

Using the Double Dipstick Test on Whether the Church Should Speak Out on Social Issues

Colleagues,

This week's Thursday theologian is Timothy Hoyer, pastor of Gloria Dei congregation (ELCA) in Lakewood, New York. A Seminex grad, Timothy has been pastoring ever since he got his sheepskin in 1982. That's 25 years already. He's hooked on the Augsburg Aha! as the best way to get to what's really "good" and genuinely "new" about THE Good News. He's also committed to that strand of Christian theology as genuinely relevant in the rough and tumble daily lives of Gloria Dei parishioners today. Timothy has produced a number of prior ThTh postings, as well as text studies posted by the Crossings Community.

For this post Timothy takes one of the Seminex code-words, "double dipstick," and uses it to test the habit of American denominations to "make statements" about social issues. I think it was some Seminex student who coined the term "double dipstick" for Philip Melanchthon's habit—especially in the Apology to Article 4 of the Augsburg Confession—of regularly testing any and all segments of the church's tradition with two questions:

1. do the merits and benefits of Christ get used or don't they?
2. do these benefits actually get across (make a "crossing") to the needy folks for whom Christ intended them?

A negative answer on either side of this double-dipstick, and that piece of the tradition is in trouble.

Here's how Timothy runs the test on the church creating social statements.

Peace and Joy!

Ed Schroeder

Jesus, crucified and risen, gives us benefits, great benefits-forgiveness from God, righteousness from God, and eternal life with God. Jesus commissioned those who trust him to use those benefits. Those benefits are to be used to benefit people, that is, give them faith in Jesus. That is the double dipstick-to not waste the benefits of Christ, and to use them so that people are comforted in their conscience.

Do social statements by the church 1) use the benefits of Jesus 2) to comfort people in their relationship with God?

No, social statements do not pass either part of the double dipstick test.

Social statements are about living in the "Creator's orderings"-in family, in a country, in business, in a marriage, and in any encounter with another person. The ELCA has social statements on abortion, church in society, the death penalty, economic life, the environment, health and healthcare, peace, and race, ethnicity and culture. In process are statements about education and sexuality.

The Promise of Christ is not about those issues. The Promise of Christ is to make new the heart, the conscience, a person's relationship with God. Forgiveness cannot guide a woman whose pregnancy is life-threatening. Forgiveness cannot guide economic policies because forgiveness and the minimum wage and

trade treaties have nothing in common. Forgiveness does not affect the ozone layer or the production of carbon dioxide from burning fossil fuels. And forgiveness from Christ does not determine one's race, one's ethnicity, or what kind of music one's culture has.

Thus, the Promise of Christ cannot be used to make social statement, failing the first part of the double dipstick test.

Since social statements are about the creator's orderings, not the Promise but the law is the tool to tell people what to do. "The law tells us what we are to do. No such instruction is contained in the Gospel. On the contrary, the Gospel reveals to us only what God is doing...The Gospel makes no demands whatever" (The Proper Distinction Between Law and Gospel, C. F. W. Walther, p. 9).

If the Promise of Christ were used to direct members of the church and the church in society, then the Promise of Christ would be used for a purpose it was not meant for. The Promise of Christ is to use the benefits of Christ so that they benefit the hearers. To use Christ to direct behavior or as a guide or as the grounding for a social statement, then the Promise will be transformed into law. Words like "should," "ought," and "must" will be used.

When the Promise of Christ is transformed into law, then it is no longer of any benefit to people in their relationship with God. Instead of the Promise giving forgiveness from God and peace with God, the Promise will demand certain behaviors. And unless those behaviors are obeyed, then, and this is usually what happens, people will be told they are not Christian. Their standing before God will no longer be based on their faith in Christ but on their own behavior. C.F.W. Walther warns about this in Lecture 21 of The Proper Distinction Between Law and

Gospel when he says that love (works) must not be required for justification (pp. 222-234).

Thus, the benefits of Christ will not be used to comfort people's consciences in their relationship with God, failing the second part of the double dipstick test.

What causes Christians to form rules about what they should do? What urges the church to make social statements?

The urge to make social statements is the Old Person's desire to DO something, to do what is right and to feel good about doing what is right. To feel good is really to feel good before God on the basis of doing right instead of feeling good before God because of what Christ has done. To do what is right is to use the law to define what is right to God instead of using the Gospel to define what is right to God. That is to trust the law instead of trusting Christ for the definition of what is right to God.

For example, a pastor visited at a nursing home, shared the Lord's Supper with one resident and helped another resident, new to the facility, understand where and how she is given spending money so she can have some cash in her purse. The pastor walked to his car and felt good about the work he had done in his visit. Which visit did he feel good about? He felt good about the visit in which he helped the new resident with her finances. Such work made him feel useful, that he had done some good.

That good feeling is what motivates the church to make social statements. The church wants to be relevant, to do something worthwhile, to change for the better how its members live their lives in society. Society always needs to be corrected and to be directed to help the weak and the poor.

