

Response to Sermon

[N.B. The writers for Sabbathology and Thursday Theology do their work for free. Our Listserve provider, however, does not. Contributions to palliate his pressing us for pecunia are welcome. Here's the address: The Crossings Community, PO Box 7011, St. Louis MO 63066-7011.]

Colleagues,

Four weeks ago (ThTh 114) I reported on the Schroeder clan reunion and our family discussion around the picnic tables of the sermon we'd received that morning. The trigger for that conversation was some folks noting Christ's name not mentioned in the sermon, but appearing only in the votum at the end: "The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God the Father, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all."

The preacher and many of us in the clan are friends, so I sent him a copy of ThTh 114. Few days ago he sent a thoughtful letter and also gave permission for me to pass it on to you. He also said I could mention his name if I wished. He had no reason to remain anonymous. However, since this sermon review began in anonymity, I'm opting to keep it that way. Here's his text:

Dear Ed:

Thanks for the commentary on my 6 August sermon. I always appreciate hearing from others, even if it's critical. Your insights were interesting. I probably have a different view of the modern preaching task than you do. My style may be a bit less narrow linguistically. I don't have such a fixed division of the Trinity that I feel compelled to accentuate the "Christ quotient" at the expense of the other dimensions of God, especially when preaching on an Old Testament text. [I Ed's note: The OT text for the day-parallelizing the day's Gospel from John 6-was Exodus 16, manna in the wilderness.] Caemmerer was neither a teacher nor a mentor of mine, though I have read the man. When it comes to preaching conceptualization and design, I certainly do not "take the Gospel for granted," to use those words from Caemmerer. In actual delivery, I do work hard to avoid "religious talk" that pervades much of the good and bad theology (and preaching) across the church. As I see it at least, people in the pew deserve better than a string of holy words lumped together. (I have a relative who talks this way, tossing in the name of Jesus for accent and legitimacy, and it drives me crazy.) Newcomers to the faith seem more apt to get a realistic foothold in Christian community if they get more than Jesus language applied to their everyday realities.

Sprinkling Jesus' name across the paragraphs, especially in a sermon on Exodus 16, is not my definition of what makes for Gospel. The Gospel comes in many different forms. In fact, in all kinds of human encounters I witness, from pediatric intensive care units to factory lunchrooms, I receive Gospel straight and solid from parishioners of every kind. Rarely, if ever, in such instances do they invoke the name of Christ. That's a good thing. If they did, it would dampen some of the raw beauty and incarnational mystery in some of those moments, and be downright phony in others. Still, I believe they have as much to proclaim about the Lord Jesus Christ through their words and deeds as I do. When Jesus talks about knowing some and not knowing others on the final day, I have trouble believing that it's related to how frequently we "dropped the NAME."

Your reflections do give me something on which to chew. And I'll continue to do so. Do keep [our parish] on your list if ever you're in the community again. It's always a treat to see you . . . and now to reflect with you.

Warm personal regards...

Some thoughts--

1. Christian preaching on OT texts is always dicey. It forces the preacher to come clean on the distinction between a synagogue sermon and a Christian one. Clearly the "Christ quotient" is central to that distinction. But how? The writers of the N.T. give some pointers. They were the first Christian proclaimers who had to figure out that distinction for themselves in their own preaching. Remember, they were always using O.T. texts. It was the only Bible they had. And hardly any of their O.T. texts mentioned the Christ-vocable--even in Hebrew!

2. John's Gospel is most obvious in this. He presents Jesus "preaching" on a series of OT texts: Jacob's ladder (chap. 1), rites of purification and the temple (2), serpent in the wilderness (3), Jacob's well (4), Sabbath-keeping (5). Toward the end of chapter 5 Jesus articulates his "new" hermeneutic for the Hebrew scriptures--and the grim consequences for not following it: "You search the scriptures anticipating therein to find eternal life; and it is they that testify on my behalf. Yet you refuse to come to me to have life."

