

Readers' Feedback: "How does Jesus on the cross make a difference?"

Colleagues,

Here are some recent responses that have come back to us at this Crossings cyber-port. Robin and I think you would appreciate them.

Peace & Joy!

Ed

1. [Lutheran pastor "M" in Western Australia]

Just a little thankyou from remote rural Western Australia. Mission Exec "S" from New South Wales put us onto the Crossings method over here in the West a few years ago at Pastor's Inservice, and I have found it very helpful in thinking about texts and preparing for preaching. I also do a little bit on our local Christian community radio station (Hope FM, here in Esperance, W.A.) so maybe a couple of hundred people get a 120 second analysis of the gospel text at 7.45 am on Tuesdays. Half way through I always ask, "How does Jesus on the cross make a difference?" and then go on to answer that. Good discipline trying to put it into a breakfast radio timeslot, and answering that key question. God bless.

2. [EHS forwarded these words to the NSW pastor mentioned. He then sent this back to us:]

It's pleasing to know that Pastor M regularly shares his Crossing of the Sunday text with people via radio. Last

week I taught another small class of four persons the method over five days. So let's hope there's good fruit from that planting. Joy and peace in Christ.

3. [From Pastor "B" in the upper Midwest]

I want you to know how much I appreciate your ThTh 74: "Measuring sermons to see if they're Gospel." I remember when I was on sabbatical a few years back in Pittsburgh. I made a point of visiting a different ELCA congregation each week with a checklist (arguably, a kind of pharisaic thing to do). At the top of my list were: 1) did the sermon I heard pass the double-dipstick test [= merits and benefits of Christ hyped and the people offered the promise inherent there]; and 2) was communion celebrated. Not a sermon I heard passed the double-dipstick test. Only one of twelve of them even named the "Name." Again, at the risk of sounding like a Pharisee, I find the quality of preaching in our church to be simply deplorable. I've stopped attending district meetings because the sermons I hear at them only make me angry. I am being persuaded that in addition to not being taught critical thinking skills, our sem grads aren't taught what the Gospel is. It is heart-breaking.

Maybe your item, if read widely enough, will help. I'm going to make sure my assistant reads it. She, too, is (alas) a recent grad of one of our ELCA seminaries.

4. [From "S," a prof at one of those seminaries. I'll summarize his longish message.]

Responding to ThTh74 his main point was that EHS was way, way too affirmative about the Lutheran-Roman Catholic consensus document, "Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification" [JDDJ] though he trusted that I was not naive about it. He saw JDDJ as a sellout by the Lutherans,

a cave-in to RC notions of "fides caritate formata," namely, that faith when furnished with works of love does indeed justify sinners, but not faith alone. That even the justification-by-faith [JBF] presented in JDDJ was flabby, and that there was no real justification-by-faith-ALONE at all in JDDJ. He also thought that when it came to JBF as CRITERION for all doctrine, there was serious fudging going on. He also copied to me the statement of the 251 German theologians—a number of them friends of mine, others whom I know and still others I don't—all of whom think JDDJ is bad news.

5. [Thereupon EHS sent him this]

Instead of saying "That's what JDDJ says," I should have said: "That's what JDDJ (surely) wants to say—and here's a suggestion for how it might say that even more clearly." Of course, JDDJ is not what you or I wish "they" would have said. But the days are gone when one guy (e.g., Melanchthon) will author an ecumenical document. That doesn't mean you or I can't write a "declaration" of our own. But if you cherish the word "joint" in the title—and I do—then there'll likely be disagreement among co-confessors [you and me] on just how cheered or saddened we should be by what "they" finally hammered out. Any document by committee will never look like a "full glass" for everybody. But even for those who see it unfilled, there are two ways to read the data—half full, half empty. I can argue that the JDDJ glass is half full. So I see the job of us confessors today to keep on trucking to get it fuller.

E.g., that happened a bit today at the every Friday brownbag noon hour at St. Louis University, where some of us Lutheran types talk shop with a few Jesuits of SLU and some Dominicans of Aquinas Institute. Even if JDDJ is at best only "one talent" and not 5 or 10 as last Sunday's

Gospel signalled, the dominical admonition is not to “bury it,” but to “go for it” and see what we can make happen with the one talent we’ve been given.

Remember, I’m just back from 13 straight weeks with fundie conservative (American style) evangelicals—the whole shebang of my Bali congregation. If you think JDDJ is too skimpy to capitalize upon, you should’ve seen the glasses that the Lord set before me for my pastoral work down there—some half empty, some upside down, some full of gosh-awful alien liquors. Enough for now. About those 251 German theologians—well, some other time.

6. [Whereupon he sends me this:]

“Half full, or half empty?”