That motivation to feel good, the motivation to tell others what is right, is presumptuous. It presumes God's lawful authority. For the church to make social statements is nothing else than the church using the law in what is often and wrongly called the third use of the law. The third use of the law is to take the law's function of preserving peace and restraining evil, a function meant for the "lawless and disobedient, for the godless and sinful, for the unholy and profane" (1 Timothy 1.9) and think that it is now a tool of the church to guide its members, that is, believers in Christ.

For the church to use the law to guide its members is to not have faith in Christ as the guide. Also, to use the law as a guide has results that the church is forgetting, namely, that the law increases sin, the law brings wrath-God's and our own at God-it causes argument, and it troubles consciences. Those results of the law are always part of the law and the church cannot whitewash the law and pretend the law does not do those things or think that such results can be separated out of the law so that the law is only a guide. "It is an extraordinary blindness and stupidity of the Antinomians to imagine that the wrath of God is something distinct from the Law. That cannot be; for the revelation of God's wrath is the Law in its operation upon the intellect and will of man. Paul expresses this fact when he says: 'The Law worketh wrath'" (The Proper Distinction Between Law and Gospel, p.96).

When the church uses the law in social statements, then it will increase sin. St. Paul wrote, "The law increases sin." Walther wrote that the law tells people what to do but does not empower them to do it, "it rather causes us to become more unwilling to keep the Law. True, some treat the law as if it were a rule in arithmetic. However, let the Law once force its way into a person's heart, and that heart will strain with all its force against God. The person will become furious at God for asking

such impossible things of him. Yea, he will curse God in his heart" (*The Distinction Between Law and Gospel*, p. 14). Secondly, the law shows people their sins, which a social statement would do, revealing how people are not doing what the church (God) wants them to do. People outside the church, if they are told what the church says about an issue in a social statement, will only hear what they are doing wrong. They will feel judged. They will think that the church, always issuing social statements, always telling people what to do, is always condemning them. They will avoid the church in order to avoid being judged. So social statements will keep people out of the church.

And, again, the person outside the church will be told what to do but not be given any power to do what the social statement suggests. "The good I want to do I do not do," wrote Paul, attributing his inability to do good to sin within him. Since people do not want to and cannot do what the church directs them to, they will stay away from the church because of guilt.

For example, if a denomination says that remarriage after divorce is not allowed, what do people do? They go to another denomination to get married.

Or people outside the church will agree with the social statements and join the church because the church teaches what is right and teaches what the Bible says. People will think because they agree with the social statements and act in agreement with them, that they are right before God. They become "secure sinners."

Werner Elert, in *The Christian Ethos*, gives another example of how the Gospel cannot be used to guide a Christian in social issues. His story is of a ration officer, who is Christian, and has a widowed young mother in front of him, along with her

children. His heart is moved by love (the Gospel) to help her and give her all she needs. For love is generous. But he must reject his feelings and follow the rules of rationing because of all the other people, with needs just as great, are standing in line behind her. Thus, reason (law) must handle social issues.

Lastly, another result of social statements (law) is that they cause quarrels. Christians in their piety want to do what pleases God. They feel urged to stand up for what God wants and to insist that God's ways be obeyed. So, if they do not agree with a social statement, they will argue against it. They will form groups to work against it. Or they will leave the church because the church is not teaching what's in the Bible. The law, that is, social statements, will cause dissension, arguments, and parties for and against the issue. Unity in the church will be based, not on faith in Christ, but on one's opinion about a social issue. Paul warns Titus, "But avoid stupid controversies, genealogies, dissensions, and quarrels about the law, for they are unprofitable and worthless" (Titus 3.9).

"Now I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you be in agreement and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same purpose" (1 Cor 1.10). Although Paul addressed the Christians about their boasting of who baptized whom, the root of boasting-I'm better than you are before God-is the same boasting that happens when people insist they are right and others wrong about a social issue.

Paul told Timothy to teach in agreement with the Lord Jesus Christ, that is, forgiveness in his name. It is when people teach something that does not agree with forgiveness (social statements disagree because they are law) that there will "come

envy, dissension, slander, base suspicions, and wrangling among those who are depraved in mind and bereft of the truth, imagining that godliness is a means of gain" (1 Timothy 6.4-5). "Imagining that godliness (doing what is right according to a social statement) is a means of gain" is to trust the law for righteousness instead of Christ.

Social statements do cause "enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions" (Galatians 5.20) which Paul calls "works of the flesh" (v. 19). If social statements cause such quarrels, are they works of the flesh?

Besides, in Acts, Paul and the new Christian church agree that the laws (social statements) do not have to be followed in order for one to be a Christian. Christians are to remember the poor, which Paul was already willing to do.

Christians are commissioned as ambassadors for Christ, speaking what Christ has given them to speak, "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you shall be saved." Jesus breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit, if you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained" (John 20.22-23). The church's job is to proclaim the Promise of Christ. The Promise of Christ issues no order for what people must do. The Promise of Christ only gives people what Christ has already done. The Promise issues no orders, no demands, and no social statements.

Timothy Hoyer