

Friday, December 28, 2007

Offensive Preaching

There is a real and strong offense inherent in God's Law and Gospel, rightly divided. Those who find their god in their own bellies don't care about it, but many others, who pay attention to spiritual matters, find the preaching of Law and Gospel to be offensive. This includes many "in Israel," that is, church members.

Therein is the reason why there is such division in outward Christianity. If we insist on recovering, preserving and teaching the pure Gospel of Christ, we will risk further outward fracturing of Christianity. There will always be some -- even many who find it offensive. In that sense, the Reformation has indeed had a part in the divisions that are so apparent. Is Christian unity so precious that we should seek to buy it with our certainty of salvation? I hope not.

A new "gospel" message has been arising in many churches, in which the only "false" teaching is one that discriminates between righteousness and sin, between saved and unsaved. Some churches have found that this message sits well with a great many people, especially if it's seasoned with a generalized nod toward the Golden Rule. "God will save everyone who tries their best." And the ranks of those churches swell to bursting. No offense there.

On the other hand, there are also divisions in outward Christianity that have no bearing upon our certainty of salvation, nor any relation to the teaching of God's Word. Those sad divisions can be healed in only one way: by recovering, preserving, and teaching the pure Gospel of Christ. In other words, through Reformation.

This, from Luther in 1531:

For many years, it was common experience at many gatherings that preaching was done to please everyone and cause offense to nobody. But the fact is, if you remove the offense and the obstacle, then Christ is lost. For right from the beginning when this man came into the world to show himself, there was opposition and taking of offense. Yes, say the pope, the bishops, the wise, and the mighty of this world, we will not tolerate this. Very well, are you angry? Then suppress it. Christ came to the Jews. He did not ask them beforehand whether or not he should come. This started such a stir in their land that they could not suppress it. Now he has come to us through his gospel, without our knowledge or will, and has also started a great uproar. Are you angered? Then oppose it. Are you wise? Then speak your mind. There are many who want to resolve the matter by human wisdom, but that remains to be seen. If they're going to resolve this, bring an end to division and offense, achieve tranquility and unity, as they suppose, then I will scratch this text. Christ himself says in Matthew 10:34, "Think not that I am come to send peace on earth: I came not to send peace, but a sword." Therefore, it will likely be and remain, as Simeon states, "This child is set for the fall and rising again of many in Israel." On the other hand, many will rise because of him and be saved. Those who try to resolve this matter through human wisdom will accomplish nothing; rather, they will fall, never to rise, and be smashed because of it. For they try to make Christ different from what God ordered and ordained.

-- Luther's House Postil vol. 1, first sermon for "First Sunday after Christmas"

Posted by Jesse Jacobsen in Doctrine at 14:22

Sacerdotalism and the Keys

In an article printed in the latest *Lutheran Synod Quarterly*, one of the ELS Doctrine Committee members provides a perspective on sacerdotalism. Classically defined, sacerdotalism occurs when we teach that an individual cannot freely and directly approach God (as in prayer), but requires the intervention of a third party -- a priest of some kind. It also occurs when we teach that God's spiritual gifts must always be received through an intermediary -- again, through some kind of priest.

Thus defined, sacerdotalism contradicts scripture's teaching that every Christian is a priest in his own right (1 Peter 2:9). Scripture teaches that every Christian has full access to God in prayer (1 Thessalonians 5:17), and may receive His spiritual gifts through Word and Sacrament with no intercessor but Christ himself.

There is, however, a useful distinction that the author may have overlooked.

Back in 2001

I wrote two email responses on the mailing list [elsministry](#) that described this distinction. The first is message number 260 in the list archives.

Here's the message, with other names removed to avoid raising issues that may distract from the point. The first two paragraphs were written by the person to whom I was responding. The rest was written by me, 6 years ago.

