

“Your Gospel is too Small.” A Look at 2 Recent ELCA publications.

Colleagues,

For ThTh #250 I asked two of you regulars to do a show-and-tell on the quality of the Gospel in two pieces that recently went public in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. Both pieces focused on the “evangel” (a.k.a. the Gospel) signalled in that first “E” of ELCA. I thought the Gospel was skimpy in both pieces, but you’ve heard me holler about that before. So I asked Timothy Hoyer and Kevin Born, both ELCA pastors (New York and Minnesota, respectively), to do an “objective” analysis and tell us what they found. Here are the results. TIM HOYER looks at an item in the March 2003 issue of THE LUTHERAN, our church’s monthly magazine, p. 16f. It’s called “Law and Gospel.” You know I perk up when seeing that. This one is even written by a dear buddy in the Luther Research Congress crowd. But on this point (ouch!) he thinks that Melanchthon got it better than Luther did when it comes to Christian ethics. To wit, we do need God’s law to finish the job after the Gospel has done the justifying. He signals that by saying: “After the gospel has done its justifying work, setting us right with God, the law comes back into play.” I choked on that, wrote him a “friendly” letter and am still waiting for a reply. Tim “plays” with the prospect of “playing with the law.” He’s a real tease.

KEVIN BORN examines the Gospel in the first draft of the ELCA’s “Evangelism Strategy” now in the public domain. You can find the full text on the ELCA website: Here too, he finds, “the law comes into play” to finally undermine the very evangel that is at the center of evangelism. That’s bad news, not the good news.

Timothy Hoyer: “Playing with the Law”

A child is given a new game for her birthday, such as The Game of Life. She excitedly asks her parents to play with her. She opens the box and gets out the pieces and cards. Then she looks at her dad and asks, ‘How do we play this game?’ Dad answers, ‘I don’t know. Let’s read the rules.’ Together they look on the inside of the lid of the box the game came in. There they read the rules of the game.

As they play the game, if there is a disagreement about what to do, or someone doesn’t like what happens to them in the game and cries, ‘That’s not fair!’ then the rules are reread to solve the situation. The rules will say who is playing right and who is not. The player who is right will have her piece placed where it should be as a reward. The player who is wrong will have her piece put back where it should be as a punishment. At least, that’s what it will feel like.

As Christians, we often look to the Ten Commandments as the rules for what we are to do in our life. We treat the Ten Commandments (the law) as if they were a birthday present. We want to play according to the rules so that we can have fun with God.

The law, we feel, is essential to us, for it reveals God’s will for our lives. We know how we are supposed to live because the Ten Commandments tell us. We gain a sense of security knowing what is right and wrong. We feel safe when we know how we are right or wrong and that God knows how right we are according to the law. And when we do wrong, well, God forgives us and the law corrects us and puts us back where we should be. We understand the system of the law and are attracted to it. We praise the law as being excellent, as a light to our path, and

as God's unchanging will for our lives. The law protects us from others. The law protects others from us hurting them. And the law guides us into acts of justice and peace. The law is how life is supposed to work and when it does work we feel good about life and God.

However, we don't follow the rules. We cheat. We make up 'house rules,' which are our own rules that give us an advantage in special situations. Or we become so concerned about the rules and playing right that we no longer treat God like a loving parent enjoying the game with us, but as a competitor or as the final judge who decides according to the rules written permanently on the lid of the box we call the Bible. We are so enamored with the law that we look to the law instead of God for what is right and wrong. We trust the law to make us look good to God. We do not trust God to be the source of all goodness for us.

The law, with its system of rewarding those who do right, becomes our god. We look to it and its rewards to make our life good and to make us feel good. We cling to the law and its ways of fairness and keeping people where they are supposed to be instead of holding on to God as our source of goodness and the giver of what is good in our lives.

