

God's Rights

The logic of moralism vs. the eschato-logic of the Gospel

I was once alive apart from the law, but when the commandment came, sin revived and I died; the very commandment which promised life proved to be death to me. (Romans 7:9-10)

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I enter the church. I am greeted by nice people on their best Christian behavior, all smiles and name tags. The banners, brightly colored, artistically done, declare what it is all supposed to be about: Grow in Love!; Celebrate!; Feed the Hungry!; Stewardship is Caring!; Blessed are the Peacemakers!; and so forth. I wait for the Service to start with bowed head. Not out of reverence particularly, but apprehension. Wondering whether the Gospel will get preached in the face of all these imperatives.

The text for the Day is, let us say, the Laborers in the Vineyard. Ah, I say to myself, that's a good one. Perhaps this time it will be different. True, a glance at the sermon theme in the bulletin is not exactly encouraging: IT'S NEVER TOO LATE. But still, hope springs. The text is strong; if it is given a chance, maybe it will win anyway.

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Service in the Vineyard

The sermon, as it turns out, is not bad. As a matter of fact, it is pretty good. It is even entirely true in its way. It begins with a heart-rending story about a talented and highly qualified worker who has been laid off and now cannot get a new job because he is too old. Too late, he is told. Now the preacher begins to deal with the text. The Lord, the preacher says, calls us *to serve* in his vineyard. Let us not overlook that in all the business about the laborers being called at different hours. True, whatever the way of the world where workers are judged as no longer employable for this reason or that, the Lord judges differently. He is a God of grace, and therefore IT'S NEVER TOO LATE. But we are called by the Lord *to serve*.

But how do we serve? The preacher explains that today the vineyard is the world, a world that cries out in its hurt for the church to be a place of loving and caring, a fountain of peace and justice. (The suspicion grows that now we are coming to the really serious business of the day.) Christians must get serious about serving in the Lord's vineyard! The sermon winds up with a story about a card left in the pew after a Service signed, "A Seeking Skeptic." The card went, "I don't need to be told over and over again that God is love. I have heard that before, and I am heart-sick of sitting here in the midst



of people who have heard it again and again and yet show so little love. If you who call yourselves the people of God would actually show some love and be affirming of people who don't happen to be just like you, maybe I would find the love of God you talk about a little more convincing." The preacher closes with mighty encouragements about making our church right here on Elm and Main into a more loving and caring community. It's what we have been called to do. IT'S NEVER TOO LATE for us to take up the work because God is a God of grace. Amen!

Not bad. Skillfully done. Even moving here and there. We adjourn to the lounge for coffee. *No one talks about the sermon!* One cannot but admit that what the preacher said was all right and true, so we have no defense. Yet in the battle with the text it was, at best, a draw, and in that battle even a draw is really a loss. *Moralism*, the leaven fermenting away at our spiritual resources, has set in. If not detected in time, it will have the whole lump.

The Leaven of Moralism

Moralism. An ugly and touchy subject, especially in the church. Why is it so touchy a subject? Because it appears so right with its earnest concern for Christians to act like Christians, to produce the fruits of faith. Yet moralism constitutes a



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grave error. It is a radical transformation of Christian proclamation into something far removed from the Good News.

Moralism is a subtle business. Mostly it is not blatant, though it can become so. It is often just the slight twist of the dial, the shift in the point of view, the setting or ordering of the remarks, the shading and coloring of what is said. It springs from an often almost imperceptible nervousness about, impatience with, or lack of confidence in the Gospel. The moralist is eager to cut the tree down and cast it into the fire when it does not bear fruit, while the preacher of the Good News counsels just to spread the fertilizer on a little thicker and wait. Even crusty old Tertullian, who would probably win a lot of honors in a contest of moralists, recognized that impatience was a prime temptation for Christians.

