

“Who Me?”

Edward Schroeder

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“Two Sundays in a row I went to X-Lutheran church and both times there was no Gospel in the sermon. It was gentle legalism. And the pastor is AELC!” That’s what I heard from a pastor back for summer school in June after ten years of ordained ministry.

Why don’t the Elimites, of all people, know the difference? Why can’t they detect it when they are doing it? Legalism – that’s the scolding word the moderates put to the LCMS administration. How could they possibly fall into the same trap?

There is probably no one answer, but here are several; try them on for size.

1) The notion has gained almost automatic acceptance that legalism means hard-hat, nasty, unbudging, never-admit-you’re-wrong gritting teeth and scowling lips.

And then the opposite is Gospel-oriented, which means “nice guy.” At root the contrast here is not between two theologies but between two different personality types. Legalism, however, is an “ism.” It is a proposal for salvation. It is a message a “pitch” for moving from malady to goal through some specific means. So the final place to look for your own legalism is not in your personality type – which may be a very mixed bag on different days of the week – but in your operational kerygma. What are you urging upon people as the way, truth and life? Of course all of us think we’re urging Jesus Christ, but remember, “not everyone who says to me Lord,

Lord...”

2) The Jesus of legalist preaching often comes off himself as a “nice guy”. And isn’t that at the center of the gospel that to sinners and down-and-outers Jesus really was a nice guy? True, but how do you preach that message? “Since Jesus was friendly to sinners, he calls us to do likewise.” “Don’t get hung up on individual commandments as the Pharisees did, just practice the one commandment of love as Jesus did and as he calls us to do.” But this way of preaching Agape is pure legalism. How so? It calls for a performance on the basis of which the performer is led to think, “I’m now OK”. It roots itself in the ministry of Jesus, may even mention the word Gospel over and over again, but for the person in the pew it is not Good news. It is another demand, another burden, another obligation, finally another coercion. Just because it ostensibly comes from Jesus does not make it the “easy yoke” and light burden he promised his disciples. Any message that takes the pattern of Joseph Fletcher’s Agape-ethic (There’s only one law you have to follow: Agape. If you are not Agape-oriented God does not like you; if you are, He does) is no Good news for the kinds of sinners the Scriptures expect to show up in our worship services.

3) How about the heavy preaching of good works in the New Testament, all those apostolic admonitions and counsels? Good question. Take a close look at them and contrast them with the pattern of the decalogue. To be sure, the N.T. admonitions are in the imperative mood, but they are not law – and by no means legalism. (Do this and God will like you). Part of the dilemma in our tradition is that we don’t notice that these N.T. imperatives are “grace” imperatives. Might we even call them the Second Use of the Gospel”? They surely are not a third use of the law, for they always push you back to Christ when you track them down. Never do they lead you back to Moses. One

test question on imperatives is: Who gets the merit from the mandated action? The N.T. grace imperatives always designate the sister or brother as the beneficiary of our action, and Big Brother as the engine for moving toward that action. And His Word is not you gotta", but "you get to."

4) How do we finally tell whether our witness is the Good news or just some Christian-coated legalism? Ask the clients. "Did you get any Good news out of the sermon? Was it the Good news you need for coping with unfaith, pride, pain, or whatever besets you? Is a crucified and risen Messiah necessary in the Good news you heard, or could you just as readily have found the same good news in another Messiah-figure?"

A recent book by LCA professors Bob Jenson and Eric Gritsch (Lutheranism: The Theological Movement and Its Confessional Writings, p. 43) has been helpful for me. Preaching the Good news, they say, is not determined by checking whether you used a certain set of Gospel-loaded words (justification, Agape, faith, new creation, Jesus). Rather it is a kind of talking – how you use the "good words" from the Biblical sources. They say: "Whatever you talk about (in preaching), do so in such a way that the justification your words open to your hearers is the justification that faith apprehends rather than the justification that works apprehend." In other words, it is the very meaning of faith that a legalistic preacher misses. Gritsch and Jenson offer this as remedial help: 1) When you preach, make the topic under discussion those points in your life and in the life of your hearers where the value of your life is being challenged, undermined, destroyed. 2) At that very point weave in the Good news of the story of Christ to intersect and interpret that challenge. 3) Remember that if you do this accurately (evangelically) your words will be an unconditional promise of value to your listeners.

Gritsch and Jenson have thereby put into other words the arch-Lutheran axiom about preaching law and promise. Law is God's diagnostic tool for exposing human malady. Gospel is unconditional promise and is offered gratis to folks who have failed the law's performance tests.

5) Why does legalism nevertheless persist, when we all really know deep in our hearts that what is said above is the very truth of the Gospel? Why, because deep in that same heart is an opinio legis, a law-is-God's-last-word opinion that is as durable as our own old Adams. So the preaching of "clean" Gospel will not come if we only once get it straight in our heads. It will have to be done over and over again as long as we have operational Old Adams and Old Eves. These operators can also readily enlist Jesus by having him assist us in finally "making it" with God's law. But as the Law-expert of the N.T. (Paul) said, if Christ gets hooked into a legal-performance system of salvation, as though "justification were through the law, then Christ died in vain." (Gal. 2:21)

This side of the resurrection none of us is immune to legalism. The cosmic drift of the entire old creation goes in that direction. So don't be surprised when it pops up in your proclamation; and thank the sister or brother who calls it to your attention. The preaching of legalism is a forgivable sin, though painful to have to admit. And for you as well as your congregation, the gratis Gospel has its perennial promise: There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.

Edward H. Schroeder
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