

Reflections for Reformation Day

Colleagues,

The number on this posting is 333. For 333 weeks in a row ThTh has gone into cyberspace—more or less regularly. Are there any of you out there who were there when ThTh #1 was posted? 333 is one-third of the way to 1,000. Also half-way to the number of The Beast in the Book of Revelation. So it must be a significant number. And the timing too. Elections for the president of the USA will have happened before #334 comes out. I'm tempted—but not much—by this posting's snazzy number, “half-way to the number of the Beast,” to ring the changes on Armageddon in anticipation of Election Day. After all, Luther was a vivid believer in “realized eschatology,” namely, that the apocalypse was NOW—or at the very latest, tomorrow. And Revelation 14:6 was a text that Luther-followers early on linked to Luther himself. John the seer says: “Then I saw another angel flying in mid-heaven, with an eternal gospel to proclaim to those who live on earth—to every nation and tribe and language and people.” Consequently Luther's face appears on that angel in woodcuts of the time illustrating John's Apocalypse. Maybe we should rehabilitate an airborne reformer into our Lutheran iconography.

Naytheless, I'll eschew “Luther and Armageddon” for ThTh 333, and wait till after the election, when the aftermath may offer even more grim signals of America's God-problem—and our need for that “angel with the eternal gospel to proclaim . . . to this nation.”

For a cheery note on this Reformation Day weekend, here's an item sent our way by Paul Goetting:

“Dear Ed: This is the link

(<http://www.pbs.org/empires/martinluther/>) to the Martin Luther 2 Part Documentary which is appearing again on our PBS station next month. They have some classroom resources which may be beneficial for Adult Forum, Sunday School or Confirmation. You can purchase the DVD on this too from PBS directly."

Instead of my prose for Reformation remembering, ThTh 333 offers a few more responses from Reformation-minded folks. The first one is in response to the "faith-as-surrender" exchange of a month ago. The last three bring closure (I hope) to the conversation about eulogies.

Peace & Joy!

Ed Schroeder

I. The Surrender Discussion– (Wherein one respondent brought in John Donne's poem "Batter my heart" as a surrender text.)FROM JERRY BURCE

Pastor, Messiah Lutheran Church in Fairview Park, Ohio

I have liked the [John Donne] poem ever since I ran across it in my mid-20's, when it gave splendid verbal form to the roilings of my own innards. I was moved then to memorize it. I still catch myself rehearsing it from time to time. Here's the text–

*BATTER my heart, three person'd God; for, you
As yet but knocke, breathe, shine, and seeke to mend,
That I may rise, and stand, o'erthrow mee,'and bend
Your force, to breake, blowe, burn and make me new
I, like an usurpt towne, to'another due,*

*Labour to'admit you, but Oh, to no end,
Reason your viceroy in mee, mee should defend,
But is captiv'd, and proves weake or untrue.
Yet dearely'I love you,'and would be loved faine,
But am bethroth'd unto your enemies:
Divorce mee,'untie or breake that knot againe,
Take mee to you, imprison mee, for I
Except you'enthrall mee, never shall be free,
Nor ever chaste, except you ravish mee.*

Comment:

- a. It's patently not about surrender. To the contrary. It's about the impossibility of surrender. This is the cry of the person who thinks he ought to fling wide the gates of the "usurpt towne" to its rightful owner—and realizes to his dismay that he can't do it (lines 5-6). Freedom, chasteness, righteousness—he can ache for these till the cows come home but all are beyond his own grasp and forever will be unless God should do something drastic to effect it (lines 11-14). The spirit is indeed willing. The flesh is worse than weak.
- b. Echoes, then, of Romans 7. I wouldn't be at all surprised to find this lurking in the background. Were I a scholar I'd dig around for the sermons Donne may have preached on that chapter and look for connections.
- c. Echoes too, perhaps, of Luther—or at least of the way this Lutheran (JB) was hearing a piece of Luther at a certain point in his life: "I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ my Lord or come to him." Was JB hearing Luther rightly at the time? Probably not. The hankering, after all,

was not for the righteousness extra nos that comes of "true faith," but for the intrinsic righteousness of the age to come when all is made new.

