

Three Distinctions to Make when Reading the Bible

Colleagues,

I began the last post (#860, September 10) by announcing a formal change in Thursday Theology's publication schedule, from weekly to bi-weekly. I start today by adding a clarification about the purpose for this exercise. It's long overdue. In fact I can't recall that anyone has ever spelled it out in all the seventeen years that Thursday Theology has been occupying its wee cranny of cyberspace. Ed Schroeder said nothing explicit about it when he penned the first-ever post in May, 1998. Nor did Robin Morgan, his collaborator at the time, when she wrote the second one a week later. After that came a weekly stream of essays and offerings, unbroken for at least thirteen years, almost all of them either written or edited by Ed, with Marie Schroeder serving behind the scenes as the top-flight copy-editor who kept grammatical, typographical, and stylistic blunders to a minimum. Most all of us who followed through all those years did so because Ed was Ed—sharp, provocative, and almost always able to teach us something we hadn't known before, especially in matters pertaining to how and why one confesses the faith as Lutherans get to do. Now and then we argued with him. It may have seemed at times along the way that he was simply venting. Few of us, if any at all, paused to ask what Ed was up to. That includes the little band of three—now down to one—who took up the mantle at the end of 2011, when Ed insisted he was done. Sure, we surmised some things about goal and purpose, and spelled them out when we introduced ourselves in [ThTheol 701](#). But looking back, our terms were too vague, and in some ways too ambitious for the talents we possessed.

In any case, we missed the point, that one unifying thread that tied Ed's body of work together, and frankly serves as the sole sufficient reason for our own present efforts. It came to me suddenly this week as an accidental gift from—who else?—Ed. Why Thursday Theology? To keep plugging away, with an unwavering and unrelenting focus, at the only question that finally matters, whether in theology or life: what is Jesus, crucified and risen, *for*? Or in Phillip Melanchthon's better phrasing, how do we make proper and thorough use of "the merits and benefits of Christ" (Apology IV). Is there anywhere else a current publication, be it online or papered, that zeroes in on this question as its sole *raison d'être*? I'm guessing not. I'll rejoice if I'm wrong.

In any case it occurs to me that it's time to add a defining tagline to every post: *De usus Christi*, for those of you who went to seminaries and got addicted to bandying bits of Latin about; or for those of you whose feet are planted more firmly on earth, "About putting Christ to use." I know, to some that will sound overweening and obnoxious (dare I say "Trumpish"?), as in "Who are you, wretched worm, to be *using* Christ?" Not so the Lord himself, who insists on his identity as Servant-In-Chief; and after that he shows his wounds to cowering worms and orders them unmistakably, with the authorizing breath of his Spirit, not to let those wounds go to waste (see John 20:19ff).

And there you have it: what Thursday Theology is for, and why, on this end, we'll do our best to keep cobbling it together and daring to send it to you in the hope that you'll read it. More on this, I trust, in the near future.

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Careful readers will see this matter of "using Christ" lurking in the background of today's offering. It comes from Pastor Jochen Teuffel of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Bavaria,

via Ed and Marie Schroeder, who translated it from German. Pr. Teuffel did a stint of teaching many years ago at a Lutheran seminary in Hong Kong, the one (currently of three) that relates to the Lutheran World Federation. That's where he and Ed crossed paths. The topic here is the Bible, and how to read it; and, pointedly, why reading it through the interpretive lenses that so-called "evangelical" Christianity insists on as a matter of dogma makes a hash of what's there. Also lurking in the background is the issue that seems to have prompted the essay, i.e. how the Bible gets used, in Germany as well as in America, when the talk turns to same-sex relationships. To appreciate that, be sure to click on the links you encounter as you read.

I should mention at the outset that Pr. Teuffel writes with a confessional bite. Some of you, shaped by current ELCA culture, may find this unsettling. Read through it anyway so you don't miss the heart and essence of the essay, those three important distinctions that serve, in all our encounters with the Bible, to keep Christ and his benefits in play.