But let us look at our sermon. Where do we detect this leaven? To begin with there is the—generally unnoticed—shift in focus in the move from text to sermon. Instead of the keeper of the vineyard and his wild behavior being the central subject and message of the sermon, the spotlight moves to the laborers and their response and service. And that, of course, means that eventually we ourselves and our doings become the subject of the sermon. God's doings in Christ fade into the background as something everyone more or less

knows about already. God becomes a cipher which does not really count for anything. To be sure, God is held to be a God of grace, but since grace has become a generality (God is, in general, nice to everybody because he just can not help it), it is our doings, our response, that are the real center of attention. With God's activity effectively neutralized, we are the only actors left. No matter how much we insist that our actions are performed with the aid of grace, the shift in focus indicates the strong likelihood that the real impetus is moralism, a free-standing commitment to a pattern of behavior quite apart from God.

The Shift of Focus

It seems to be something of a dogma these days that the preacher must begin the sermon with a little story taken from daily life in order to gain attention and signal the sermon's relevance to the pressing concerns of the hearers. The theory is not in itself fatal, perhaps, but in practice the story that is recounted frequently pressures the text into discussing something *we* are to do and little else. Our response, our service, our campaigns for peace and justice, our caring and sharing, our battles for a sense of worth and dignity take precedence over what God has done and intends to do.

So the parable about the, to our lights, irresponsible householder be-

comes the parable about the laborers. It is about our service and all that. The parable about the sower becomes the parable about the soils. "What kind of soil are you?" Perhaps the pericope about the healing of the paralytic will become a story about the community. Just think of the love and caring and sharing of those who carried the poor sufferer to the Lord. The Beatitudes become a list of more or less readily attainable Christian virtues. And those wild ecstatic seers of old we call the prophets become (*mirabile dictu!*) models in our contemporary quest for international peace and justice. Always the little moralistic twist. We seem constantly to be clutching anxiously and nervously at straws, looking for handles, the slightest excuse, to plug in our concerns and agendas. How else can we make the church and its proclamation relevant? How else prove our usefulness?

Why does this happen? Why can the text not have its say? We have already mentioned the unrelenting pressure to be relevant. No doubt there is also the pressure to be successful. But no doubt also the preacher genuinely cares about the steady stream of tragic cases he or she has to deal with and becomes frustrated at being able to do so little. So the preacher turns to the kind of preaching and teaching that appears to get at the problems more directly and promises quicker results. ➤



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The preacher cannot do it all alone. Is not everyone in the church, as we put it these days, to be involved in ministry?

But if we put it all together—the shift of focus and the desire for results for whatever reason, it adds up to the logic of moralism. Moralism makes an “ism” out of the doing itself. It makes the moral, that is, the Law, the way and either forgets the Gospel or calls upon it only to help out in case of failure. Moralism wants results and believes such results will be forthcoming only if they are cajoled or demanded from us. Moralism works by force ultimately, not physical force in most cases, of course, but psychological and social force. Since it demands results, it is inherently nervous about a Gospel that simply gives unconditionally and does not ask anxiously about the outcome.

The Clash

The result is a direct clash between the logic of moralism and the eschatologic of the text. Preachers stand at the point where this clash takes place, usually with a heavy agenda imposed on them by their exposure to many different influences: institutional, political, emotional, humanitarian, ethical, and so forth. The problem is not that the preacher

does not believe in Christ and the Gospel. Rather, it is that it is so very difficult, apparently, for the preacher to allow the eschatologic of the text to break out and dominate the scene. If it is allowed at all, it must be held carefully in check and balanced so it will not do any harm to the ethical exhortation the preacher is driving for. Who will be concerned about justice if people are declared just unconditionally for Jesus' sake? How can you get any results if you say that everyone gets the same regardless of what they do?

Moralism creates massive confusion in the church about the church's essential message and mission. For some decades now we have been bombarded with missives designed to correct our supposed “Lutheran” sins: the Reformation's undercutting of good works; our too-facile separation of religion and politics; our quietism and failure to be politically active; and so forth. All this, of course, is the fault of Lutheran theology! But whatever the place of the complaint, it often appears as the prelude to an announcement of the preacher's pet agenda. No doubt there have been and continue to be misreadings and misuses of Lutheran theology. No doubt we have made premature separations. But when the eschatologic is disregarded or compromised and the logic of moralism takes over, the result is complete confusion on God's rule in the world, the kingdom of the left hand (Law) and the kingdom of the right hand (Gospel).