Our concentration on doing what is right to get our rewards distracts us from the basic act the law tells us we should do. The basic act is to trust God above anything else. And, according to the rules of the game, to break this rule results in our being disqualified. We can no longer be in the game of life. The law puts us where we should be, which is in the place of death. That is what the rules of God, the Ten Commandments require. No exceptions are allowed. The law always accuses us of not trusting God. The very reason the law exists is because we do not trust God. To have the law, to have the Ten

Commandments, means we are not trusting God. The law can do nothing less than accuse us of our distrust of God. The law does more in demanding protection for everyone, but it can never do less than always accusing us of not loving God more than anything else. When we say that the law is the will of God, we need to remember that the will of God is that we love and trust God first and foremost. The law does not exist without this demand to love God. When there is a demand, there is also accusation. There is no demand without accusation. That is the nature of law.

For example, when children are playing nicely, the parents are pleased. But when one child gets frustrated and hits her brother, then the parents teach the children the new rule of 'No hitting.' From then on, that rule of 'No hitting' not only demands that the children refrain from violence, but it at the same time accuses them of not pleasing their parents. The rule accuses them of loving themselves more than their parents. Loving themselves more than their parents is the reason why they hit. As long as the rule of 'No hitting' exists, the children will know they have failed to be right with their parents, and they have failed to be right with each other.

The rule of 'You shall have no other gods before me' tells us that we have failed to love God most of all. The accusation leads to the judgment that we are guilty of having failed to love God. The result is that we are put in the place we are supposed to be according to the law. We are put in the place of death.

Jesus died and rose for our sake. When we trust him who suffered for our sake, God regards and reckons that faith as pleasing to God. That faith is our righteousness, our goodness before God. That faith is our goodness because the faith is in the crucified and risen Jesus. That faith is how we love God

more than anything else.

Jesus then gives us additional benefits. He gives us his love, love that sacrifices itself for others, his love that has mercy for God-distrusters, rule-breakers, and doers of violence. We have his love to give to one another. So we get to live in and by his love.

Jesus gives us his Spirit who is always telling us of Jesus dying and rising for us so that we continuously live in faith, by faith, in Christ's love and by his love.

The Spirit Jesus gives us also produces new talents in us for playing with each other. The Spirit gives us the talents of peace, love, joy, goodness, gentleness, kindness, truthfulness, and self-control.

Now we have been given Jesus' death and rising, his goodness before God, faith, the Spirit, Jesus' love, and the talents of the Spirit. Those are the ways we get to live the new life of faith that Jesus has give to us. Thus, the law does not come 'back into play'— despite what's said in *The Lutheran*, March 2003, p.17. The law does not come back to 'reveal God's will for human life, protecting us from our neighbors, protecting our neighbors from us and guiding us into acts of love for justice and peace' (ibid).

First of all, the law is not needed to reveals God's will to us. Christ reveals God's will of mercy and forgiveness and righteousness and eternal life for us. The law cannot and does not reveal that. Christ gives us mercy and forgiveness for distrusters and doers of violence. The law cannot and does not do that. Christ give us peace with God, reconciling God and us. The law cannot and does not do that. Christ empowers us to make each other right with God. The law cannot and does not do that. In Christ, we can promise eternal life to one another. The law

cannot and does not do that. With Christ, we have his love to give to one another, love that serves our neighbors' needs and sacrifices itself for their care. In Christ, we do not need the law. We do not need the law to tell us what to do or how to live because Christ does that. So who wants to play with the law now that we have Christ?

Secondly, to have the law come back into play means that the law brings its accusations, judgment, and puts us into the place of death. The law by its very nature is demand and accusation. When the law is present, accusation is present. Accusation gives us no peace with God and keeps our conscience troubled. The law cannot be brought back as a guide for life, as a way to help a person in Christ, because the law will accuse us. The law is of no help to a person in Christ, only trouble.

The law is still useful to keep us trusting Christ and to keep us looking to Christ for how we are right with God and are given goodness and eternal life. That's because we still have our self-centeredness and it needs to be kept in its proper place—daily crucifixion. We are still surrounded by rules and they still attract us as a way to win, to be better, or to get something we really want to make our life good. But when we see the law only as a way to win, to improve our life, or as a guide, we are forgetting law's very nature of demand and accusation. We cannot pretend the demand and accusation of law are gone because of Christ, and law's role as guide (and only a guide) is still present. We may want the law as a guide to give us surety and comfort about what is right and wrong in God's will. However, to want the law as our surety and comfort is to stop wanting Christ as our guide, our surety, and our comfort. And suddenly we trust something else more than we trust Christ. The law accuses us and condemns us for being distrusters. To trust the law to guide us is to go against the law's demand to

trust only Christ.

