

Foretasting “Full Communion”: Tomorrow’s LutEpisc Today

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Dr. Bertram considered this a “‘penultimate’ draft, not (yet) for publication.” Unfortunately, he died before he was able to edit it to his satisfaction.

Like Gaul, this paper has three parts.

- 1) What do I think I am doing up here?*
- 2) Why should Richard Hooker arouse Lutherans’ curiosity?*
- 3) How might Episcopalians and Lutherans retrieve Hooker’s teachings on ministry?*

I.

What I think I am doing is what the “theologians of hope,” back in their neo-Marxist phase, used to call “anticipation”: doing today what is not possible until tomorrow. This essay is written in the assured hope that our two church bodies, The Episcopal Church and Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, will enact their (revised) Concordat of Agreement by the year 2000. In that assurance and with the millennium only a biennium away, it is not too soon to anticipate what life will be like under “full communion.” Forget about what is not yet “possible.” Let’s do it anyway – proleptically, but today.

Do what today? Why, “full communion.” And full communion, as some of us have been urging all along, includes full conversation. Once our national bodies have acted, Episcopalians and Lutherans will surely be dialoguing not merely in summit meetings between denominational representatives but locally, like this. For locally is where Word and sacraments are nearest. (You don’t have to be a congregationalist, as I am not, to say that.) And what we locals will be dialoguing about, surely, is not just administrative and programmatic arrangements but also deep-seated matters of heart and soul, each other’s fondest traditions of believing and confessing Christ. And we shall be dialoguing no longer as a precondition to communion but now as the enjoyment of it. The Concordat assures us on the basis of expert opinion that in each other’s churches the Word and sacraments are being faithfully communicated. What better way to confirm that than to find out for ourselves locally, together, no longer on hearsay but at firsthand? One of Lutheranism’s classical confessions speaks of “the conversation and consolation of brothers” and sisters as a means of grace. That is what I take to be happening here today, if only as a foretaste.

One way to engage such full conversation is to begin reading each other’s favorite, most formative texts. That is an experience familiar to newlyweds. They get to know and like their in-laws by appropriating each other’s family histories. Thus the Concordat would have Episcopalians reading the Augsburg Confession. (Henry VIII once did that, though never to the point of signing.) And conversely, what? What, in Anglican sources, should Lutherans be reading? Obviously, The Book of Common Prayer. But the Prayer Book, at least much of it, is already so deeply ingrained in the American Lutheran psyche that, when we read it, we feel we are meeting ourselves coming back. Isn’t there rather something, somebody in the Anglican ancestry – some

doughty dowager or great-uncle – who thought through the Anglican position uniquely and definitively, and said so?

My Episcopal colleagues, as a chorus, recommend Richard Hooker – whom, I suspect, some of them have not read, at least not recently. He is that great sixteenth century spokesman contra Puritanism and pro The Elizabethan Settlement, whose eight-book Treatise on the Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity is still probably the most comprehensive Anglican argument for the episcopate. So that's what I've been reading the past two months, or rather re-reading. My first reading was in graduate school, not exactly a rapturous experience. But this time around I find myself virtually "hooked" on Hooker. (That is not nearly as irreverent a pun as the ones Episcopal seminarians commit against his name. Don't even ask.) My new enthusiasm for Hooker is not hard to explain. I am about to marry into his family. He is soon to become "my" uncle as well. As for corny puns, doesn't that too come with full conversation: the right to chuckle at each other's forebears, this time affectionately?

I have likened this feature of full communion, our reading of each other's family diaries, to what young marrieds do. I admit there are many in both of our clans, Episcopalian as well as Lutheran, who begrudge the forthcoming "full communion," even though they will vote for it, as an arrangement in which they have little choice, a sort of shotgun marriage in which there was scant meaningful courtship. My consolation to these critics is to remind them that whole civilizations have flourished on systems of marriage brokers and arranged marriages in which the couple falls in love after the wedding. Martin Luther's marriage to a German nun and Thomas Cranmer's to a German Lutheran (whom for years he kept hidden) showed signs of such romance after the fact. What I do dare to suggest, at the risk of seeming risque, is that we not wait with our full conversation until two years from now but begin experimenting pre-nuptially. (You will not be

shocked to learn that that, too, has some precedent in both our families.)