The prescriptions: the Great Commission, the Priesthood of Believers, the Use of the Keys. Were not these given to ALL Christians? I believe this might be a, or the, moot point. If there is limitation, then you would have to say that the Call my wife starts to serve under tomorrow...in which she will be teaching the Word to little lambs of Jesus, using the Keys by calling to repentance and offering Jesus' forgiveness with the Law and the Gospel, ...

The Prescriptions above are clear. They apply.

I don't think we have a clear enough idea of what those three Prescriptions mean and how they relate to one another. They are not synonyms, nor even different aspects of the same thing, but are often presented that way. Your example of "using the Keys" leads me to wonder something. Would you say that any use of Law and Gospel (which always call to repentance and forgive) is an exercise of the Keys? I hope my question doesn't sound too elementary. I would answer "no." In my Bible Class this morning, we discussed our DC Theses' conception of how the Keys relate to the forgiveness of sins. That class also answered "no," and drew a line between "sharing the Gospel" and "forgiving someone's sins." This, I think, is confessional. See S.A. III, "On the Gospel," where the Keys and the "mutual conversation and consolation of brothers" are listed separately, yet both as means of grace.

Here's an interesting experiment: ask your members if they think that they *ought to* bestow God's forgiveness upon someone for sins that have nothing to do with themselves? Or, is that task better left¹ to God's ministers? Certainly, it's better left to God's ministers, in spite of the universal priesthood, etc. Yet Matthew 18 says that Christians should forgive one another 70x7 times, but there's another distinction that came up in

this morning's class: forgiveness is not necessarily God's forgiveness, and it's God's forgiveness that's better left to God's ministers. When I asked this morning what the difference is between giving God's forgiveness (exercising the loosing Key) and forgiveness between brothers, the answer was not surprising. The former is saying something like "I forgive your sins in God's name as His representative." (You know the many liturgical forms of this.) The latter is any other method of communicating the Gospel, e.g. "Jesus forgives all your sins, because He suffered and died for you." I wonder if this conception of forgiveness and Keys is widely-held.

So based on your message to N., I'm wondering where you would draw the line between any "generic" use of Law and Gospel and the exercise of the Keys. Both, of course, are means of grace, right? This may (or may not) have an effect upon our view of a CDS teacher's activities.

¹ "...better left..." : I use this wording because the Keys are like Baptism in that every Christian must use them as the need arises. In this, I'm not denying in the least that any member of the Church can use the Keys. They are possessed by the whole Church, every member, as our Confessions clearly state. My wording merely recognizes with the Confessions that it's possible for an individual Church member (not just the Pope) improperly to seize the exercise of the Keys.

A lot has happened since 2001. My preferred way of expressing these distinctions has changed somewhat since. Generally speaking, though, I still see much significance in the fact that in S.A. III, "On the Gospel," Martin Luther distinguished several species of Gospel from one another. I think that provides present-day Lutherans with a useful guide and precedent for our usage of the term "Keys" in relation to the other items in the list.

Neither then nor now do I suppose that individual Christians are unable to approach God directly in prayer, or unable to receive His spiritual gifts through Word and Sacrament without some kind of priestly intercession. Neither then nor now do I claim any difference in authenticity or efficacy when a pastor speaks the Gospel over against when a layman speaks the gospel. In other words, sacerdotalism is not an issue here -- though I have wondered at various times since whether some may have jumped to that conclusion.

More Recently

The other time I mentioned this matter was in a much later email response to the same list, message number 2304. I was responding to a different writer, whose words are interlaced with mine, conversation-style:

In my experience, however, the phrasing is not all that is needed to apply this to the person. In addition, I might assure Hank, "Look Hank, Christ took your sins to the cross - these too. He didn't say 'It is finished, except for Hank Jones, who has some sins too great for me to atone for.'" I may ransack Scripture for words of gospel comfort. What kind of shepherd would I be if I said tht the only word of gospel that could apply to Hank is the formula for absolution? The ability to do this, the CALLING to do this is the difference between Bill and Pastor Jacobsen.

