

Your God is Too Small

Colleagues, First off some corrections on ThTh 293 a fortnight ago, "Seminex at Thirty. Random Ramblings for an Anniversary." Senectitude triumphed over rectitude. There were three errors that I know of.

1. I forgot Carl Volz's name in the roster of the dear departed. Here's how the paragraph should have read: Of the 38 faculty folks who walked "off," 14 have already walked on through the valley of the shadow of death. I list them here with "Seminex at 30" in memoriam. Herb Bouman, Bob Bertram, Doc Caemmerer, Bill Danker, Alfred Fuerbringer, Carl Graesser, Paul Lessmann, Erv Lueker, Art Repp, Al von Rohr Sauer, Gil Thiele, Carl Volz, Walt Wegner, Andy Weyermann.
2. I promoted Martin Scharlemann, Concordia Seminary's president after John Tietjen's suspension, to the rank of Air Force Major General. Martin was a Brigadier General. I should've remembered. He was my brother-in-law.
3. We were sacked for "dereliction of duty," not derilection.

Now to the Topic: Your God is Too Small

First three days of this week, Sunday evening to Tuesday noon, I was with 80 "rostered" workers in one of the synods of the ELCA 600 miles from St. Louis. [Go figure.] It was their annual "Bishop's Theological Conference for Professional Leaders." The Bishop, who knows the theology I'm hustling, had invited me to hustle it at his place, to make four presentations on "The Word of God: Lutheran Hermeneutics for Our Day." And one of the "for our day" issues was to be the ELCA's mare's nest of homosexuality.

Well, I did what I was asked to do. And on the mare's nest item there was serious conversation, but little debate. I sense the troops are tired of it. Enough already! One pastor told me: "we've been doing the ECLA study we're supposed to do, but nobody is changing their mind." My take on that is that education won't do it. Changed judgments about homosexuality come from lived experience. At least that's how it happened for me. The study came second. What I proposed at the conference was that the hang-up in the ELCA is biblicism on both sides, both seeking to learn what the Bible "really" says. And there will never be agreement on that. That's what the Bible experts – pro and con – have already told us in the ELCA study materials.

Even worse is the legalist hang-up that spooks in the shadows of all biblicisms, also in ELCA biblicism on both sides. It's something like this: once we know what God tells us is the right thing on this one, we can then do the right thing and God will be pleased with us. Paul's grim axiom for that is: They that live by the law shall die by the law. ELCA beware! The best thing to do is stop the study.

Long time readers of ThTh have already heard me out on this. If you want to review, check the umpteen past postings on the subject now archived on the <www.crossings.org> website. Here's the list:

1999

Jan. 28

Feb 4

May 27

June 17

2001

June 28

2002

Jan 17

Jan. 24

Feb. 7

May 16

2003

Sept. 18

Oct. 2

Back to the Bishop's conference. It wasn't the homosexuality topic that generated most of the serious debate. Instead it was about God as our critic. Discussion in the sessions and Kaffee-klatsching verified what a wide river Lutheranism is these days. Tillich fans identified themselves naming their mentor. Barth, though never named, had his fans too. More than one responder began this way: "I start from the premise that we have a loving God." In Barth's own words, probably unknown to this fan, it is: "That God speaks to us at all is already Grace. Lutheran law-and-Gospel needs to be rearranged into Gospel and law." One pastor (and only one, sob!) identified himself as a ThTh fan, and claimed that what the incognito Barthians were saying was NOT what these colleagues of his had pledged to say when they made their ordination vows. Even the claims coming from the Tillichians was not good enough to pass muster as Lutheran. There were other less-than-Lutheran theologies voiced. But that didn't surprise.

And, wouldn't you know it, some of the stickiest stuff came at the very end of the fourth session with the clock ticking, lunch impending and my departure soon to follow. So on the plane home I did re-runs about what I "should have said." Lest I misrepresent, it was a fun conference. Lots of the folks said they were being helped. Nobody got mad. I did not get crucified, which may signal something about me. There is that modern adage

that being a Christian means “You gotta look good on wood.” I came home without even splinters.