Peace and Joy,
Jerry Burce

"The Bible says . . .": Why it is sometimes dangerous to equate "Word of God" with "Bible." **by Jochen Teuffel**

If someone is looking for evidence of militant Christian intolerance, one of the worst examples can be found in an early Protestant confessional document, the Reformed Church's Heidelberg Catechism of 1563. There we read Question #100: **"Is the blaspheming of God's Name by swearing and cursing such a grievous sin that God is angry also with those who do not**

prevent and forbid it as much as they can?" (1)

The catechism's answer, so radical that it horrifies us today, says: "Certainly, for no sin is greater or provokes God's wrath more than the blaspheming of His Name. That is why He commanded it to be punished with death."(2)

To support this death penalty for blasphemy the Heidelberg Catechism cites Leviticus 24:15-16: "Speak to the people of Israel, saying: Anyone who curses God shall bear the sin. One who blasphemes the name of the LORD shall be put to death; the whole congregation shall stone the blasphemer. Aliens as well as citizens, when they blaspheme the name, shall be put to death." (3)

How then should an "evangelical" Christian today object to a biblically-grounded death-commandment for blasphemy, when the Lausanne Covenant of 1974 says the following under the title "The Authority and Power of the Bible":

"We affirm the divine inspiration, truthfulness and authority of both Old and New Testament Scriptures in their entirety as the only written word of God, without error in all that it affirms, and the only infallible rule of faith and practice."(4)

For a thoughtful "Bible-believer" this short-circuit conclusion seems close at hand:

1. The Bible as the error-less Word of God is for Christians the only infallible rule of faith and practice.
2. The Bible says: Kill blasphemers.
3. Therefore Christians in obedience to God's Word are to kill blasphemers.

"But that can't be true!" every conscientious Christian would say. But how can we find solid grounds to counter that false conclusion? What can fulfill that task is the Book of Concord,

the confessional documents articulating the commitment of the Lutheran Church, beginning with the Augsburg Confession of 1530. In the introduction to the Epitome of the Formula of Concord, the final document in the Book of Concord, we read: "We believe, teach, and confess that the sole rule and standard according to which all dogmas together with [all] teachers should be estimated and judged are the prophetic and apostolic Scriptures of the Old and of the New Testament alone, as it is written, Ps. 119:105: 'Thy Word is a lamp unto my feet and a light unto my path.' And St. Paul: 'Though an angel from heaven preach any other gospel unto you, let him be accursed,' Gal. 1:8."(5)

In the Book of Concord it is the canonical authority for the Holy Scriptures that is confessed, without thereby making any formal equation between Holy Scriptures and the Word of God. What is "canonical" authority? The key term in the Epitome is "standard" [*norma* in Latin, *Richtschnur* in German, possibly "yardstick" in English]. So the standard is not individual quotable Bible passages, but the canon, the Bible as a whole, which needs to be read "self-interpretively," in keeping with Martin Luther's dictum: "The Holy Scriptures interpret themselves" (his Latin: *sacra scriptura sui ipsius interpres*)."(6)

That the Holy Scriptures are not 100% the Word of God has to be evident to any Bible-reader, thanks to the clarity of the scriptures themselves. We read there not only words from God but also what God's word has achieved and brought about with humans; how humans respond to that; how they now and again contradict the Lord, dispute with him; how people, apparently godly people, say all sorts of things, and do not get God's approval (Job 42:7-9). Or again how even the devil takes the divine word into his own mouth to tempt Jesus in the wilderness (Matt. 4:5ff). All that is simply distorted if the entire Bible with no exception is identified as "God's Word."

There were historical grounds in Protestant confessional documents for equating Bible and Word of God. One was to counter the Catholicism arising after the Council of Trent in the 16th century. Another was to say “no” to modern historical-critical Biblical scholarship. As God’s authentic word the Bible in its entirety would appear to be elevated beyond historical criticism or churchly machinations. Understandable as this concern is, potential misunderstandings lurk in the background. Namely, making Bible and Word of God synonyms confuses divine inspiration with divine authorization. Not every specific word in the Bible comes divinely authorized. That is evident right away in a sentence embedded in the opening verse of Psalm 14: “There is no God”—definitely not a statement coming with divine authority, but the language of a fool’s heart, as the verse identifies it.

When the divine inspiration of the Holy Scriptures is taught, that means first of all that the wording of the “prophetic and apostolic Scriptures of the Old and of the New Testament” have not been transmitted to us thanks to human religious ingenuity, but for God’s own purposes. So we confess with [Balthasar Mentzeri](#) (1565-1627): “All that is needful for saving knowledge of God and for justifying faith and for leading a godly life, all that stands full and complete in the Holy Scriptures. Therefore they are claimed to be ‘the sole rule and standard’ [*Regel und Richtschnur*] of saving truth.” (7) The conviction that the canon is divinely inspired arises from the internal witness of the Holy Spirit when the Holy Scriptures are being read and in that reading God’s life-giving saving message is believed.

But for that very purpose distinctions within the scriptures are called for—eventually three distinctions.

