

Reader Response on Necessitating Christ in Preaching

Colleagues,

Here's some feedback that's come my way on the topic above.

Peace & Joy!

Ed

1. From the pastor who preached the sermon that triggered the discussion, this one-liner—Re: Thursday Theology 118. Thanks Ed. Nice job. Fun to read. (Name)

2. From a Seminex grad, now a pastor in Indiana—It seems simple enough to me: There is no other name under heaven by which we must be saved. Of course, just saying, “Jesus, Jesus, Jesus” is not proclaiming the Gospel. But neither is a gracious act by you, me or my aunt. They may reflect the gospel, be empowered by the gospel, even carry the gospel; but what they aren't is the Gospel.

The confessions say (as I am sure you know) in Augsburg Confession, Article V, that the Holy Spirit works faith through the means of Word and sacrament.

1. That seems to me to exclude the good deeds we do as the “means” of grace.

2. So experiencing the gospel in the good deeds and words of others is not the same as proclaiming it in the pulpit in a public setting.

3. And the Gospel proclaimed through Word and Sacrament is AC IV, i.e., Justification by Faith; or in the words of the liturgy, "Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again."

I always thought the task of preaching was to connect our deeds and experiences to the Christ, not to proclaim our deeds as the Gospel. Anyway, this seems to be the big debate in preaching these days. Do I proclaim the Gospel or a good moral lesson? Do I proclaim what God has done in Christ or what we have done in Christ? To me, the answer is the difference between life and death.

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3. From a Seminex grad, now theology prof in a church college—Thanks for ThTh 114's analysis of the sub-Christic sermon, and thanks also for today's reassertion [ThTh 118] of the hermeneutic of promise in response to the preacher's explanation.

Your preacher's comment that he doesn't claim Caemmerer as mentor helps to clarify for me how much I do. With Caemmerer/Hoyer as homiletics profs, and Schroeder/Bertram as systematics profs (in light of Ebeling's admonition that "Theology's task is to make itself superfluous and to make proclamation necessary"), I simply can't receive nourishment from sermons that aren't shaped by Augsburg Confession, Article IV.

I am grateful that the college is blessed with two strong preachers. However, preachers in our local parishes leave me high and dry. One preaches his own story, assuming we will find mirrors to our stories; a second preaches sanctification (good sanctification, mind you, but assuming we already know the cross stuff); the third and youngest preaches canned sermon illustrations. It's been a

long, long summer waiting for campus worship to begin again.

Perhaps this is where my earlier comments about the well-roundedness (better word: integration!) of the Semineex faculty are most apt. Preaching, pastoral care, exegesis – all were done in light of a clear justification-by-faith/theology-of-the-cross understanding of the Gospel. I don't know if that seminary faculty model exists any more. It certainly seems clear that most seminarians aren't learning it. Lutheran seminary curricula don't have the solid Confessional focus that grounds it all. One studies the Lutheran Confessions, to be sure, but already midway through one's curriculum at most ELCA seminaries – quite unlike the way you drilled it into us in our very first semester, so that no later part of our learning was Confessions-free. I am, on the one hand, profoundly grateful for the grounding I was given. I am, on the other hand, profoundly pained by how much that grounding seems lacking in the church as I experience it today.

4. From a retired pastor in California–Re ThursTh #114–your vacation experience of a no Name of Names sermon is all too common, and it ought to be a barley beard in your pants (I got something similar today as I was weed-eating around the place). At least I think so, and since you have a vehicle and an on-ramp to the net, I encourage you to keep bringing it up. Don't accept the 'shame on you' which you dutifully reported in # 115. "A poor, overworked pastor?" Puh-lease! That one should be asked what the true work of ministry is.

5. From an LCMS pastor in upstate NY–Some thoughts on the

interesting exchange between you and the preacher in #118: At first blush I want to agree with the preacher's negative reaction to lots of religious talk and "Jesus" name-dropping in sermons or conversation. It is true that religious talk and dropping Jesus' name can actually get in the way of the Gospel. I can understand the preacher's reaction since some of that drives me crazy too.

But then I begin to think about the whole thing while remembering Luther's explanation of the 1st commandment in the Large Catechism and also R.J. Neuhaus' thoughts on religion. Neuhaus says one way to look at religion is that the root word is the same one from which we get the word ligaments; thus as the ligaments hold the external body together so a religious system holds together the conceptual and meaning life of any human being. There is no such thing as a human being with no ligaments and so there is no such thing as a human being with no religion. At the center of any religion is a god or gods—but at the dead center there is a god (what we look to for all good and run to in time of trouble). This means that we are into religious-talk and god-talk the moment we open our mouth and enter into conversation with anyone.

