

Law or Gospel? A Follow-up to the Post of June 11

Co-Missioners,

Our editor shares some clarification on the item we sent you last week about under-told Gospel and its present consequences.

Peace and Joy,

The Crossings Community

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A treasured colleague sent me an unhappy note about [last week's post](#). I wish I could share it. One paragraph in particular merits very wide reading. It's a splendid reflection on the effects the Gospel has on the quiet, everyday lives of the people we get to serve as pastors. It would push us all to honor the saints as the saints ought to be honored.

But as ever, *mea culpa*. I didn't pause in the week's rush to ask for permission to share it. For the flavor of what you're missing I point you instead to "[Be It Ever So Humdrum](#)," a short piece by Robert W. Bertram from 1965. Here too the emphasis is on the little shoots of Easter reality that can appear in a Christ-trusting life for others to spot and be glad for. This is my way of putting it, not Bob's.

The brunt of the colleague's unhappiness is that I had berated my congregation for falling short of the Easter standard—or is it the zeitgeist standard?—in matters of race and immigration. I

had blamed them unfairly for their contribution to our country's mess. I had failed to love them as a pastor must and to honor the countless signs of faith in Christ that they do manifest. That, in any case, is what the colleague heard.

Did others hear this too? That's a dreadful thought; so dreadful that, with permission or no, I share my reply to this colleague. May they clarify and underscore what I aimed to say last week.

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"[Dear _____:]

"I think you missed my crucial point, which says much more about the poverty of my writing than of your reading.

"You heard me reprimanding saints. I was not—or rather, I wasn't intending to. I meant instead to reprimand the preachers who underfeed the saints. And as far as I'm concerned, the worst culprits here are the ones who hector them to suck it up and do what they're supposed to do. See the roster of our own church body, packed to the gills with people who are pretty sure that Jesus is beside the point except as an example of how to bring in the kingdom or do peace-and-justice or whatever the mantra of the day happens to be.

"This is not Gospel. It's law, and shabby law at that, grounded less in the Word of God than in the latest effusions of the secular day with its ever-morphing definitions of righteousness and its scathing denunciations of the "sinners" who don't see it their way—sinners in quotation marks, because they're far too "woke" to use that word.

“As you and I both know, you cannot browbeat people into being good. What we can do—what we must do—is effuse about the God who declares us good and is busy making



us good. He justifies and sanctifies, to use the standard language. Emphasis on ‘He.’ Emphasis also on the present tense. ‘It is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.’ And yes, of course I see as you do how this doing of God is unfolding in all manner of attitudes and behaviors that one finds in the dear saints we get to care for. My beef is that we as preachers and pastors don’t go nearly far enough in pitching the real-time marvel of God’s in Christ and inviting folks to believe it, and through believing, to see it. Emphasis in this last sentence on inviting, not hectoring or whining. The other verb is ‘declaring,’ as in 1 Peter 2:9, our second lesson of a few Sundays ago.

“How many preachers declare with Paul that ‘all things are yours and you are Christ’s and Christ is God’s’ and use that as the basis for urging people to quit crabbing at each other? To believe the Gospel is to do as you believe—faith and works are like fire and heat, not one without the other, as the Formula of Concord quotes Luther as having said. Paul is not the least bashful about naming both sides of that coin. a) You have been

bought with a price. b) Therefore glorify God with your body. Etc.

“So suppose white American preachers had been unabashed about declaring the mighty deeds of Him who has called our baptized black neighbors into the same glorious light that the baptized white folks are standing in? Suppose we had invited exultation in their status with us as the children of God? Suppose the preachers of the last three centuries had been as insistent about the black/white thing as the New Testament is about the Jew/Gentile thing and had talked about it in the same way, as a wondrous work of God unfolding before our eyes? Would our country look remarkably different today? I’m guessing yes. ‘My word does not return to me void, but accomplishes what I send it do.’ But when the word—and here the Gospel word in particular—isn’t being put out there by the folks whose job it is to speak it, then how does get anything done?

“I indict myself here. I leave it to you to assess your own proclamation. For my part, I’ve done far too much of announcing forgiveness without pushing beyond to exult in its consequences for the lives we live today as well as the one that awaits in the age to come.”

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Final word for this week: *Kyrie eleison*. Come, Holy Spirit, and make us new!

Jerome Burce

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Thursday Theology: that the benefits of Christ be put to use
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