Well, of course, but so is the Koran half-full and thus can be jointly confessed quatenus. So one party can choose to have it one way and the other can choose to have it the other way. Everything becomes a matter of power regarding who can turn the wax nose. Under these conditions you’d be hard pressed to identify anything as another gospel. Wait til more time goes by and the Jesus Seminar makes its inroad on the ecumenical managers (some slopes are slippery and just on the other side of the justification slope is Jesus (see SA II,I).”Burying or appropriating the ‘one talent’ that JDDJ at best may be.” That’s, of course, great evangelical strategy (Paul in Acts 17) but we’re talking about teaching and confessing here, not missiology which is rooted in the former. Why make a big deal about variata of various sorts. The major hermeneutical heart of JDDJ is just some variata. The “Joint” is fine but the first “D” stands for “Deconstruction” which is done with the JBF “talent.”

7. [Whereupon EHS sent Prof “S” the jeremiad from Pastor

"B"—item 3 above—along with these reflections.]

To debate about how bad JDDJ really is seems to me less important than what Pastor B points to. Is the defective JDDJ or even a correctly improved one really gonna make ANY difference for what this jeremiad bemoans? I think not. What gets preached in the parishes (also in Luther's day) is not shaped by what they did at Augsburg 1530 or 1999. That's just a fact of life. What counts "for the free course of the Gospel being preached to the joy and edification of Christ's people" is not JDDJ documents—or even the original Augsburg Confession—but that people learn what really IS Gospel and what really ISN'T. That comes—if and when it comes at all to supplant the false gospels that abound in people's hearts—from the face-to-face stuff (or cyber-interface) that you & I do when we are NOT writing confessional statements for folks to sign, but rapping with our colleagues and students and holding their feet to the fire. The fire here being not a document but the Good News itself spoken so that they can hear it and cross it over to their own lives. I can't escape the conclusion that the folks who don't preach the gospel are folks who don't know the gospel. If they did, as someone once said, they could not help but preach it when they got a chance. Maybe the Jesus Seminar is a threat to THE Gospel. But even if large numbers of our clergy and laity were to go for it, it wouldn't make the bad Gospel that Pastor B complains about much worse. So also "nailing" JDDJ for its fallacies is irrelevant for what really gets preached in the ELCA, I think. It's not JDDJ that is at the jugular, but what's getting taught—or not taught—at the seminaries these pastors come from. That must be at least one source for the lethal false gospels coming from the mouths of our preachers regardless of what was publicly praised at Augsburg on Oct. 31, 1999. Fiddling

with JDDJ is at the very least Neronic (maybe even moronic) whilst the ELCA city burns.

8. [From second career seminary student "S."]

Re Thth 74. Though the context of your give and take with the ELCA pastor was regarding sermons, I suspect your remarks are on target for other areas as well. I also suspect that the widespread allergy to the Reformation "dipstick" you mentioned is coincident with the widespread popularity (explicit or implicit, conscious or sub-conscious) of Theology of Glory, the growing popularity of non-Jesus-only theocentric views of religious pluralism, just to name a few. I'm even starting to wonder if there isn't a coincident allergy to the concept of original sin. Could all these tendencies be working together to try to thwart the proclamation of the only Gospel truly worth proclaiming?

9. [From a retired LCMS pastor.]

Thanks for the "Measuring Sermons" document. I wonder why I find it so reassuring and affirming of 48 years of my own preaching? I like your response in the measuring sermon document: 'Where there is no promissio at all present, we must add the promise," etc. It's truly great to live in the promise.

10. [From an ELCA pastor in the state of Washington]

Thanks for ThTh74. Something that often happens in so-called Christian preaching is that we treat the methods of Biblical Exegesis that we learned in the seminary as the final step in preparation for sermons. What I remember from my exegesis classes is that we often isolated texts and did all of the "critical" studies of them, tearing them apart, but then failing to put the jigsaw puzzle back together again. And then we forgot to put this put-together-puzzle back into the bigger puzzle called the Holy Scriptures. As much as I enjoy exegesis . . . and the

application of the historical-critical method, we forget the context. Often our context is too narrow. Melancthon was correct in supplying the promise, because we are not supposed to interpret texts in a vacuum. We have to take into account the "whole" of Scripture. Preaching a law text without the promise is ignoring the context of the whole of Scripture. Each individual text links to the whole of Scripture. And the main purpose of the Scriptures is to point to Jesus Christ, the good news of salvation. Thanks again. Keep feeding us with your ThTh. I read it off Lutherlink.

11. [From an Anglican rector in BC, Canada]

I found your litmus test for sermons, THTh 74, excellent. I should enlarge it and tack it up in my study. Three different sermons each Sunday is a bit much, and I find I am tempted to apply the gospel superficially, accept it as read, etc. for fear of using it to manipulate certain behaviour ("Jesus did this for you, so you better..."). Peccavi. But what would a Lutheran expect from an Anglican?