We cannot have the law as guide and the law as accuser at the same time because our human will will not be able to tell the difference. Whenever the law is used as a guide, it will also be accusing.

In Christ, we are given a new life to play. But there are no rules on the lid of the box. Instead, Jesus takes his turn first. Then, on our turn, we simply follow what Jesus has done and play as he does. Playing as Jesus plays, we will give mercy, forgiveness, goodness, and more. In Jesus, we have already won the game of salvation—of pleasing God, so we don't have to try and beat each other to get God's attention. Instead, we are free to help each other get through the game, enjoy the game and each other.

Christ is God's gift to you. Enjoy playing with him.

Kevin Born: The ELCA's "Evangelism Strategy"

Throughout much of the nineteenth century and the first part of the twentieth, most of the immigrants arriving new to the United States were of northern and western European background. Many of them arrived as Lutherans, looking for Lutheran congregations to join. Existing Lutheran churches grew rapidly. New Lutheran congregations started on every corner. And we Lutherans thought we knew something about evangelism.

Today, the people arriving new on our shores are not as a rule from northern or western Europe, they are not of Lutheran heritage, and they are not looking for Lutheran congregations to join. Numerical growth in Lutheran church bodies in the U.S. has trickled to a halt, and we Lutherans in the U.S. are

discovering that we don't know much of anything about evangelism – and quite probably never did.

So is that the rationale for an “Evangelism Strategy for the ELCA?” Perhaps. Perhaps there is another rationale. In any case, Draft 1 of this “Strategy” can be accessed through the ELCA’s web site. Draft 2 is rumored to be in process. The charitable thing might be to ignore Draft 1 altogether and pray fervently that Draft 2 is a vast improvement. That would certainly be the easier thing to do. Critiquing the content of Draft 1 of this “Strategy” is akin to critiquing the wardrobe of the clothes-less emperor of fairy tale fame. There just doesn’t seem to be any substance in the “Strategy” to critique. At least no evangelical or confessional Lutheran substance.

Maybe it’s unfair or unrealistic to expect a strategy to pay any attention to substance, or to reflect any substance behind it; but when the subject is evangelism, substance should not be ignored. In this regard, evangelism is like fishing (to borrow a Biblical image). We can talk about fishing equipment and fishing technique all we want to (and in this part of Minnesota, many folks do), but at some point we had best pay some attention to our bait. The best equipment and the most expert technique will do us absolutely no good if what we’re dangling is a bare hook.

In search of bait, then, let us begin with how the “Strategy” defines evangelism: “Evangelism is telling others that Jesus is Lord, inviting them to trust in God through Christ, and bringing them into the Christian Church.” The words there are all right – there’s just not enough of the right words there. Specifically what Jesus are we to tell others about? And exactly what kind of Lord is he? Such questions aren’t stupid. The Church throughout its long history has proclaimed many a different Jesus. Which one is meant here? Jesus the teacher?

Jesus the judge? Or the Jesus Luther and the confessors got all excited about, Jesus the crucified? Similarly, what kind of Lord is meant here? A dominus who dominates from above, constantly demanding and requiring? Or a dominus who serves humbly from beneath, who finally dies to ransom his people? Only one Jesus, only one kind of Lord, is good news – God’s evangel – for us, and that is the one who came to serve, not to be served, and to finally give up his life for us.

Without a bit more information, though, there’s no way of knowing if the “Strategy” has that particular Jesus and that particular Lord in mind. And without knowing that, we are left to wonder if and why trusting God through Jesus is preferable to trusting God through some one or something else; we’re left to wonder if trusting God through Jesus is a good idea at all; and we’re left to wonder if and why belonging to the Christian Church is any better than being outside of and apart from it. Of course, inasmuch as this “Strategy” – especially in its Draft 1 stage – is an “in house” document, so to speak, it’s entirely possible that the “Strategy” takes for granted that everyone in the ELCA is in agreement on just exactly who, and what kind of Lord, Jesus is. But again, it is the Church that’s responsible for all the different Jesuses and all the different kinds of Lords that have been preached down through the years. What says we ELCA Lutherans are different in this respect from the Christians who have gone before us?