In reading each other's texts we shall do so, of course, from the perspective of our own confessional commitments. As you would expect, I shall be reading Hooker Lutheranly. That could make for distortion. All the more reason that I should do my Lutheranizing of Hooker in your presence, like this, in full expectation of your Episcopal correction. On the other hand, there is also an advantage in seeing ourselves as others see us. Thus I fully expect that as Episcopalians read back to us Lutherans what they see in our Augsburg Confession – an Augustana Anglicana, as it were – then what? Then not only we – “Luther's later lessers,” as Martin Marty calls us – but our confession itself may take on more of the catholicity we have always claimed for it.

So I am to do a reading of Hooker in front of you, out loud and Lutheranly. That is already unnerving enough. But the plot thickens when we add that I come to this task in 1998, that is, post-Philadelphia. In other words, ever since the assembly of the ELCA last August my confessional commitments, surely my denominational ones, now find me in “full communion” with three denominations from the Reformed tradition. But with them you Episcopalians are not in communion. Indeed, that is very much why you and they are not in communion: because of the episcopate. You have long upheld the rule of bishops and these Reformed communions have long contested it in favor of presbyterian or congregational polities.

What now are ELCA Lutherans to do, whose polity might be described somewhere in between (in the words of Sydney Mead) as “episcogational”? On the one hand, with Episcopalians we propose to adopt the historic episcopate, and we agree eventually to have all ELCA pastors ordained by “bishops in succession.” On

the other hand, we disclaim (though Episcopalians do not) that such episcopal ordination is essential for the unity of the church. Fair enough. However, since Philadelphia the question is bound to arise within the ELCA, Is such episcopal ordination essential for ordination itself? For suppose, under our new agreement with the Reformed, that a Presbyterian minister comes to serve an ELCA congregation. Will her non-episcopal ordination be recognized? Surely the problem is not insuperable. Yet I ask myself, perhaps a bit too late, why I ever decided to do this tribute to my new Uncle Hooker, whose life's work was a prolonged, point-for-point rebuttal of those Reformed churches with whom I now happily find myself in "full communion." Still, there must be a reason. What if Hooker himself turned out to be a resource in our dilemma? How eschatological dare we be?

II.

Why, we ask secondly, should Hooker arouse Lutherans' curiosity? Well, who wouldn't be aroused by a "compliment" like this: "I dare not deny [said Hooker of the Lutherans] the possibility of their salvation, who have been the chief instrument of ours, albeit they carried to their grave a persuasion so greatly repugnant to the truth?" Wouldn't you perk up if Hooker characterized your (the "Lutherans'") interpretation of Christ's words "this is my body" as follows?

Perplexities which [Lutherans and papists] do both find, by means of so great contradiction between their opinions and true principles of reason grounded upon experience, nature and sense. Which albeit with boisterous courage and breath they seem oftentimes to blow away, yet whoso observeth how again they labour and sweat by subtilty of wit to make some show of agreement between their peculiar conceits and the general edicts of nature, must needs perceive they struggle with that

which they cannot fully master.

If the one you are about to marry turns out to have ancestors who said things like that about your ancestors, wouldn't that pique your attention? Sure, and maybe more than your attention. Yet Lutherans dare not be too thin-skinned, considering the "boisterous courage and breath" which their Blessed Martin did indeed "blow" at those who challenged his understanding of "this is my body."

What's more, also more arresting, is the way Hooker may remind Lutherans of that "second Martin," Martin Chemnitz. He was the second generation reformer who is credited with keeping the first Martin's achievements alive. Chemnitz and Hooker were contemporaries and, so some have speculated, may have influenced each other.

It is generally conceded that Hooker's way of talking about Christ's presence in the Eucharist resembles Bucer's and Calvin's. "But most strikingly," says the Anglican John Booty, Hooker's teaching is like that of "the German Lutheran, Martin Chemnitz." That ought to get a rise out of Lutheran scholars, at least a doctoral dissertation.