When I am in conversation with someone who talks on and on about the prince of the family (the oldest son) and ignores the daughter who is in special ed, we are into god-talk. When a young widow tells me her only reason for living is to see her son through his education and then she can go ahead and die, we are talking god-talk and religion. When I am talking to a church professional who has been chewed up by a church agency (happens a lot) and begins to say she is sounding like her super-pious mother and I ask her what she thinks her mother's image of God is, she blurts out: "electric fence," we are doing god-

talk and religious-talk.

It is inappropriate to drop "Jesus" all over the place but the battle between the risen Christ and other gods is going on all the time just as the process of living and dying is going on in some form all the time. Thus I have become more and more convinced that worship connects with life in the language of the people and in language that not names Jesus but presents Jesus as the "I AM" in the center of worship clarifying his connection with us in the death and resurrection process of all of life.

I find it very interesting in Luke 24 that Luke's hermeneutic is not just tacking Jesus on to the story that opens minds to the scripture but the risen Christ opening minds to the scripture by showing how, I think, the died and risen Christ is necessary to open our minds to scripture which in itself is the story of the death and resurrection of Israel and in him all of life. Thanks for the exchange and food for thought.

6. From a lay theologian in St. Louis—For that California pastor who said: "All I could think of is that I am glad you and your Schroeder clan don't drop in on me. Shame on you." Tsk, tsk, the shoe must fit. You Schroeders really OUGHT to drop in on this guy, sounds like he needs some help seeing that he needs some help.

7. From a worker-priest in southern Illinois—In regard to those who would criticize your criticism of the sermon delivered the weekend of the Schroeder reunion, I can also say to your nay-sayers, "If the shoe fits, wear it." Would they also say "Shame on you!" to the prophets: Jeremiah,

etc? Would they support out of secular sympathy those who preached “another gospel” and who came under Paul’s criticism? If the “hard working pastor” hasn’t delegated some of his burden so that he can do the primary purpose of his ministry, i.e., to proclaim the good news from God over against our lethargy and misdirections about Him, the pastor should be doing some other vocation instead of just holding hands and getting paid for it.

8. From an Anglican priest in Canada—Must admit (confess) the first response of TT115—the words from the ELCA pastor defending Christ-empty sermons—made me rather angry, not in a hot tempered way, but very cold and deliberate. If I as a priest—a minister of the gospel—and am too busy and overworked to have at least one sentence in a homily that points to some GOOD NEWS, then I am too busy and working at the WRONG things. I know that my preaching often falls short, and when it does, I wish there were people in the congregation theologically aware enough to notice and would (in charity!) point that out.

I am on your side, but unlike you, I don’t have the courage to listen to preaching when I am on holidays. So we go to the 8:00 Communion, where we hope there is no homily. When there has been, it has invariably been a disappointment. So my wife and I preach to each other on the way home about what we hoped would have been said.

9. From a second-career recent graduate of Luth. School of Theology in Chicago--“Christ-less” sermons – Methinks Mr. ELCA, California doth protest too much [see direct quote in #7 above], but I know that I usually am careful in the way I try to get at this because that kind of reaction is precisely the kind I’m not interested in eliciting.

Interesting story: At our Synod Assembly the bishop actually stepped up to the plate Friday night and preached a B-minus sermon for once (topic: how hard it is to make Jesus front and center when there's so much fresh pain in the "congregation"?). That night the usual suspects gathered at the hospitality suite for relaxation, beer, pretzels, and chat. One pastor walked in beaming about the bishop's sermon – as if it were par for the course. He got unanimous and overflowing support for his appraisal from the entire room . . . except for yours truly who had the nerve to say I'd heard several of our bishop's sermons that didn't measure up in my book. The pastor stopped dead in his tracks and looked at me like I had horns and demanded an example. I said, "How about the one at our conference a couple of years ago, that all of us heard. There was not one iota of the Gospel of Jesus Christ in that sermon." At which point, another pastor said: "well, I can't critique other people's sermons..." To which I said, "Friend, you just got done telling us what a wonderful sermon that was tonight. How can you know that if you can't critique other people's sermons?"

Mr. ELCA in California may well have a point, but unfortunately, it's not just every once in a while that the necessitating of Christ is missing. It's almost every Sunday in many places, and it's a serious issue.