3. In order to make this O.T. hermeneutic "perfectly clear," John then offers chapter 6, a long one, all of which has Jesus himself exegeting the text of Exodus 16, Moses and the wilderness manna. [Both of these texts, Exodus 16 & John 6, were the lessons appointed for the Sunday of the sermon under discussion above.] John 6 gives us not only Jesus' feeding folks in the wilderness, his parallel to the Moses-manna event, but a sermon, a dialogue sermon (47 verses!) on Exodus 16. What do we get? Exodus 16 cum "Christ quotient," that more-than-Moses feeder in the wilderness. Call it the first recorded Christian sermon on Exodus 16.

4. For sure, this is not Exodus 16 "straight." Rather it's Exodus 16 exegeted by Jesus himself according to his new hermeneutic to reveal what Moses-manna can and cannot do. Gift of God though Moses-manna was, it didn't (couldn't?) offer the life that lasts. Thus (in Crossings lingo) Exodus 16 under Jesus' hand becomes diagnostic data. It exposes our problem, does not provide a solution for it. When offering his "new" hermeneutic in chapter five, Jesus concluded by applying it specifically to texts of Moses: "Moses is your accuser, on whom you have set your hope. If you believed Moses, you would believe me, for he wrote about me. But if you do not believe what he wrote, how will you believe what I say?" (5:45ff)

5. In John's "sign-theology" Moses' manna signals Moses' law. That signal marks every reference to Moses in John's gospel. He says it point blank in his prologue (1:17) contrasting "the law given through Moses" and the "grace and truth coming through Jesus Christ." Under the sign of bread, John 6 presents both Moses and Jesus as bread-winners. Both of them and their breads come from God. But the nutritional value of each is as different as death and life. So says Jesus in this sermon on Exodus 16. The fathers "ate" the Mosaic manna-law and they still died. Anyone who eats Jesus' alternate bread "will live forever." It's not caloric deficiency, nor caloric magic. It's that one bread is law, God's law, and the other is grace and truth, God's grace and truth. One of these gives life to sinners, the other does not. [N.B., this is not Paul speaking, but John!]

6. If Exodus 16 was indeed godly bread, but no remedy for death, then you can't preach a sermon "just" on Exodus 16 and have it come out as good news. Surely not Christian Good News. So how to utilize this Johannine hermeneutic when preaching on Exodus 16 today? Can Christians somehow get back behind John 6 and preach JUST on Exodus 16? Not if it's to be more than a synagogue sermon--Moses straight. After John 6 Christians can no longer get back to Exodus 16 "just on its own." For we no longer have it "on its own." We're blessed (or "stuck") with John's (and Jesus') midrash to that text. We can't go to Exodus 16 as though John 6 doesn't exist. It's not that John 6 dictates how you must interpret Exodus 16. Rather John 6 claims: given Jesus' own exegesis both of the OT text AND OF HIMSELF, Christian proclamation cannot preach about Exodus manna without "adding" Christic bread.

7. Here we have a classic instance of the issue Melancthon faced (Apology of the Augsburg Confession, Article 4) when he asks: "What to do when your sermon text has no Christic promise in it at all?" His solution: "Simple, 'add' the promise to the promise-deficient text." But can you really get away with "adding" something to the Bible?! Well, Jesus did. He adds his own promise to Exodus 16 and he authorizes his disciples to do likewise with un-promising texts. Not to do so is not following the Master. John was following Jesus' lead when he wrote John 6.

8. But note well, John doesn't present Jesus bad-mouthing Moses here. Nor does he do so anywhere in the 4th Gospel. Instead he specifies what Moses can and cannot do for us, and then links it to the Christ-addendum. It's a brash claim, but not complicated. To wit, there is only one way for us to access God's grace and truth. That is the one "through whom" grace and truth came, Jesus the Christ. John claims that Jesus himself made such claims with his "I am" statement about the way, the truth, and the life. What chutzpah! What scandal! But that chutzpah, that scandal, is the core of Christian proclamation. Sermons that bypass it--on texts from the Old Testament or (as has been known to occur) even texts from the New--are engaged in some other enterprise.

Peace & Joy!

Ed