

Six Months After Sept. 11

Colleagues,

The missing “R” word, “repentance,” promoted in the first ThTh posting after Sept. 11, 2001—exactly 26 weeks ago—is still significant by its absence from secular and churchly language in the USA. When I mentioned that a few weeks ago commenting on President Bush’s State of the Union message, the axis-of-evil speech, I kicked the tripwire for one of you.”Dear Ed, You are out of your theological mind. I can’t bear to read what you write any longer. Please remove me from your mailing list. Feel free to tell anyone that I totally disassociate myself from you and what you teach and preach – a form of Marcionite theology, which is but a smokescreen for cultural left politics. Ugh.” This unhappy camper is a Seminex grad, once a teaching assistant in our systematic theology department.

What apparently pushed this erstwhile co-confessor over the edge were these words in that posting: “Some still ask: what’s heretical in the religion of America? Answer: Check the president’s text again for the following: our Manichean view of evil [world divided between those evil people and us righteous ones], our Pharisee heresy [God, I thank thee that I am not like other people], . . . and the all-pervasive blindness to God our critic, God the terror-inducer whom Jesus urges us to fear [and NOT the Osama ben Ladins of our life] (Luke 12:4f.).”

Comes now the New York Times (Feb. 24) and says (almost) the same thing. An Op Ed item there pinpointed the “Manichaen (sic!) mentality” now enveloping our national psyche, which makes it impossible to distinguish between being “righteous and being self-righteous.” Is that Christian theology, or what? And in the NYT! Or Daniel Schorr on National Public Radio last week

speaking of the “Armageddon mindset” taking root in Washington. Is that theological analysis or what?

After six months Osama is still at large, so is the anthrax-killer, taunting the allegedly most powerful (ever) nation on earth. Does Psalm 2 fit? “He who sits in the heavens laughs [as the nations conspire]; the LORD has them in derision.” That’s not good news. Yet could it be true?

Shortly after Easter I’ve been asked by some folks from the United Church of Christ here in New England to discuss this theme with them. Attached below you’ll see how my outline is shaping up “after six months.”

Peace & Joy!

Ed Schroeder

Theme: PREACHING IN THIS STRANGE, NEW TIME

[Their first title was “Preaching in a Time of Terror,” which I still prefer as you’ll see below.]

Intro:

It is “Apocalypse Now” and we’re missing it. Francis Coppola’s movie by that name a decade or so ago was showing us an “apocalypse now” not just in Vietnam, but “back home” in the USA already then—and we continue to miss it.

I. 9 – 11 was a big event of Apoc. Now in the USA. Literally apo-calypse, God pulling off the veil. And we continue to miss it. Examples abound. Au contraire Lincoln’s call for repentance in the Apocalypse Now of the Civil War. He

didn't miss it.

II. What's the "it" that we continue to miss?

- A. "Strange, new time" [Why did your program committee fudge away from the original title, "time of terror," as your theme? Terrorism is the grim new word in everyday life.]
- B. No matter. "Strange and terror" are theological synonyms when doing God-talk. God's "opus ALIENum" [Latin for "strange work" (Is. 28:21)] and the "megan phobon" [Greek for "sore afraid" – call it "terror" – of Luke 2] are the same thing.
- C. The "it" is God the critic ["kritees" in Greek = judge] calling us to account. God's critical work is indeed "alien" to God's "special" work of saving sinners, but the terror it induces is nonetheless real—unless the sinners are too blind to see it.

III. Preaching Repentance when it's Apocalypse Now

- A. Grounding: Jesus' own preaching paradigm in Mark 1:15. There are four verbs in that passage: two indicative (God's kairos is now; the King's at the door), two imperative (repent; trust the good news). How these 4 verbs function in Mark.
- B. Naming and Facing THE terrorist. Luke 12:4f.
- C. Coping with God the Terrorist. Two examples.
 - Augustine 410 – 'Fessing up to God's critique of every empire.
 - Luther 1529 – Disarming the terrorist by repentance.

IV. Preaching the Good News when it's Apocalypse Now.

- A. The grounds for proclaiming: "Fear not, only believe" [i.e., trust the Good News].
- B. Preaching that Good News in the face of terror, God's opus alienum: Necessitating Christ vis-a-vis terror. Exploiting Christ's "sweet swap" when it's

apocalypse now.

V. What may we expect from such repentance-and-good-news preaching?

- A. The “thin tradition” of the theology of the cross in the church’s history.
- B. Repentance preaching as “a voice crying in the wilderness.”
- C. Winning by losing (Mark 8:35).
- D. Bonhoeffer’s commentary on Jesus’ words: “Come follow me . . .”