Dangers and Distinctions

There are two dangers for any theology that works with the eschatologic. The one, indeed, is an illegitimate and premature separation of the Kingdoms, but the other is the confusion created by an illegitimate identification or mixture. We have been trying to avoid the one only to succumb to the other. We have been falling all over ourselves of late to deny the Two-Kingdoms doctrine only to collapse everything into a mish-mash. Say what you will about the evident pitfalls of the doctrine, the fact is that when it is denied, the world does not become noticeably better. The church only becomes noticeably worse.

Paul Tillich made a distinction that I have continued to find helpful in sorting out many of the issues here. The distinction was between conditioned and unconditioned problems and their respective “remedies.” Conditioned problems are those that arise because of the particular conditions under which we have been brought up and live. Perhaps we had a bad relationship with our parents, are troubled with addiction, have a broken leg, or lost a job or been subjected to poverty and injustice. Conditioned problems, however, can be solved only by altering or correcting the conditions that brought them about. A bad relationship with one's parents may call for therapy, addiction for appropriate treatment, a broken leg for a physician, poverty and injustice for appropriate political and social remedies. Conditioned

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problems call for the appropriate means and skills of those able to deal with them, quite often of specialists.

Unconditioned problems, however, cannot be attributed to any of the particular conditions that we encounter on our life's journey. They arise simply from the fact that we exist over against the threat of non-being and death, that we are creatures and not creators, that we are estranged sinners and cannot escape. No conditions this side of the eschaton can be altered to remedy such unconditioned problems and anxieties. It is the paramount task of theology and the proclamation and sacraments of the church, Tillich maintained, to deal with the unconditioned problems and anxieties of existence. If the church substitutes conditioned remedies for unconditioned ones in its central message, the result is nothing but confusion. Therapy will be confused with the Gospel, overcoming addiction with release from sin, physical healing with salvation, liberation from poverty and injustice with redemption, jogging with religion, affirmation of every possible lifestyle and inclusivism with community, meditation with faith, and so on endlessly.

The confusion between the conditioned and the unconditioned in the church today is massive. We seem quite incapable of doing anything with the eschatological logic of the biblical texts. Everything is turned so there can be a moralistic payoff. The church is besieged by people with every sort of agenda other than what one finds in the text of the Bible. And one begins to wonder if people enter the ministry because the church is about the last place left on earth where they will find a captive audience on which to unload their agendas.

Conditioned and Unconditioned Problems

It is of course understandable that we should concentrate so much effort on the conditioned problems of the time. The conditions are in so many, many instances intolerable. If they are not altered soon, perhaps there will be no one left to preach the unconditioned promises to. We desperately need to attend to the business of altering the intolerable conditions under which we find ourselves (the threat of nuclear war is a case in point). All that can certainly be granted.

But this means only that we need to ask ourselves some more fundamental questions about what the church and its message really are for and how they relate to our conditioned problems. Do we really think that we will get on better by deserting the eschatological message of God's action on our behalf in favor of some moralistic exhortation? For the most part there is nothing wrong with the duties moralism lays upon us. It is the voice of the Law. There is nothing wrong with the Law. It is holy, just, and good. The only problem with it is that it does not work, not ultimately. Not to accomplish the ends that the church is finally interested in—the life of faith in God, true community in love, hope for life eternal.

Certainly we know this. To be sure, the Law works after a fashion "out there" in the world. It works by force, either physical or other sorts of inducements. And we do need to ask about our responsibilities over against that enterprise—the so-called political use of the Law. But the church, surely, differs from the world in that it has no force of that kind. It has only the Gospel. It is premised on the wild, wild belief that the Gospel ultimately saves the world,

not the Law, that the Gospel inspires spontaneous and free doing of the good. It is dedicated to pursuing the fantastic divine risk manifest in the sheer and unconditional gift of Jesus crucified and risen. It prophesies that he will come again to wrap all things up. Moralism disagrees, but if the church follows the logic of moralism to the end, it can only take the road of force and end in the streets or try to flex its political muscle as a "moral majority."