That dissertation in turn would generate two or three more on still another, more exciting comparison between Hooker and Lutherans. I am thinking of a comparison between them on the subject of "participation," as they called it – salvation as participation in Christ. That theme goes back at least to the New Testament and early on is mainstreamed into the catholic tradition, systematized by Pseudo-Dionysius with strong elements of mysticism and hierarchy, and continues to appear under a variety of forms and names: koinonia, participation, union, communion, theosis, deification. Hooker – by way of Aquinas, for example – appropriates this tradition. But neither is that theme

unheard of in German Lutheranism. There it surfaces most controversially (heretically?) in the hands of Osiander, a colleague of Luther. (It was Osiander's niece, by the way, who married Cranmer.) Though Osiandrianism is condemned, not least by Martin Chemnitz, the latter himself freely introduces the language of "participation" into the Lutheran confessional book, The Formula of Concord. And today, as we speak, the hottest issue in Luther research is what is going on at The University of Helsinki, where Tuomo Mannermaa and his movement are dialoguing with the Orthodox over the theme of theosis in (guess who) . . . Martin Luther. It is only a matter of time before Finnish Lutherans discover Richard Hooker and call him out of retirement. But why should we wait for them?

Hooker could interest Lutherans even on that hot-button issue which currently troubles our negotiations for "full communion." I mean the issue of episcopacy. Not that today's Lutherans, or probably today's Anglicans, would swallow his views on that matter hook- line-and-sinker. (Sorry about that.) But there are positions he took on episcopacy – "high" but conciliatory, not absolutist – which might commend him to even the most resistive Lutherans. For instance, Hooker did not infer that Lutheran or Calvinist churches on the continent, because of their different polities, were not churches. Even his contemporary, Lancelot Andrewes, who thought bishops ruled "by divine right," would agree: "If our [episcopal] form be of divine right [a claim which I do not find in Hooker] it does not follow from thence that there is no salvation without it, or that a church cannot exist without it. He is blind who does not see churches existing without it." Equally reassuring to Lutherans is Hooker's fundamental argument, against Puritan biblicism, that matters of church governance are to be decided by human reason reflecting the natural law of God. Such reasoning has an eye to what in any given time is edifying and expedient. And by no means need that

contradict Scripture or catholic custom. This argument recalls Luther's, half a century earlier, Against the Heavenly Prophets.

What Lutherans may appreciate most of all is that Hooker did not argue for the episcopate on the basis of apostolic succession. That sort of proof was only beginning to be applied to the English episcopate of his time. He was acquainted with it, he by no means repudiated it and, had he lived longer, he might have adopted it. The fact is, he quite intentionally did not, even though he knows that it was "the general received persuasion held from the beginning." What did he understand by apostolic succession? "That the apostles themselves [before they died] left bishops invested with power above other pastors." Had the apostles done so, then presumably the superiority of bishops, ever since, would have been by "divine right." I do not find Hooker employing either that premise or that conclusion.

If not apostolic succession, what is the alternative for which Hooker did opt, though tentatively? "Merely that after the Apostles were deceased, churches did agree amongst themselves for preservation of peace and order, to make one presbyter in each city chief over the rest, and to translate into him that power by force and virtue whereof the Apostles, while they were alive, did preserve and uphold order in the Church" That way the first bishops would have been chosen by local churches to be chief among their presbyters, all on quite pragmatic, rational grounds. Hooker was willing to suppose – but notice, merely "suppose" – this alternative to apostolic succession as if he were saying, "Suppose for the sake of the argument." Suppose what? Suppose that bishops were an "order taken by the Church itself," not by the Apostles. What difference would that make, if any? Would this alternative order – post-apostolic, church-appointed – be any less by "divine right"? Well, it might, but only if "divine right" implies an authority directly from God, as the apostles had received theirs from God's Son.

But what if, instead, this alternative order was arrived at by God-given human reason, namely, churches figuring out a solution to their leadership needs according to God's natural law? In that case their solution would simply have been a more reasonable – Hooker says a “more warrantable” – way of facilitating “the ministry of the Gospel and the functions thereof.” Still, for all of its human reasonableness, is that alternative any less divine? After all, the whole point of the churches' solution was to insure the “ministry of the Gospel.” And that is “from heaven.”

Now the purist may complain that the preceding paragraph was all based on a passage from Hooker's Seventh Book, which was not published until well after his death and might have been tampered with posthumously. Not only is that complaint dubious. The fact is, already in Hooker's Fifth Book, whose authenticity is beyond dispute, he had anticipated the point we have been making. He is speaking about “the ministry of things divine” and emphasizes that those who are assigned to that ministry are authorized by God. That is so, Hooker explains, “whether they be such as [God] himself [investeth] immediately or as the Church investeth in His name.” Either way, Hooker seems to shrug – whichever! – they “do hold their authority from God.” What Lutheran wouldn't wish that she had said that!