Back to the “should have said” remorse. Yes, I know it’s folly to say “if only I’d” What’s done is done. Probably even worse, such “if only’s” signal unfaith. Mine. Even so I pass on to you some of what I heard and what I tell myself I “should have said.” In some of what follows I’m surely merging what I DID say and what I wish I’d added on.

I’ll focus on the one item mentioned above that recurred in several responses: “God cannot be as critical as you are saying, Ed. I cannot preach that to my people.” This is not the first time I’ve heard this, of course. I remember hearing it at the very beginning of my teaching at Valparaiso University. It was at the first-ever theology dialogue we had with Nortre Dame University. The topic was sin. Our department chair and theirs gave the presentations. Bob Bertram, VU dept chair, spelled out the picture of sin in the Augsburg Confession. First reaction came from the ND dept chair, also a Bob—Robert Pelton, I think: “It can’t really be that bad, Bob, can it?” And in Pelton’s essay he showed us that it wasn’t “that bad.” Pelton’s opinion is, I sense, majority opinion throughout Christendom. All over. Not just at this conference.

Nevertheless back at Augsburg in 1530 the confessors claimed (and showed) that this is false teaching, a falsification finally of the Gospel itself. It is an “other” Gospel. In theological shop-talk it’s anti-nomianism. However, not anti-nomianism about ethics—(“I can do whatever I darn well please; that’s what Christian freedom means”) but anti-nomianism about God—(“God could not be THAT serious about God’s law that he would actually carry his critique THAT far”).

Three exchanges (and now 2 days later what I should have said).

I. ONE CONFeree:

"I start from the premise that we have a loving God, and therefore this talk about law and gospel as two very different words or actions from the same God to the same sinner—one a word that finally kills sinners, and the other a word that makes alive—that simply doesn't compute."

I should've said:

How solid is the premise you start with? As pious as it sounds, is it the right place for "starting" Christian theology? I think not. Nor do the Lutheran confessions. Yes, they could be wrong, but they also might be on target. Isn't it more plausible to start from the premise (at least if you start, for example, from the Genesis creation story) that God is just? God plays fair and square. Isn't that a better premise? We see it already in the opening verses of Genesis. God not only creates but also evaluates his creation, and does so in fairness and equity. Right from the beginning God brings creation into being by speaking "Let there be...", and at the end of the day God-speaking evaluates the creation: "It's good, very good."

But when you get to the end of the creation story in the third chapter God's evaluation is very different. It comes because the creatures are different. The primal human pair stop listening to God and begin to listen to that other voice. God is still fair, just, equitable. But no more "good, very good" from the mouth of God.

Listen to God's different speech: "cursed... enmity... pain...thorns and thistles...sweat of your face... [and at the end] to dust you shall return." After which comes one more coup—not a "coup de grace" at all—"Get out of my garden. And you'll stay out." Had you interviewed Adam and Eve on their way out, they would not have said: "This is good news. We've got a loving God." Hardly. Yet had they had the faith, which they no longer did when God

pulled them out of the bushes, they could have said: "God's not being nasty. He's giving us a fair shake. We screwed up. The contract said: The day you eat of it, the death sentence kicks in. God's love, maybe; but God's justice for sure."

If you want an over-arching rubric for "starting," why not start here? God as a justice-giving creator. Creation may be so frightfully screwed up that God's justice is hard to find. Yes, often clearly undermined by all sorts of demonry. And, yes, we the human creatures are central to creation's screw-up and the screw-ups on God's justice. But there is one place where God's primal justice operates unimpaired. It's portrayed in the second next chapter after the Eden eviction. In Gen. 5 we hear that staccato report of Adam's and Eve's descendants. Ten names in the family tree. The last word about everyone is "and he died." No exceptions to that fair-and-square justice from God.

Summa, you can't get to a "loving God" for your theology by premise. Loving God is a conclusion after a long Biblical history. If you don't take the Biblical path where you've "gotta" go through Good Friday and Easter Sunday, there are no grounds for having "loving God" on your theological blueprint, and surely not from starting there.

The one and only (!) place in Christian scripture where we hear "God is love" is in the first epistle of John. For John that is NOT a premise. It is a conclusion. A consequence conviction coming from the cross of "the only Son." Gospel-grounded theology does not start there, it ends there.

