

Trusting the Promise: Abrahamic Faith Then and Now

Colleagues:

Every now and then an email comes in asking for a “Gutachten.” That’s not the term they use, but that is what’s being asked for. Gutachten is an old German term for a piece of advice, an opinion, a “What are your thoughts . . .” on something that’s dicey or controversial, or just a sticky-wicket. Here are a couple of recent ones. Peace and Joy!

Ed Schroeder

Request #1. *Don’t remember who asked this: “The 3 Abrahamic faiths—Judaism, Christianity, Islam. Shouldn’t we Christians be emphasizing what our faiths have in common (all coming from Abraham), not what makes us different from each other? Especially now with Israel and Islam daily on the front page? Aren’t all three faiths really united in the care-and-redemption project God has given to the children of Abraham?”*

Gutachten #1

Basic is the point that “care and redemption” are not synonyms. So my pitch in Jewish-Christian conversation (also conversation with Muslims) is that we might quite easily (well, sometimes more easily than others) join hands—and heads and hearts—on the “care” agenda, but we go quite different ways on the “redemption” one.

E.g., Vis-a-vis Judaism: Obedience to the Torah and trusting

the promise are not the same ball of wax. My hunch is that somewhere in the event of the Damascus-road (or in his yrs in the desert thereafter), this became the "Aha!" for super-Jew Saul of Tarsus. Which "Aha!" then gets spread out throughout his NT epistles.

Somewhere St. John got the same "Aha!" to prompt his own linch-pin line in the prologue 1:17. Which then gets played out in the rest of his Jesus-narrative. Especially in chapter 8:39-59 where a hefty debate arises about who really is, and who really isn't, offspring of Abraham. Jesus makes the feisty claim that the yardstick for determining Abrahamic paternity is your response to Jesus. And then gets very nasty as he uses the yardstick: "If you were Abraham's children, you would be doing what Abraham did, but now you are trying to kill me, a man who has told you the truth that I hear from God. This is not what Abraham did. You are indeed doing what YOUR father does . . . your father, the devil."

If Jesus' verdict (according to John) about this faith claimed as "Abrahamic" in his day—where they even had "begat...begat" documentation to support it—is negative, what then is the analogue for Islam? Islam too traces its paternity (and its theology) back to Abraham via his son Ishmael. That does provide parallels to Judaism's Isaac-connection to Abraham. But it says nothing yet about analogues in either Judaism or Islam to Abraham's faith, his trusting God's promise. That was the point of contention in John 8. "Abrahamic" faith of some sort, but not the faith of Abraham himself, as Jesus portrays it. Is the same true of Islam? I think so.

In St. Paul's brilliant Aha! about "two covenants" in the OT (Galatians 4)—one the Abrahamic promise, one the Mount Sinai law—he traces out the differences. Children of promise vs.

children of slavery. And then Paul rubs it in as harshly as Jesus does in John 8. But he does it via MATERNITY, not PATERNITY. "Present day Jerusalem," he says, is NOT on the Sarah-side for Abrahamic connection, but [aargh!] on the Hagar-side. Ouch! [Wonder how he might use the Sarah/Hagar metaphor today when "Hagar-side" = Islam own claim!] And Hagar in his metaphors runs a straight line to Sinai. Hagar-law-Ishmael = slavery. Sarah-promise-Isaac = freedom.

Seems to me that vis-a-vis Islam the same pertains. Islam's cherished Hagar-connection for connecting to Abraham carries this double-edge. Does it ever get back to God's promise to Abraham? Does it ever get beyond Sinai? I don't know the Koran well, but I have a copy and I have gotten inside it. I can't find THE promise in its pages anywhere. Between submission to Allah's will and trusting the Abrahamic promise is a continental divide from which the streams do not flow in the same direction. Two clearly different proposals for redemption, behind which are two clearly different pictures of salvation. One is reintegration "into Abraham's bosom, God's Abba-family," the other a mythical paradise of Eden restored where everything is peachy-keen and no desire goes unfulfilled. One is mediated by promise-trusting, one by personal performance.

Request #2.

Early in April this came in.

"In next 10 days I will give a special lecture for MTh students in Pematangsiantar [Sumatra, Indonesia] about: The Thought/Thinking of Paul. I have 3 session on the same day. There are about 20 students. Have you any idea for this purpose? It is impossible to mention all Paul's theology in one day. Thank you for your attention."

