

Year's End Summary: the Hassle about the Gospel

Colleagues, First off two notices. If they were printed in the Classified Ads, they'd be under PERSONALS:

1. On this very day, December 27, 2001, God willing, Marie and I will start driving from St. Louis to New Haven, Connecticut for a spring-semester stint at a new workplace. I'm to serve as Senior Mission Scholar at the Overseas Ministries Study Center across the street from the Divinity School of Yale University. From January 1, 2002 until the middle of May 2002, this will be our mailing address: Overseas Ministries Study Center, 490 Prospect Street, New Haven CT 06511. Our e-mail address remains unchanged.
2. From the grapevine we've heard that one of our ThTh readers "is going to be the sacrificial lamb" in an upcoming purge at an LCMS school. So one of his buddies asks: "Would you mind putting his name out on the wires?" Be glad to, I told him. The name in question is one I won't name right here. For now he's NN. NN is a creme-de-la-creme law/promise theologian. After almost a decade of teaching in the LCMS system, NN has run afoul of the doctrinal censors. Why? For professing the sort of law/promise theology that you read in these postings, including last week's ThTh 184 from NN's teacher Bob Bertram. NN has great credentials. Ph.D. from U. of Chicago. Publications. Honors hither and yon. Recommendations from David Tracy, Brian A. Gerrish, Martin E. Marty, etc. And besides all that, i.e., best of all, he knows THE Gospel, and knows how to teach it. If I were still a hiring honcho in theol. education, he'd be my

first interview. To follow up write skreegs@qwest.net

Now to the Year's End Summary: The Hassle about the Gospel

Seems to me that the Hassle about the Gospel has been the dominant thread in this year's postings. Frequent themes—homosexuality, historic episcopate, church building programs, mission theology, preaching, and those two months worth of repentance postings—were finally variations on “Just what is the Gospel, and what is it not.” It's all been about the farm-wagon wheel that I learned to use for imaging “good” theology, when I was a classroom theology prof like NN above. All the spokes of the Christian wheel must fit into the hub, aka the Gospel, must be socketed, grounded in that hub, or they don't belong in the Christian wheel. They are spokes from some other wheel—of which there are many. Many other wheels are rolling around and through Christian churches nowadays, Lutheran churches included.

A number of you ThTh readers I have disappointed by not responding to your own responses to me this past year. Sometimes I just get too many to cope with. I'm thinking right now of one very long and intense and thoughtful rejoinder from a dear Seminex student to the homosexual postings. He's a pastor “out west.” You heard me, brother S, “giving away the store” as I talked about that issue—and I never got back to you. What I thought I was doing was socketing that hot potato issue into the Gospel hub—just as we did in Seminex theology classes, and then reporting out to the readership what I saw when that happened. So if we were still together in the Seminex building on Grand Avenue, dear S., I'd ask you to show me how you socket homosexuality into the Gospel we both hold dear. And we'd check

our two versions out side-by-side for their gospel-groundings. Even though it seemed to you, as I recall, that I was concluding from my Gospel-hub that “anything goes,” we both know that’s not so.

But the “gospel-wheel” does mean that anything Gospel-socketed does indeed GO. Gospel-socketed stuff finally goes—better, comes—commended by the Lord of the Gospel himself. That’s a feisty claim. But it is finally the feistiness of any assertion that claims to be Christian. Luther and Erasmus argued (1525) whether assertions were the form of the Gospel. Luther said yes, Erasmus didn’t think so. The Gospel (and each spoke) does not come with question marks at the end of its sentences. Even though question marks often dominate in sermons I hear [Did you . . . ? Have you . . . ? Will you . . . ?], the Gospel cannot be preached with interrogative sentences. It’s always assertions. Both in its claims about Christ and its crossing into our lives. Note the real absence of question marks in Jesus’ own sermons. See Mark’s summary of Jesus’ preaching: “The kairos is full. The Kingdom is here. Repent. Believe the Good News.” Nary a question mark. Just 4 indicative and imperative sentences.

Some of you I have doubtless disappointed when I DID respond. I’m thinking of the ThTh postings about bishops and again about church buildings and those many postings on repentance. Here too, the Gospel-socket test is the criterion. If it’s anchored in the hub, it’s of a piece with the truth of the Gospel. If not, don’t call it Christian.

My upcoming junket at the Overseas Ministries Study Center [OMSC] for the spring semester 2002 is to focus on mission theology (natch!) and on preaching the Gospel. That’s not two different themes, as y’all know. As I understand my assignment—all this from afar communicated mostly by the cyber-medium—my task is (1) “some lectures” but no semester-long

courses since OMSC doesn't do that, (2) doing my own research, and (3) being a "presence" in the community. I'll leave the third item to you for your envisioning.

On the second item I propose to keep pressing on the theme "Lutheran missiology – an oxymoron?" You know from past postings that I don't think it's oxymoronic. Yet just what that is, is conflicted everywhere – also within my own church, the ELCA. And my own reading so far of that conflict is that it is not a conflict about how to do mission, but about what Gospel, which Gospel, is at the center of mission. A few weeks ago I posted some thoughts on that in reporting on some discussions at the end of September with Mission execs from the ELCA. The responses some of you sent on that item are still in the hopper, for my own edification and for (I hope) future sharing with this readership.

The first item, "some lectures," at present includes one on "Making Sense of the Gospel in a Secular World" during the January intermester at OMSC when students from 30-plus seminaries show up for crash-course mission exposure. Later in the term I'm slotted for a whole week (8 sessions) on "In a World of Faiths, Why Jesus?" It's scheduled for April 15-19. If you've got nothing else to do after Easter, come on over and sign up. The OMSC address is above.

For the coming year you'll be hearing more frequently from ThTh co-editor Robin Morgan—or so we have it planned. Robin's been handling 3 (or is it even 4?) near full-time jobs for much of the year 2001. Why next year for her should be any different, I'm not sure. But she says so and also says she has ThTh stuff to put out on the [cyberspace] wire.

For example, you've never heard anything about Hildegard von Bingen from me—and probably never would. But you will from

Robin. And lots more. So stay tuned.

May the remainder of your Twelve Days be blessings for you and for others. And the same be true for all the days of two thousand two.

Peace & Joy!

Ed Schroeder