

The Conflict on Mission Theology in the ELCA

Colleagues, Last week's posting, my proposal for a Lutheran mission theology, drew only two responses from you listserve receivers. Apparently my linking Luther's law/promise hermeneutic to missiology came as no surprise—maybe even “ho-hum”—to you long-time and long-suffering ThTh receivers. But that wasn't the case when I presented it live to the original audience in September. There it drew fire.

In last week's ThTh 176 I told you the context: a missiology conference in Chicago, called by Richard Bliese. In attendance were ELCA mission and evangelism execs along with ELCA theology professors—19 of us. Assignment: each of us to bring to the gathering a one-pager of what we thought Lutheran missiology was, so we might shop-talk Lutheran mission theology and evangelism strategy. Bliese asked me to expand mine (“up to 4 pages”) as the first item on the agenda. That was the text posted last week as ThTh 176.

The first response at the conference came from a seminary president: “Very interesting. Yes, very very interesting.” After that faint praise came not-so-faint damns—three in a row—from ELCA honchos of the Division for Global Mission [DGM]. For them it was not interesting at all, but vexing. As I reconstruct their vexations from my scribbled notes, they went something like this:

- A. You parse God's work of law and God's work of gospel under the rubrics of “care (=law) and redemption (=gospel).” To talk about “care” under the rubric of God's law and “redemption” under gospel is not right. “Care” belongs under gospel.

- B. Redemption as you, Ed, present it is an “individualized act, not world-wide.” The real nemeses in the world are sin/death/the devil. Your individualized redemption doesn’t get to these evil powers in the world. The Gospel of redemption as you present it doesn’t transform the world.
- C. Your presentation centers on “getting me saved,” and not—as mission should—on transforming all creation. God’s mission in the world is to transform creation for the sake of life.
- D. You stay too narrowly in the second article of the creed. God the creator of life is the central metaphor for mission. Life is God’s highest value.

I responded to these criticisms in the give-and-take that followed, but I didn’t do well. I was engaging in ad hocery—claim vs. counter-claim. I couldn’t put my finger on what the central issue was.

One of the readings sent to us prior to the conference was GLOBAL MISSION IN THE 21ST CENTURY [GM21], the “Vision Statement” of the DGM. I had prepared my presentation before I read GM21 since I wanted to get my thoughts about it down on paper before I started arguing with it. I knew from past exposure that law-promise theology was not a high priority in the DGM, and sure enough when I did then read GM21 I scribbled the margins full as I went through its 40 pages. But here too my marginal scribbles (and screams) were ad hoc pot shots.

1. Clarity didn’t come until the first session of the second day of the conference. One of the DGM execs walked us through GM21, and one of his colleagues later in the day finally put THE ISSUE into words: “The reign of God is God’s mission to the world. It is the transformation of creation for the sake of life. [For us Lutherans the

question is:] how do we exploit this understanding without getting bogged down in sorting out the Two Kingdoms notion.”

2. For me that was an Aha! The penny dropped. The ice broke. I had been arguing for the exact opposite thesis: “Concerning God’s Reign in the world—how do we exploit this understanding without getting bogged down BY NOT sorting out the Two Kingdoms notion.” That’s law and promise, God’s left hand and God’s right hand, care and redemption. To avoid “sorting them out” is catastrophe. But that Aha! didn’t come until we were about to adjourn, so I rewrote my own one-pager and sent it to Bliese. After these two paragraphs above, it went as follows:
3. “Bogged down” is a good metaphor. Which option—to sort out, or not to sort out, the Two Kingdom notion—bogs us down in mission as we try to see and hear both what the Bible says, and what’s going on in God’s world? That is THE question.
4. My 4-page opening presentation (law/promise—and its derivative, God’s left-and-right-hand regimes) was offered as a hermeneutical proposal (NOT a doctrinal one), a proposed set of lenses for reading the Bible and the world for mission. It is the Reformers replacement for the nature/grace hermeneutic of scholastic theology. And the word “distinction” between law and gospel is key. “Distinction” is not separation, but distinguishing in order to reconnect things rightly. The law/promise distinction “saves” the Biblical data and the world’s data, said the reformers. In the hermeneutics of scholasticism, they said: Both God’s law, and God’s promise, got lost. So does the work of God’s left hand and God’s right hand.
5. Hermeneutics and soteriology go together. During the “Wars of Missouri” in the past century—it really was a