II ANOTHER CONFeree:

"I can't accept that wrath of God stuff you refer to. Humans indeed act in wrath and destroy one another and the planet. And there is the power of evil in the world. But God acting in wrath? Possibly never really. And surely not since Jesus. Since

Good Friday and Easter, the wrath of God is gone from creation.” This too is not a new objection to law/promise Lutheranism.

I should've said:

1. What do you do with the 150-plus references to wrath of God in the OT, the several dozen wrath of God passages in the NT? Many of these NT texts speak of God's wrath in operation AFTER Easter. Both in Paul's writing AND in the Gospel of John, even in the very chapter where you find John 3:16, "God loved the world in just this way." In that reference (3:36) John's claim—and it could be Jesus' own words, for in John's prose it's not always clear—is that "Whoever believes in the Son" has immunity from God's wrath. God's Son has indeed done it in. But if you don't trust that Son, you don't have it. Immunity is not yours. It's individual medicine, not crop dust sprayed on the field. Those who do not cling to the Son, still have the wrath of God clinging them. Or perhaps this—
2. Sounds to me like your God is too small. I don't mean that as a nasty dig. I mean it seriously. Literally. There is this large collection of Biblical data about the wrath of God that you apparently can't fit into your God-concept—yet. So your picture of God needs to expand, expand to the breadth of the Bible's own God-picture. God is not simply "nice guy" in Biblical texts. God "visits iniquities." God is at least as complex as we his human images are. You and I know human anger as well as affection both to be present within ourselves. So, say the scriptures—using anthropomorphic metaphors, of course—so does God. That will indeed make it initially more troublesome to talk about God, of course. A monochromatic deity is "easy." But even more troublesome, it is beneficial both for one's own faith and for one's theological blueprint for doing pastoral work. By that I

mean it could do its own “Christum treiben” on you—push you to Christ to cope with this paradox. In fact that’s how Paul came to terms with the antithesis. Why God’s law? Why God our critic? Why God’s wrath? “To drive us to Christ.”

This pastor, I learned in the over-lunch conversation we had, did her M.Div. at the University of Chicago. So I should’ve quoted Aristotle. Specifically his axiom that philosophy, like the individual sciences, seeks to “save the phenomena.” I.e, “save” the data that is under investigation by bringing them in onto one blueprint. And the better system is the one that “saves the most data.” The best, if possible, would save it all. Ditto for theologies. The theological blueprint that saves more data is better than one that saves less. A theology that can’t find a place for the wrath of God on its blueprint is a theology too small.

You can declare the wrath of God to be non-existent. But if it does indeed exist, you are in trouble. And if the people you are called to serve have encounters in their lives that they can only portray as the wrath of God, you—with no place on your pastoral blueprint for what they are talking about—are in trouble. With no place for it on your own blueprint, you won’t have a clue for building anything of benefit for these folks. It comes down to the “double-dipstick” we talked about in the first session Sunday evening—the best theology is the one that does not “lose” the merits and benefits of Christ and thus has Christ to “use” in offering Good News to folks who are crying for help.

Wrath of God, so Paul, so John, has not disappeared since Jesus was here. One format wherein it is revealed is abandonment, when God “gives up” sinners to their own choices, not intervening in their self-destruction. Here God does not stomp on them. Instead God deserts them. God says (ala C.S. Lewis): “OK, sinner, have

it your way. THY will be done.” Divine desertion was Jesus’ own experience (swapping with us, of course) as he uttered that cry of dereliction.

Pushing the wrath of God off the blueprint is no way to help your parishioners when it hits the fan for them. Though “pushing it off” is not a bad image. It’s all in where you push it. The good news is that there is One who invites us to “push it off” onto him, and thereby trump it. That sweet-swap prompts Paul to say it simply: “We are saved BY HIM from the wrath of God.” (Rom. 5:9) That includes encounters with wrath that are yet to come. When parishioners utter their own cries of dereliction, the pastor’s calling is nothing less than to midwife this dereliction-sweet-swap. In Augsburg prose, to “illumine and magnify the blessings of Christ, and bring to devout consciences the consolation that they need. . . the consolation offered them in Christ.”