[As you readers will soon see, if it has escaped you before, I DO have a one-track mind, a one-string banjo, and really only one broken-record "Gutachten" that gets played over and over again.

Gutachten #2.

Here's one idea. Overarching title: Paul's own "Reformation discovery" – "Christ's Gospel is a Promise"

Lecture #1. THE DISCOVERY

Not Moses but Abraham is the center of the OT. The Gospel is a Promise. Christ connects his work to Abraham (and David) not to Moses. Abraham and David = both promissory covenants, Moses = performance covenant. Show the students the evidence in Romans 4 & 9, Galatians 3 & 4.

How that is important for our life today—in church and in the world.

Lecture #2 ONE CONSEQUENCE—How to read the Bible

The Biblical hermeneutics following that discovery Paul as Exegete, his hermeneutics of the OT. Galatians 4 and his discovery (sic!) that there are TWO covenants in the OT. How Paul practices that hermeneutics when he uses OT texts.

How that hermeneutics became the hermeneutics of the Luth. Reformation.

How we use that hermeneutics today.

Lecture #3. ANOTHER CONSEQUENCE—Ethics of Freedom

Paul's Promissory ethics for daily life: Freedom. Freedom, not submission (contra Islam, the faith of 180 million in Indonesia) is the center of Christian ethics. Present Pauline texts of "freedom" and show how he uses them. 2Cor 3:17, Gal.5 et passim.

>From this Luther (in his Galatians commentary) developed his notion of the two different “grammars” of the Law and of the Promise.

The grammar of the law says:

IF you do this and that, THEN God will do such and so.

Sample: The grammar of the ten commandments in Exodus 20/Deut 5:

IF you “love me and keep my commandments,” THEN I will show you “chesedh.” IF you don’t keep my commandments, THEN I will “visit” your iniquities until the third and fourth generation of your offspring (=total extermination).

The grammar of the Gospel promise goes like this: SINCE God-in-Christ did such and so, THEREFORE you do such and so.

Sample: The ethical admonitions–promise-imperatives–of the NT epistles everywhere. Check them out.

SINCE/BECAUSE God was in Christ reconciling the world unto himself, THEREFORE be reconciled to God and reconciled to one another.

Give sample cases to preach/teach freedom in pastoral work today in Indonesia.

Request #3.

“Tell us again: just what was the Gospel presented in that ‘Christian message’ offered at the time of the Virginia Tech massacre? And why didn’t you like it?”

Gutachten #3.

The full text of the Christian message, 'twas only two minutes of time allotted, can be found at <www.elca.org/jle>

The gospel in that message is presented in the metaphors of Light vs. Darkness, Good vs. Evil, Life vs. Death. >From which comes this:

“The darkness of evil” has visited us at VT.

“Amid our pain, the light shines in the darkness and darkness has not overcome it.”

“We come to this place to testify that the light . . . cannot finally be defeated.”

“We can do something. We can push it [the darkness] back.”

“We can . . . share light, one with another.”

[Ergo] “Let us deny death’s power.”

The substance of that message is the classic Gospel of Zoroaster (aka Zarathustra), dating way back to the 6th century B.C. and still a lively religion among the Parsees in parts of Asia and in the Western world.

To call it a Christian message is simply not true. Christians will catch the reference to the first chapter of St. John’s Gospel in the second sermon line quoted above—and that may tease us to think that the message is possibly Christian after all. But unless you tell the folks who that Light is, they might just as likely think it’s Zoroaster, or their own inner spirituality, or who knows what. Here’s an example: President Bush—a ThTh reader reminded me—quoted that passage from St. John verbatim (I think in a State of the Union address) as applying to the War on Terrorism. Born-again Christian that he is, he nevertheless told us that the USA was that Light and the Terrorist darkness would never overcome us. USA replaces Christ. Another false Gospel. Zoroastrianism #101.

In John's gospel, apart from Christ Darkness ALWAYS wins. The two-minute sermon deceives. "WE" cannot push it back. Apart from Christ we're part of the Darkness. Darkness doesn't push back darkness. The Christ who says "I am the Light of the world" [John 8:12] adds the consequence for those who don't "follow me." They "walk in darkness." As, sadly, doe this two-minute allegedly Christian message. And then at the end when the message encourages us to "deny death's power" on our own, it drives the final nail into the coffin. Pure Promethean madness. Another instance of the malignancy in America in our culture-wide "Denial of Death" [Ernst Becker]. Apart from Christ, death, like darkness, ALWAYS wins. That IS the Christian message. It's in the Bible.