I think you are essentially correct. It has also been asserted that our Confessions sometimes make a semantic distinction between absolution in a narrow sense and other forms of gospel application. I think that is also essentially correct, though we can not insist that the Confessions always speak about absolution in exactly the same sense.

I've been doing some thinking about what I mean by saying that absolution is implicitly public. Your description of preaching being most public, etc., was helpful in that regard. For the sake of discussion, I'd like to suggest a finer-grained view of the "publicness" of the means of grace than we are accustomed to. It

seems to me that we recognize two components of "publicness:" that something is done on behalf of or with the authority of Jesus, and that something is done on behalf of or with the authority of the His bride, the Church. Thus far, we have (with our adopted statement) not distinguished between these two components either logically or semantically. It may be beneficial to do this, in order to understand what is meant by "implicitly public." Unfortunately, we don't have any vocabulary that I'm aware of to use in making this distinction, so I suggest using the pairs public/private and official/unofficial for either component. That means that in this argument, public and official are no longer synonyms. I'll use the public/private pair to describe whether something is done on behalf of or with the authority of the Church. I'll use the official/unofficial pair to describe whether something is done on behalf of or with the authority of Christ. Sometimes I like to see things organized visually, so I drew this diagram on paper. Hopefully it translates into whatever font you are using in your email reader:

Public	Public
Official	Unofficial
Private	Private
Official	Unofficial

Public: representing the Church (in practice: the assembly)

Private: on the authority of one's own faith

Official: representing Christ

Unofficial: representing oneself

This diagram represents four possible ways that someone can "forgive" or "retain" the sins of another person. When we use the term "keys," where does that fall on the diagram? I think that our past descriptions of this have failed to take into account the possibility of an "unofficial" way of speaking, that is, forgiving or retaining sins on one's own personal authority. Because of this, we have always focused upon the left side of the diagram, where the only distinction is whether the Church has charged an individual with the responsibility to forgive and retain sins.

But it remains possible for someone to forgive or retain sins, speaking on the right side of the diagram. So let's consider those two possibilities in concrete terms.

If an assembly of Christians directs an individual to drop a personal grudge against someone else, and that person does so, then he is acting unofficially, giving the forgiveness that comes from his own personal authority. This act is public in the sense that the assembly asked him to do it, so that he is representing their will. But since it is not intended to be a pronouncement of God's forgiveness, I don't think this is an exercise of the Keys. At least it's not "official," so it would be an extremely broad, and therefore probably inadvisable, idea of "keys."

The same individual can continue in his grudge or drop it completely on the basis of his own opinion. When he voices this decision, he is "forgiving or retaining sins" both privately and unofficially. In the same way, any individual may express his personal approval or disapproval of another person's behavior. "I think it's wrong for you to let your kids watch so much TV." That is "retaining sins" on one's own authority, without representing the assembly of Christians. It's both private and unofficial. Again, I don't think this is an exercise of the Keys.

So when I have said that the Keys are implicitly public, that translates into this argument as: "the Keys are

implicitly official." Recognizing that unofficial forgiveness and disapproval is a real possibility, I am categorically saying that they do not qualify to be called the Keys. Something must represent Jesus to be a use of the Keys.

It would be beneficial to continue this line of thought by asking how a particular act can be official -- can represent Jesus. In other words, whom has Jesus commanded to perform these acts of ministry? The various means of grace differ in this regard. But I've written plenty already.

....

Is this the call to preach/proclaim of Romans 10? I think you have to answer "yes," unless you want to say that faith DOESN'T come from hearing the message in this classroom, from this teacher, or that it shouldn't.

Again, I agree with the same clarification that we are using public ministry-related concepts in a wider sense. Romans 10 directly addresses those who preach, and the Church has reflected this in certain ways. But indirectly, Romans 10 addresses the public ministry in a wider sense by establishing the principle that those who proclaim God's Word publicly must also do so officially. In other words, they must be authorized. The practical form of this authorization can vary dramatically. We don't always have to use the word "call," but the official authorization must be recognized.