ONE MORE:

I was commending Luther’s theology of creation as grounds for Christians, both hetero and homo, to confess with him in the Small Catechism: “I believe that God made me together with all that exists. God has given me and still preserves my body and soul—whether hetero or homo” and then comes a laundry list of other goodies.

Good conversation ensued and then came this one off the wall—just as the clock was ticking down to closure. “Ed, in your theology of creation, how about a spina bifida newborn? Did God create that baby that way? My response: “If God didn’t, who did?”

“I can’t believe that God would do such a thing.”

“That citation from the Small Catechism ‘God creates all that exists’ is in your ordination vow, as well as in mine. So how do you link that to spina bifida?”

“Well, I simply can’t say that to the parents of this baby. I can talk about God as creator of the baby, but not of the spina bifida.”

What I should’ve said (maybe)

1. If you have no place on your own pastoral theological blueprint for such tragedies, then you will have to push the spina bifida off onto something else, as I hear you saying you do. Does that signal that your God is too small? That your own theological blueprint cannot “save” this terrible reality?
2. We are committed as Christians to monotheism. There is no second “evil” deity onto whom we can shove such things. We are “stuck” with having to bring it all together, “all that exists,” as the catechism says, under one roof labelled “God at work.”
3. That was one big chunk of Luther’s fight with Erasmus—God’s absolute management of everything, even the awful stuff. Erasmus said no, Luther yes. In western culture Erasmus carried the day, and still does. Possibly also with you. But Luther’s is better. Saves more of the data.
4. There is just “too much” Bible to push off the blueprint on this one. One of the most vivid is Deut 32:39 (spoken against the Canaanite option of two deities, one for good stuff, one for the bad) “See now that I, even I, am the one and there is no god beside me; I kill and I make alive; I wound and I heal; and there is none that can deliver [you] out of my hand.”
5. Marcion way back in the second century of the early church coped with his experience of evil by choosing the Canaanite option—a bad God who did evil stuff, a good God fully revealed in Jesus. His case was very plausible. He too could have started with a spina bifida baby. Yet he

was excommunicated in Rome in 144 and got tagged as a heretic. He was unable to find space for God the critic on his blueprint. So he dumped him.

6. Luther offers one alternative to Marcion, the term “hidden God,” for coping with such lived experience. He did not invent it. He found it all over in the Psalms and in Isaiah. Hidden-God encounters are terrifying. You can declare them non-existent, but that doesn’t mitigate the terror. God himself is not what is hidden in such encounters. No, a fateful, and often fatal, power against us, not for us, is our experience, and it is way beyond our control. What’s hidden in such encounters with this one and only God there is, is any grace and mercy toward us, that this fateful power could ever be “merciful to me a sinner.”

Enter Jesus, not more of God-hidden, but God-revealed, taking off the veil where mercy was hidden before. This is the Gospel’s proposal for dealing with hidden-God encounters. Same deity, but now with veil removed, showing the whole world God’s shining face in the crucified and risen Jesus.

Hidden-God encounters, spina bifidas of all sorts, are not God’s last word. Why God plays the hiding game is itself shrouded. But not always, not entirely. See the Book of Job. See how the Psalmist, how Isaiah, cope.

To get to the specifics:

The Word of God in person encounters deus absconditus on a Friday noon—“My God, my God, why this abandonment?” Bad news for him, good news for us. It’s for us and for our salvation. That’s the sweet-swap offer again. That offer perdures. It outlasts all hidden-God encounters. So he promised: My Word will not pass away. His disciples trust him for it. That word of God trumps the no-mercy hiddenness of God that vexes all of Adam and Eve’s

kids, and still vexes God's kids whom Christ has brought home to his Father. Even trumps spina bifidas. Not necessarily that such afflictions are cured this side of our own resurrections—though that too has been known to happen—but afflicted ones do get “healed” already on this side. The “full cure” is his promise for the other side. We trust him for this side, we can trust him for the other. He operates with a very big blueprint—and a long-range future.

Peace & Joy!

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