The first distinction has already been mentioned. It refers to

the “**status**” of a Biblical text and poses the question: Is this particular Biblical word explicitly predicated to the triune God or does it signal that it comes from a human mouth? If it is the second, then a canonical interpretation [= according to the saving message permeating the entire Bible] is called for to distinguish whether this human-word conforms with God’s purposes and therefore counts as testimony for God’s own word, or has it gone astray on its own as a human word, possibly even a word that contradicts God’s own word.

The second distinction needed for God’s word as well as human testimony to God’s own word is this: Who is the **addressee** of this particular word? To whom is this word of God spoken? Is it a single individual (to Abraham in Genesis 22), the entire human race, the people of Israel, or else the church of Jesus Christ?

Martin Luther speaks directly to this in his sermon (August 27, 1525): “How Christians Should Regard Moses.”

One must deal cleanly with the Scriptures. From the very beginning the word has come to us in various ways. It is not enough simply to look and see whether this is God’s word, whether God has said it; rather we must look and see to whom it has been spoken, whether it fits us. That makes all the difference between night and day. God said to David, “Out of you shall come the king,” etc. [II Sam, 7:13]. But this does not pertain to me, nor has it been spoken to me. He can indeed speak to me if he chooses to do so. You must keep your eye on the word that applies to you, that is spoken to you, and not on the word that is spoken to someone else. The word in Scripture is of two kinds: the first does not pertain or apply to me, the other kind does. And upon that word which does pertain to me I can boldly trust and rely, as upon a strong rock. But if it does not pertain to me, then I should do nothing. The false prophets pitch in and say, “Dear people, this is the word of

God," That is true; we cannot deny it. But we are not the people to whom God is speaking. God has not called us to do this or that which he has commanded them to do. (8)

For good reasons Martin Luther, in his explanation of the third commandment in the Large Catechism, has said this about the Sabbath Commandment: "This commandment does not concern us Christians. It is an entirely external matter, like the other ordinances of the Old Testament connected with particular customs, persons, times and places, from all of which we are now set free through Christ." (9)

For Christian living under the Gospel, according to Luther, the Mosaic law is abrogated. It pertains only to the people of Israel. The only place where it connects with Christians is where the Mosaic law replicates the natural law of morality, for example in the Decalogue. There it does speak to Christians. "Thus I keep the commandments which Moses has given, not because Moses gave the commandment, but because they have been implanted in me by nature, and Moses agrees exactly with the law of nature, etc. But the other commandments of Moses, which are not implanted in all people by nature, the Gentiles do not hold. Nor do these pertain to the Gentiles." (10)

So even though a Biblical word has the "status" of Word of God, that does not yet render it valid for Christians until the addressee-question has been answered. Once more Luther: "Dear people, God spoke also to Adam; but that does not make me Adam. God commanded Abraham to put his son to death [Gen. 22:2]; but that does not make me Abraham and obligate me to put my son to death. God spoke also with David. It is all God's word. That is true. But let God's word be what it may, I must pay attention and know to whom God's word is addressed. But that is still a long way from making you the people with whom God has spoken."

(11)

The third fundamental distinction for Biblical Word of God is the “**mode**” of God’s speaking: is it law or gospel? Are we being addressed in our own sinfulness with a divine demand, impossible for us to fulfill, or are we receiving an unconditional saving promise in Jesus Christ calling us to trust him? Classic for this distinction is Luther’s tract “On Christian Freedom” of 1520:

How it can be the fact that faith alone justifies, and affords without works so great a treasure of good things, when so many laws, commandments, works, ceremonies, and directives are prescribed to us in the Scriptures? I answer, Before all things bear in mind what I have said: that faith alone without works justifies, sets free, and saves, as I shall show more clearly below. Meanwhile it is to be noted that the whole Scripture of God is divided into two parts: the commandments or the law of God and the promises or pledges of God. The commandments teach and spell out for us all sorts of good works, but that doesn’t make them happen. For they show us what we ought to do, but they give no help. They do not give us the power to do it. They were ordained, however, for the purpose of showing man to himself, that through them he may learn his own inability for good and may despair of his own strength. . . . he is constrained to despair of himself and to seek elsewhere and through another the help which he cannot find in himself. . . .

Now when a man has through the commandments been taught to discover his own incapability, and become anxious by what means he may satisfy the law—for the law must be satisfied . . . otherwise he must be hopelessly condemned—then, being truly humbled and brought to nothing in his own eyes, he finds in himself no resource for his own justification.