This is an area where our ministry statement could be strengthened. It is a little too concise, and leaves many with the impression that formal calls are required. For better clarity, the narrow/wider sense distinction should be carried through the entire document, not just used in section II. Also, it could be made clearer that a "sense" is not established by God, but a human convention for speaking about something.

These excerpts show two ways I have expressed the same distinction between different applications of judgment or forgiveness. At this point, I favor the second, more recent way.

Distinctions

I've wondered if some hear about such a distinction and get a little uncomfortable, thinking that it's heading toward sacerdotalism. In particular, some may wonder if I see any distinction between the Gospel applied by pastors and the Gospel applied by laymen. Here's the shocker: yes, I do. However, the distinction is not found in terms of objective efficacy or authority. Sacerdotalism is not an issue. God's Word remains fully effective at all times, and every Christian possesses the Keys and the authority to use them by virtue of his faith in Christ.

The distinction between the Keys as used by pastors (i.e., anyone called in the narrow sense of A.C. XIV) and the Keys as administered by laymen is twofold. First, in the 4-way categorization I presented in the second message above, laymen always administer the Keys privately, even when they do so officially. In other words, Christ authorizes laymen to apply Law and Gospel to other sinners, but they do so only in their private lives, and not as representatives of the Church. That makes their divine authorization implicit, rather than explicit. Pastors, on the other hand, apply Law and Gospel to their flocks with Christ's authority, *and* as representatives of the Church. Their divine authorization comes explicitly in the form of their call.

Second, there is a fundamental difference in the way our Lord's authorization comes to pastors, as compared to laymen. Laymen possess and may use the Keys by virtue of their faith -- and for no other reason. Pastors are authorized to use the Keys by virtue of their divine call. That is, their vocation from Christ as His representatives, which comes mediately *through* the Church. This results in an important *subjective*

difference for those to whom Law and Gospel are applied. It's critically important to understand that there is still no difference in objective efficacy or the fact of authorization. The difference is entirely subjective, yet it's still real.

When a sinner hears God's Law or Gospel from a lay Christian, it is objectively God's Word, and the sinner should be convicted or comforted as though God himself were speaking to him. The same is true when the sinner hears the message from a pastor. However, the pastor is also explicitly called and authorized to deliver this message, in a fully verifiable way. (Anyone can check his credentials as a rightly called pastor.) The lay Christian, on the other hand, is authorized by virtue of his faith only, which is not verifiable by mortal man. This becomes important when we take seriously the third paragraph of article VIII in the Augsburg Confession.

They [i.e. Lutherans] condemn the Donatists, and such like, who denied it to be lawful to use the ministry of evil men in the Church, and who thought the ministry of evil men to be unprofitable and of none effect.

The Donatist heresy was concerned only with the ministry of pastors. Lutherans believe that evil men (i.e., unbelievers) who happen to be pastors still have a profitable and effective ministry in the sense that their preaching of God's Word and their administration of the sacraments is effective by virtue of their divine call. If your pastor is an unbeliever, you can still receive Baptism, the Lord's Supper, and the preaching of God's Word from him with the full confidence that it is the ministry of Jesus Christ. The pastor's faith or lack thereof has no bearing upon his divine authorization to do these things. If you were absolved by Judas on his way to betray our Lord, you could still rest assured that the absolution comes from the Lord himself.

On the other hand, if you receive your absolution from a lay Christian, he possesses the authority to speak it only by virtue of his faith, which is invisible to you. Again, this doesn't reduce the efficacy of the absolution or the Christian's authorization to speak it. The difference is subjective. If you doubt that the person is a genuine Christian, then the person's authority to speak God's absolution to you is also cast into doubt. Thus, though the difference is subjective, it is nevertheless real.

In most cases, this question of authorization will probably not arise. However, when it *does* arise, what should a terrified conscience do? Where can it go to receive an absolution that will not be cast into doubt? The answer is clear, and it's an important reason why our Lord instituted the office of the ministry. Such a terrified conscience should confess its sins and seek the absolution from its own called pastor.

