

Sermons Empty of Gospel : Part 3

Colleagues,

For this week's posting, ThTh 183, two additional responses to the topic. Peace & Joy!

Ed Schroeder

I. From Robert A. Kelly, Professor of Systematic Theology
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I found the last two editions of ThTh very interesting, in part because this term our homiletics prof and I have been conducting an experiment in which we co-teach the senior preaching class. These are the students who are just back from internship and who will graduate in the Spring. Since we are being asked to evaluate this experiment for our colleagues, I have been doing some thinking what it means for a person labeled "systematician" to be teaching something labeled "homiletics." I use the quote marks in part because I have always seen whatever teaching I have done – whether church history, ethics, or systematics – as contributing to the preaching of the students. That I have now become involved in a course specifically called "Congregational Preaching" just focuses the mandate, but doesn't change it.

We began the course with several weeks on properly distinguishing Law and Gospel. My homiletics colleague is institutionally a Methodist, but down deep he has a Lutheran theological soul which insists that students must learn to distinguish Law and Gospel as part of learning to preach. We talked about CFW Walther [Ed: = the primal "church father" of the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod, who's pastoral manual "The Proper Distinction between Law and Gospel," is a classic.] in class and we had the students turn in a short (1500 words) essay describing the heart of the Gospel. They all did really well. They actually remembered some of the stuff I tried to teach them about Law and Gospel in first-year dogmatics. We felt really good.

The next assignment was to write and preach a funeral sermon. I was not quite sure why my colleague thought that would be a good thing to do next, but I went along. Then it was revealed to me: Out of eight funeral sermons, 7 1/2 of the deceased were saved by their works! The funeral sermons were horrible – not in form, but in completely missing the Gospel and replacing it with moralism (my word for wishy-washy Law). And this was the same group of students who just two weeks before had written beautiful essays on the Gospel and who seemed to have a strong sense of the proper distinction. Hand them a corpse to bury and they forgot everything they knew from courses and reverted to popular piety.

What this says to me about the topic of ThTH 181 and 182, sermons which are void of the Gospel, is that the problem is not so much that the preachers of such sermons have been mis-taught (I really can't think of any ELCA or ELCIC seminary where students are taught to confuse Law and Gospel) but that in the crunch of ministry we so

often stop thinking and revert to popular piety: hard work and positive thinking. Sometimes we even avoid the hard work part but then convince ourselves that positive thinking is faith. We get discouraged at trying to overcome the deep well of moralism in most Christian communities and tell people what they [want] to hear – and in my experience, the figures which say that only 40% of our people understand the Gospel are about right.

What to do? I am fortunate in that the church which I attend has a preacher who spends a great deal of time making sure that her sermons distinguish Law and Gospel so that people can hear the Gospel clearly. Since September 11 (which also influences us here in Canada) she has been especially sharp – in part due to a decision she made to get back to the basic teachings of Jesus as a way of coming to grips with events.

As it happens, I am married to this particular preacher, so I have some sense of what she goes through every week in order to preach the Gospel clearly. I also know that she doesn't get a lot of feedback, except from the seminary profs in the congregation – and the fact that the copies of sermons which she prints out for the hard of hearing are now going out at a rate of about four times the number of hard of hearing in the congregation. Still, what she most often hears is that people wish that the church would be now what it was like in the 50s. And ever so often she is told that someone wishes she would be more forceful about what's wrong with "those people." I remember as a young preacher some years ago being told that the problem with my sermons was that I was not preaching enough Law. I went back and studied my sermons for the previous year and discovered that most of them were really quite legalistic – and someone wanted even

MORE Law! What is a poor preacher to do? Most of us simply aren't stubborn enough to keep on preaching the Gospel no matter what. Most of us want to be accepted, liked, even popular. So we convince ourselves that we are doing the best we can and tell people what they want to hear.

Who's at fault? I would say that fault can be equally divided: The church at large, because we do not have "clear and unambiguous preaching of the Gospel" as our first criterion for endorsement; the seminaries because we are not fanatical enough about properly distinguishing Law and Gospel; preachers because we fall into the temptation of mouthing popular piety; congregations because we do not really want to hear the Gospel and so do not encourage our preachers to preach it. Note that in all cases the problem is "we," not "they."

Anyway, keep up the good work. ThTh continues to be an important stimulus for theological thought.

Bob Kelly

II. From an ELCA pastor in Ohio

Thank you for the discussion of these past weeks on preaching without the gospel. This is something I have wrestled with in myself as an ELCA preacher and that I still wrestle with in my own preaching and in the study groups with my colleagues. It was about 4 years ago (I have been ordained for 8 years) that I believe I truly began to understand preaching the necessity of Christ. I was a good student in Seminary, my peers commented on the power of my preaching, and I have taken seriously my call to ministry since I was about 14 years old. In other words, I've worked on my preaching. I had good preachers

that taught me, but the framework for preaching the gospel didn't connect in my work in any kind of focused way. It wasn't until I started working with Sabbathology [Ed: = the lectionary text studies on the Crossings listserve] (upon the recommendation of my bishop) that I truly started preaching God's saving work through Christ.

Reflecting upon the comments of those responding to Jerry Burce's book, I find it really interesting that none of those listed suggested we call upon the power of God to reform God's preachers. The comments seemed all focused upon what we can do in our churches, congregations and synods, but none of the writers suggested that, through prayer, we ask God to shape the preaching of the Gospel. Is this an assumption that we make that God will automatically shape the Gospel, or is the lack of calling for prayer another symptom of our lack of understanding of the necessity of Christ not only in our preaching, but in our everyday lives?

Thank you for the opportunity to participate in this dialog. I pray that God will continue to open all of us to the power of the cross, & we may be blessed with the faithful preaching of the good news.