hermeneutical war—we learned how true the axiom is: “Biblical hermeneutics is at no point separable from Biblical soteriology” (R. Bertram). Applied to the “vision” document of the DGM: GM21’s calls us to an alternate hermeneutics. That also has soteriological consequences. Said bluntly: Both God’s law & God’s promise (i.e., the gospel) suffer loss in GM21.

6. GM21 “opts for LIFE as the central metaphor ” for salvation. It’s a “paradigm shift,” we heard. Indeed. One shift is that its soteriology comes out “law-shy.” God, our critic, pretty well disappears when GM21 articulates its Trinitarian salvation: God “transforming creation for the sake of life.” Question: Does salvation—under any Biblical metaphor—ever occur if God, the world’s critic, is ignored? Not only St Paul, but also St John and the synoptics say No.
7. Parallel shift (on the promise side) is that the Reformation drumbeat for “necessitating Christ” suffers. “Theology of the cross” in GM21 designates the shape (humble, vulnerable, suffering) of God’s work, but not the content. Nowhere does GM21 offer Christ’s cross as a “new thing” that “God was [doing] in Christ,” namely, “reconciling the world to himself,” and doing so in clear contrast to God’s “normal” way of dealing with us, viz., “counting our trespasses against us.”
8. GM21’s crispest statement about the cross comes on p.8. “Jesus’ ministry is a radical struggle for life. This puts him in continual conflict with those who would limit and destroy life. Jesus ultimately expresses God’s vulnerable love for all humanity in his willingness to die in this struggle. Finally, he is put to an unjust, humiliating and yet redemptive death on a cross.” [The “redemptive” aspect of the cross surfaces at Easter.] “The resurrection of Jesus is God’s re-affirmation of life and a sign of hope

in a world marked by sin and death. It declares that God's salvation, the restoration of life for all people and all creation, is rooted in God's compassionate and vulnerable love embodied in Jesus' ministry and death."

9. "Expresses" and "reaffirmation" are significant terms in the paragraph above. Question: If Jesus had never shown up, would God's project "to transform creation for the sake of life," have gotten derailed? In GM21's soteriology, it seems to me, the answer is: not necessarily. Christ "expresses" God's vulnerable love, and Easter "reaffirms" it, but there is no "necessitating Christ" for that love to be there at all, and for sinners to have access to it. Same question, different angle: apart from the cross, does God, or doesn't God, "count trespasses?" If God does, then the cross is a cosmic shift in God's dealing with sinners, not simply an expression of what God has always been doing.
10. GM21 openly calls us to move beyond the hermeneutics, the paradigm, of 16th century Lutheranism. Why? It had defects then, we learn, and even some of its good aspects are not relevant today. To move us forward, GM21 surprisingly proposes an even more ancient paradigm, the hermeneutics of medieval scholasticism, reading the Word and the world under the rubrics of Nature and Grace. In GM21 "nature" is "creation" still tragically deficient of "life in its fullness," and "grace" is God—and God's people wherever they may be—"transforming creation for the sake of life." That's the scholastic axiom: God's grace perfects nature, does not diminish it. The Lutheran Reformers found that medieval paradigm defective, so defective that they replaced it with another one, which they claimed was the hermeneutic the Bible itself commended—law and promise. Yet GM21 opts for the scholastic one and commends it Lutherans today. Why?

11. Yogi Berra could say: "When you come to a fork in the road, take it." On this issue his advice won't work. We won't get to the same place either way. It's one or the other. Is this theological nit-picking? No. It's all about mission—God's salvation of the world and our participation in it.

Peace & Joy!
Ed Schroeder