When we assign the term "sacerdotalism" its classical definition, it only applies to the objective reality of salvation received. The distinction I have just described, however, exists elsewhere: in the *subjective* reality of salvation received. It is not classically-defined sacerdotalism. If someone wants to change the definition of sacerdotalism and make the accusation anyway, then I will have to agree with the author of the LSQ article, that sometimes it's a good thing to be a sacerdotalist.

Posted by Jesse Jacobsen in Doctrine, PMW at 13:07

Daily Devotions for Busy People

In *The Lutheran Hymnal* and in the *Book of Family Prayer* there is a schedule of Bible texts that may be used for devotions through the Church Year. From what I can see, its chief advantage is variety. Its disadvantage is convenience. I find it much more convenient to keep a bookmark in the Bible that sits on our living room shelf. Then I can grab that Bible (or the second edition of *Concordia* that sits nearby) for something to read during breakfast.

In the *Evangelical Lutheran Hymnary* there is a list of the monthly psalter, which takes the reader through the entire book of Psalms once a month, with readings in the morning and evening. For a few years I had my computer sending out those readings via email. That worked well enough. Someone suggested that I make it available as an RSS feed instead. I never really had the right combination of opportunity, means, and motive, until today.

For a few weeks now, I've been producing a bulletin insert for my churches here containing some ideas and helps for use in personal devotion. Included are the readings from both the schedule I mentioned above and from the monthly psalter. That's also where I list prayer requests, Sunday school lesson themes, and progressive excerpts from the *Small and Large Catechisms*. It's a useful little insert, especially for those who can keep one handy through the week. I could do that, but today I realized I can do something else, too.

In the last year or two, I've been using an RSS feed aggregator to keep up with a few blogs and news sources. Right now, I'm very satisfied with one called Akregator, which is part of the KDE desktop environment. For those who don't know what an RSS feed or an aggregator is, here's a brief (3-paragraph) explanation:

Many web sites have pages or other information that gets updated from time to time. If you want to stay abreast of the information with your web browser, then you'll have to fire up your browser and tell it to show you that page every time you remember to check for changes. Sometimes, there will be no changes at all, so you will have wasted some time in checking. Sometimes you won't even remember to check for a while. That inconvenience and wasted time is solved by RSS feeds and aggregators.

An RSS feed can be provided by the web site you want to keep tabs on. It's a link that shows a machine-readable list of recent changes. Each item in the list of changes can contain a link to the changed information, a comment or description, a bit of audio or video media (then we call it a podcast), and any number of other useful tidbits.

An aggregator (or feed reader) is an inobtrusive program that you keep running on your computer, which periodically checks all the RSS feeds you may be interested in for new information. When it finds something new, it lets you know. The aggregator also provides a way for you to subscribe to new feeds, manage your feeds, and even view the items they contain. Google and other web portals have built-in aggregators, but I prefer one that I can use without a web browser.

So today I decided it's high time to provide this devotional information in an RSS Feed. Anyone can use it. Each item you fetch from the feed contains a brief description and a link to the devotion text for that time of that day. At 12 PM Pacific, the feed switches from morning devotions to evening devotions. (If you're in another time zone, there's not much I can do about it. I don't think I have access to your tz information when you fetch the feed.) Generally, there are two items in the feed: the devotion text and the psalter reading. Since there are no devotion texts for Sunday, the feed is set to provide Sunday texts from the historic lectionary.

If you already use an aggregator, or if your browser has one built-in, then all you need is the link. You can use either of these:

<http://www.bethanythedalles.org/devotions.py>

<http://www.concordiahoodriver.org/devotions.py>

If your web browser doesn't know what to do with those, and you don't have an aggregator, then I suggest that you try out some free ones. You'll find links from Wikipedia, among other places.

Posted by Jesse Jacobsen in Technology at 21:38