But even if the church should succeed in such ventures (highly unlikely!), what will be gained? We should not forget that the church too could gain the whole world only to lose its soul. It has happened before; it can happen again. The church exists to prophesy before the world that "there is a river, the streams whereof make glad the City of God," that there is a Kingdom in which peace will reign and justice be done freely and spontaneously because God is in charge. When I go to church, I do not expect to hear the same thing I hear on television or read in the newspapers. I want to hear something about why I should bother. I want to hear something, that is, to counter those unconditional anxieties eating away at my heart and that of the entire human enterprise.

Relevance and Decision

Now it may be true, of course, that the Gospel as preached in the past is no longer immediately relevant to the problems and concerns of the contemporary scene. But moralism is itself at least partly at fault for that. The Gospel in the past was preached largely on the premise of individualistic moralism and offered individualistic salvation in the face of moral failure. Since we have supposedly gotten over that, we have now apparently exchanged individual for social moralism. There is not much gain in that. It seems only to give us license for complaining loudly about the sins of others rather than

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our own on the one hand and make it more difficult to speak the Gospel on the other. What kind of social salvation can we preach other than the eschatological hope that one day the lion will indeed lie down with the lamb? If we miss that, we usually end by identifying the Gospel with our communal and social projects. The confusion abounds.

Time is running out on us. Either we must become more radical about preaching the eschatological Gospel or forget it. If we are to hold back on the Gospel for fear it will spoil our agendas, the world would be better served if we stopped preaching altogether and joined the local pollution-control agency or whatever organization or institution is addressing the problem that we are concerned with.

The Gospel must be preached in a fashion radical enough to put the old moralist, individual or social, to death so the new being in the body of Christ can arise. Then we shall see what will happen. I have the sneaking suspicion that the proclamation is not really successful unless the moralist in us, like those laborers in the vineyard, gets terribly nervous or even upset. I suspect that if properly preached, the Gospel should provoke us to ask "But, but what are we supposed to do then?" and we should go home searching for the answer. What *are* we to do now that it is apparent that they all got the same reward? The moralistic sermon is always ready with some sort of answer. We go to coffee and forget it.

God's Rights

But how might it look, that sermon, if we were to try out the eschatologic rather than the logic of moralism? How about as a theme: GOD'S

RIGHTS? Start right out with the words of the text: "Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what is my own?" We hear a lot about rights these days. Does God have rights? Whoever could conceive of such a thing? But there it is: God's right to be generous! But how can we put up with a God like the householder in our text who claims to have the right to do what he chooses? Does God have the right to do that?

What we have been doing to this point, of course, is simply attacking the logic of moralism with the offense of the text so as to cut off all avenues of escape. Now the sermon must take the turn to the eschatologic, to the Gospel. Yes, indeed, it all seems preposterous and even frightfully immoral, but after all, when we are honest, what chance do we really have other than the sheer generosity of God? That is, after all, our only hope, is it not?

Now comes the payoff, the point where the preacher must become the pastor and exercise the office, say the eschatological Word: I am here to say that you *are* God's own, that this very God chooses you, in Baptism, and if you have not heard that or have forgotten it, hear me now. I say your sins are forgiven. How can I say that? Because the One who told this parable got killed for it. Nobody liked it. But God approved, God raised him up. So I must say it again. Just think! They all got the same. ("Do you begrudge me my generosity?") And now it is for you. *This* is what God chooses to do. It has happened in your hearing.

But, of course, we could be a little disappointed at all of this. Is that all there is? Do we always have to be talking about salvation? Should we not be getting on to bigger and better things? Sounds a little like the question of those laborers who had been at it for a long time and borne the heat of the day. Is there anything more? There is, at the least, only that warning to those who do not see: The last shall be first, and the first last. So we end where we started: GOD'S RIGHTS—God's right to make you his own. All our little moralistic games are over. The old leaven has been cast out. Now what are you going to do about that?

Anyone for the vineyard? ■