we all kidding ourselves? Because [the Cross] is not only where God was, is it? He was there at Virginia Tech visiting death upon those students. He was there pulling the trigger in order that the survivors of his left handed deeds might recognize their need for his right handed deeds on the cross.

Isn't this cause-and-effect stuff with God? As plausible as that analysis may seem, it ignores deus absconditus reality and deus absconditus theology. And once more—seems to me—it trivializes the Hidden God reality in the whole mess by intimating (with, I sense, a tad of ridicule about such a “simple” notion) that God is doing this “merely” to get survivors to repent. I spoke to this above, I think.

Peace & Joy!

Ed