Request 4.

Couple days ago this one came in. Not so much asking for a Gutachten, but more a jeremiad, asking for comfort, I guess. It links to Timothy Hoyer's recent recommendation [ThTh 459] that the Christian church NOT issue social statements—for a whole passel of reasons, Gospel-grounded reasons, he claimed. One was that the statements always come out as third-use of the law, "you gotta" imperatives. Law-imperatives (even when quoting Jesus) that are themselves not Gospel-grounded. For "Christian" action, Timothy claims, that's a no-no.

And doesn't that take us back to the one-string banjo, Paul in Galatians 4, freedom and slavery, his exegesis of God's "two covenants"? Could Paul's ethics of freedom have included "freedom" from such social statements? I bet that when pushed, he might just have said that. [Church social statements are, so far as I know, a distinctively American phenomenon. Can't remember ever encountering them in our galavanting around the world since 1993 as ELCA mission volunteers. I may have missed

them, but if that is indeed true, I wonder why.]

Here's the jeremiad from an ELCA member, "just" a layman.

Ed, I have been too busy with church politics in our congregation here, for which I do not feel I am suited It is depressing how little "gospel" people hear or expect. It is obvious that we locally have not had the Augsburg Aha.

Anyway, I am a voting delegate for Synod Assembly. I just got my packet yesterday and can't believe the resolutions.

For example...

WORLD HUNGER

Whereas, God calls us to do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with God (Micah 6:8); and to loose the bonds of injustice, to let the oppressed go free, and to share our bread with the hungry (Isaiah 58:6-7); and

Whereas, Jesus calls us to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, visit the sick and imprisoned (Matthew 25); and

Whereas, The XYZ Synod has been committed to the cause of alleviating world hunger and supportive of the ELCA World Hunger Appeal and has encouraged individuals and congregations to support the appeal; and

Whereas, The 2006 Synod Assembly reaffirmed a previous synod resolution which encouraged a goal of giving \$5.00 per baptized member per year to the ELCA World Hunger Appeal; therefore, be it

Resolved, That every congregation of the synod be strongly encouraged to have a monthly World Hunger Appeal Sunday during which World Hunger Appeal envelopes are made available at worship, a verbal reminder is made during the announcements for

the day, a hunger-related vignette is printed in the bulletin, and an appropriate petition is offered in the Prayers of the Church; and

Resolved, That October 14, 2007, the Sunday before World Food Day, October 16, 2007, be designated as ELCA World Hunger Appeal Day; and

Resolved, That each congregation be strongly encouraged to support local, community hunger efforts providing food for the hungry, and

Resolved, That as a means of fulfilling this resolution to educate and encourage generous, regular giving, congregations use the ELCA World Hunger Appeal resources found in the hunger packets mailed to them from the churchwide office, the information provided by the Synod Hunger Team, and the resources on the www.elca.org/hunger web site.

No Gospel. It looks rather that we are Christians by following a pathetic excuse for Law. There are two Jesus sayings that come to mind. "Go and sell all you have and give it to the poor." The real Law demands more. The real Law leaves us in tears, like Schindler in Schindler's List, because we could have and should have done more. "The poor you will always have with you." Jesus is anointed for burial. It seems to me that this is claiming that what is coming up, Jesus' death and Resurrection, is more important than the above.

And from Augsburg Confession Article XX: "Hence it is readily apparent that no one should accuse this teaching of prohibiting good works. On the contrary it is rather to be commended for showing HOW we can do good works." Since the above does not talk about faith, it does not talk about HOW we can do any of the above. I am reminded of Eph 3 – God brings us into more than we can ask for or imagine.

Or even Matthew 25. Those found righteous were shocked. When did we do this?

I guess it is time to pray some more for the Church.

Gutachten #4

You've given a vivid case-study to support Timothy Hoyer's caveat. And the irony is that the resolution-framers, dear folks all, doubtless wanted to do exactly what you cry for. But, alas, "they didn't know what they were doing." So they need help, Gospel help. Is any other conclusion plausible than that you are "called" to this assembly precisely for such a time as this?