- d. Of course, Paul hankers for that too. See the inward groaning of Rom. 8:23. Might that have been the passage Donne was thinking about? Yes or no, the sonnet serves regardless as an exquisite devotion on it. "Get on the stick, Three-person'd One. Finish the job!"
- e. I especially like the way Donne pushes the imagery that today's Pelagians keep trying to cover up and bypass. It isn't about my choosing, my surrendering, my getting with the program. It isn't, because it can't be. I don't have it in me. What I need—we're talking necessitation—is not the wooing God but the raping God (line 14, i.e., line 4 pushed to the extreme). A shocking, loathsome image? Absolutely. Yet no more shocking than the reality of the crucifying God who is also the God crucified, or the God who kills (as in my dying) in order to make alive.
- f. I might even go so far as to think of Donne as a friend of Crossings. Is he doing Level 3 diagnosis? If not, he's certainly toying with it. And as Elert taught you to teach us, that's something you just don't do unless there's an inkling of the promise lurking somewhere under the surface. With hope in Christ,
Jerry

II. The Conversation about Eulogies. FROM MATTHEW BOLZ-WEBER Pastor, Bethlehem Lutheran Church in Longmont, Colorado.

For the reason illustrated here, any eulogies offered at funerals I preside at happen before the sermon. Thus, the

last word folks hear is Gospel – or to put it more bluntly, but accurately considering some of the eulogies I’ve heard, then I get to speak to the bad theology espoused during the eulogies, hopefully directing folks to God’s grace instead of how great the person was. I find these eulogies, even Kathy’s, have a place in funeral and memorial services. However, as Bill indicates, the Gospel needs to have final say.

Shalom,
Matthew

FROM GEORGE WELLER

Inventor, Musician, IT-whiz in Michigan

There is another side to the eulogy discussion. What music shall we choose? Let me offer a few cases, not as a theologian, but as a practitioner, though Ed knows me as a theology student of old . . .

1. A couple in my brother’s church and choir had a young son who committed suicide. They asked my brother to sing something (quick, someone, tell me the musical analogue of “eulogy”) at the funeral. Trying to select the right thing, they ransacked his repertoire without success. Finally they hit upon a piece I had written for my son’s baptism (upon words by Deaconess Susan Wendorf) which resonated with the parents. Song of the Holy One... “Someday you will understand that I am the One looking after you.” Someone called for permission to use the song. Do you get calls like this? Doesn’t happen often, but I keep the Kleenex handy, just in case.
2. A very senior gentleman from a former parish called. It took me a bit to figure out who he was. His wife,

a dear, somewhat eccentric lady had died, and he had prevailed upon a mutual friend and former bandmate to sing another song I had written for the same baptism. "I have called you by name, you are mine..", and he wanted to thank me for writing such a good song. And he was planning his own funeral, and would it be alright if he used it for that service too? I keep the Kleenex handy. Both of these songs consist of a collection of promises and commitments taken out of scripture, out of context, with reckless disregard for theological accuracy, but with thoughtful regard for encouragement of the saints.

What has astounded me is not only the reaction of the hearers (and singers!) but of my own reaction upon knowing that some comfort was found..

3. A colleague lost a second sister to cancer. At a loss for something to say (aren't we always?) I quoted (I think) Pilgrim's Progress: "...all the trumpets sounded for her on the other side..." And the report came back that those words were on the family's lips the whole time of the funeral. I had no idea. I am convinced that, just as we distinguish law and gospel, so we must distinguish between faith (which is about trust) and theology (which is about ideas). The bereaved need to hear about trust in large doses, and theology, as may be required. Trust comes from the heart, most often without words.

FROM BILL MOORHEAD (who initiated the discussion a fortnight ago)

Pastor, Pacific Hills Lutheran Church in Omaha, Nebraska

Ed, Herewith some response to responses.

To the six correspondents in ThTh 332, Greetings. Thanks for the Eu Logoi. I am thankful for them, and have inwardly digested them. Having done so, let me assure you of my awareness of the following:

1. bad funeral sermons, devoid of both the deceased and the Un-Deceased;
2. folk, such as yourselves I sense, capable of giving a proper Eu Logos;
3. and yet still the many folk whose eulogies I've heard in the past (and who were ably represented in print by Kathy Bartholow) who have no clue what to say in such a situation, and who, in the context of the funeral, leave the gathered assembly [who have a need bigger than what they think they want] with a message [in my experience] that is "other gospel."

As the bishop in charge of my scattered, suburban flock, though few of them may be at any one funeral, I am divinely charged to urge Christ in the sermon and to guard against anything that would un-urge Him or urge something else.

In fact, I am so aware of the setting [a real mixed crowd to be sure] that I just don't want them to be a mixed-up crowd to boot. I am aware that words may seem judgmental, but in this instance allow me to reassure you to the contrary. Ordained in 1973, I've done enough death work to be sick to death of it. But in my sickness of it, and my own death sickness that is taking me to the grave, I have hope, and a hope to share. That's why, when the sheep show up, I want them to safely graze [with apologies to J. S. Bach] and graze/grace to the full.

Peace & Joy,

Pr. Bill Moorhead, Omaha