Then comes in that other part of Scripture, the promises and pledges of God, which declare the glory of God, and say, "If you wish to fulfill the law, and, as the law requires, get rid of evil desires and sin, look up! Believe in Christ, in whom I promise you grace, righteousness, peace, and freedom. When you believe, you have them. When you don't, you don't. For what is impossible for you by all the works of the law, which are many and yet of no benefit, that will be easy and simple through faith. For I have made everything to depend on faith, so that whosoever has it has all things, and he who has it not has nothing." Thus the promises of God give that which the commandments require, and fulfill what the law calls for, so that all is of God alone, both the commandments and their fulfillment. He alone commands; He alone also fulfills. (12)

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With these inner-biblical distinctions of "status" (God's word or human word), "addressee" (individual person, humanity, people of Israel or church of Jesus Christ) and "mode" (law or gospel) we can now address that question #100 in the Heidelberg Catechism: "Is cursing and swearing by God's name such a severe sin, that God is also angry with those who do nothing to prevent it?"

Indeed holding God's name "holy" is part and parcel of the Christian faith, for we pray in the "Our Father" in the very first petition "Hallowed be thy name." And the second commandment of the Decalogue is focused there too: "You shall not misuse the name of the LORD your God, for the LORD will not hold anyone guiltless who misuses his name." (Exodus 20:7).

And yet the Heidelberg Catechism with its kill-command for blasphemers contradicts the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Jesus finally took the blasphemy charge upon himself on the cross, as Saint Paul testifies: "Christ has redeemed us from the curse of

the law by becoming a curse for us; for it is written 'Cursed is every one who hangs on a tree.'" (Galatians 3:13).

Where the trinitarian God has taken upon himself the blasphemy of the divine name (and the name "Jesus" is the Greek-rendering of the Hebrew "Jeshuah," which means "The LORD is salvation.") there the death penalty has been repealed. The wrath of the cross-blasphemed deity presents no earthly danger. Consequently there are no judicial grounds for governmental action against blasphemy, such as Emperor Justinian did in 538 A.D. with his "[Novel 77](#)" in the (now "Christian") Roman Empire. He ordered the death penalty for blasphemers "so that from the contemptuous action of such persons the city and state not suffer damage from their sinful behavior."(13)

Even if the death penalty is divinely prescribed throughout the book of Leviticus, Christians are exempt from it. This mandate applies exclusively to the people of Israel, people of the Mosaic covenant, not to Christians. Whoever calls for Christians to adopt a death penalty for blasphemy, or simply approves of that policy, abrogates Christ's substitutionary death-under-the-curse and puts himself in opposition to the gospel.

When you equate Word of God and the Bible, you have no resource for countering the false conclusion, supposedly "being faithful to the Bible," that blasphemers be put to death. When no distinctions are made in discussions about God's Word in the Bible, individual texts go off on their own, get isolated and exempted from canonical interpretation.

People are tempted to appropriate those Bible passages that agree with their own convictions. Whatever a person believes he already possesses, he no longer needs to have spoken to him. Therefore the formula "The Bible says . . ." soon becomes the gateway for one's own Un-faith. The devil too knows how to use

that formula.

The distinctions—status, addressee, mode—when dealing with Biblical texts do not do violence to the canon. Rather they serve the authority of the Holy Scriptures. They need not be applied slavishly, mechanically, but prove themselves in the context of ongoing reading of the Scriptures. Throughout our entire lifetime, we never come to the end of our reading the Holy Scriptures. In order to retain the Word of God that we have read, retain it in faith, we need to read on coherently. This is the very invitation of Martin Buber, Jewish philosopher of religions:

“The Bible seeks to be read as One Book, so that no one of its parts remains self-contained; rather every part is held open to every other. The Bible seeks to be present as One Book for its readers so intensely that in reading or reciting an important passage they recall all the passages connected to it, and in particular those connected to it by linguistic identity, resemblance, or affinity; so intensely that all these passages illuminate and explain one another, that they cohere into a unity of meaning.” (Martin Buber and Franz Rosenzweig, *Scripture and Translation*, trans. L. Rosenwald with E. Fox (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 91.)

When the Holy Scriptures are read interconnectedly, the words are in a sense “relativized,” but not in terms of human fantasy. Rather they are “relativized” into relationship with Jesus Christ, of whom we read in the opening verses of the Letter to the Hebrews:

“Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds. He is the reflection of God’s glory and the

exact imprint of God's very being, and he sustains all things by his powerful word. When he had made purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high, having become as much superior to angels as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs." (Hebrews 1:1-4)

[Author's footnotes are all from German-language sources, and are available upon request. For English-language readers many of the sources are readily available on the Internet under their respective titles. E.g., Lausanne Covenant. Book of Concord, Epitome. Luther: Large Catechism, On Christian Freedom, How Christians Should Regard Moses.]