The biggest single failing of this “Strategy” is that it nowhere explicitly identifies the Jesus who is the very heart and soul of the evangel. And if for this “Strategy” the very heart and soul of the evangel is Jesus Christ crucified, why is his cross not mentioned a single time in the course of Draft 1? Why is there not a single acknowledgement, not even a single hint of the truth that what the evangel invariably does to every one who hears it is invite them to die with the one who

has already died for them?

Possibly because what Jesus has done for us doesn't appear to be important to this "Strategy." What is very important to this "Strategy" is what's expected and required and called for from us. (As for who or what it is that's doing the expecting, the requiring, and the calling for, it seems to be the "Strategy" itself – and we're left to assume that the reason the "Strategy" expects and requires and calls for what it does is because God expects and requires and calls for the same things.) In any case, the "Strategy" sets goals for the ELCA. The ELCA is to become a praying church. The ELCA is to develop evangelical leaders. The ELCA is to start and renew congregations. The ELCA is to teach discipleship.

Again, the words sound right – but then, the Law always does to the sinner within, and these goals are pretty legalistic. These goals talk about what we must do ("deepen our commitment to becoming a praying church"). They talk about what is required of us ("a dramatically new kind of leadership"). They talk about what we are to strive for as congregations ("standards of excellence"). They talk about what we are encouraged to ("growth in our focus on Jesus Christ as the center of our faith").

These goals all leave the burden of performance squarely on our shoulders. In that they do, they are Law. In that they are Law, they accuse and indict us. (If we must become a praying church, we aren't doing enough praying now; if a dramatically new kind of leadership is required of us, then our present kind of leadership isn't good enough; if we are to strive for standards of excellence, we currently must not be excellent enough; and if we are encouraged to grow in our focus on Christ, we must not be focused enough right now.) These accusations and indictments may well all be true. But if they constitute the

entirety of our problem when it comes to evangelism, and are not symptomatic of a deeper problem (say, the sin within us and around us), then the solution to the problem that makes any evangelism strategy necessary isn't Jesus Christ crucified, but just more effort and harder work on our part. And while it may be true that goals by their very nature tend to be legalistic and prescriptive, when it comes to evangelism strategy maybe they shouldn't be. When it comes to the evangel, they definitely shouldn't be. When they are legalistic and prescriptive – as with this “Strategy” – they leave us feeling not comforted and consoled, or excited and enthusiastic even, but rather intimidated, guilty, remorseful, and despairing.

The questions should be raised, “Why these goals? Why this particular tack? What is it that this ‘Strategy’ is really trying to address and change?” Actually, these questions merely repeat the “What’s the rationale?” question asked above. If we examine the “Background” box for goal number one, there is a clue to the answer. In that box we find the following: “This is a critical time for our church. Research shows that despite a growing population that includes more unchurched, many ELCA congregations experience plateaued or declining worship attendance.”

Might it be that the ELCA’s “Evangelism Strategy” is designed to turn around that decline in worship attendance – along with the likely accompanying decline in offering income and benevolence giving? Might it be that the “Strategy” is not designed to spread the euaggelion but to improve and maintain the ELCA’s corporate health? That would help to explain the legalistic spirit of the “Strategy,” as well as the abundance of the adjectives “vital” and “effective” in Draft 1.

That the ELCA’s corporate health was foremost in the minds of the “Strategy” drafters may be disputed. Harder to dispute is

the clearly teleological orientation of this “Strategy” – the telos/goal in question being numerical growth, an end that can be affected or influenced by what we do now. How completely out of step with the spirit of the evangel, the Gospel itself, which proclaims that our ultimate telos/goal has already been achieved by the cross, no matter what we’re doing or failing to do now.

That’s the message the ELCA should be strategizing to get out.