III.

Hooker's insistence on the ministry's divine authority brings us to our third and final question, How can Episcopalians and Lutherans retrieve Hooker's teaching on ministry, especially his conviction that the ministry's Author is always God? My question is not so much whether we might retrieve that conviction (that is not in my hands) but how. And how might we? Not uncritically, of course. Both of us, Episcopalians and Lutherans, would

probably make revisions in Hooker's original, each in our own way. But on one or two points our revisions are likely to be quite similar. For example, there is Hooker's problematic understanding of hierarchy or, as he calls it, "superiority." He asks, In what respect was the bishop superior to the presbyter, and the presbyter superior to the deacon, and so on? The reason for such superiority, he begins, is "not only because one had the power to command and control the other." Stop. Before we allow Hooker to go on, may I please interrupt and ask, If that is not reason enough why some are "superior" over their subordinates, namely, that they have power to command and control them, then what other reason could there be? (There is none, I would whisper.)

Before we let Hooker answer, mightn't we ask ourselves whether indeed that isn't sufficient to make some church officials superior to others, namely, that they are authorized to "command and control?" True, we may wince at Hooker's words "command and control," which sound too military, and replace them with "lead" and "follow," which sound more ecclesial. And we would specify of course that any "power to command" would mean especially moral power, using suasion and mutual consent, not coercion. And we would add that all power entails commensurate accountability. Especially would we insist, being the church, that the power is only for "ministry," service. But having said all that, isn't it still true, superiority and subordination, leadership and followership are simply a fact of our common life and make good rational sense? After all, isn't that in keeping with Hooker's "natural law of God" or, in other words, with God's creation? It may be the old creation, not the new. But we all, also the church, still live in both. It may not be flattering that some kind of "superiority," be it episcopal or presbyterian or congregational, is still needed because of our persistent willfulness. Still, on the positive side, we can be thankful

that what we need is what we get, which then makes “superiority” a gift of creation, even if a second best creation. Isn’t that explanation enough?

Not for Hooker. For him there is another, more ontic reason why bishops are superior to presbyters and presbyters to deacons. “The reason for this was that there were degrees of dignity and worth in the functions which they exercised.” Thus, “the presbyter is more important and more worthy in office than the deacon [and so] the deacon is inferior to the presbyter.” For “presbyters have received the power to administer the sacraments, and are able [like fathers] to bear children to God,” as deacons cannot. And of course “a bishop is always considered a presbyter’s superior.” For “it has always been considered the peculiar power of the bishop to ordain both deacons and presbyters.” Thus the bishop “can create fathers [who in turn can father] children of God.” (Just watch, some wag will quip that Episcopal bishops who ordain ELCA pastors are actually “grandfathering” in the Lutheran laity.) This Hookerian hierarchy in personnel betrays not just a natural chain of command and delegation but, behind that, the Dionysian, cosmic hierarchy of worth, with some members more real and more valuable than others, and closer to God. Even so, my contention is that this prejudicial sort of ontological hierarchy can be disengaged or suspended from Hooker’s main teachings on ministry, and that even his high view of ministerial authority can still be retrieved.

I admit I have reason for wanting to do that. The church’s ministry today seems unusually to need assurance of its roots. Call it authorization. And by the church’s ministry I mean not only presbyters (including bishops, the “chief presbyters”) and deacons but as I shall quickly show, also laypeople, the universal priesthood. By being that sweeping we are already getting beyond Hooker, though only in our inclusiveness, not in

what he says about ministry as such. And what he says about it, in effect, is this: the reason the church's ministry is from God is that it conveys what only God can convey, and then only God in Christ. And what is that? It is, among other things, the forgiveness of sin. "Who can forgive sin but God only?" Answer: Only God, yes, and those whom God so authorizes. Where Hooker says this most boldly is in his comment on that passage in the rite of ordination, "Receive the Holy Spirit." (Jn. 20:22) He asks, "What especial grace they [the disciples] did at that time receive" from the risen Christ? Answer: "If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained." (v. 23) This "power to remit and retain sins," says Hooker, is "a holy and a ghostly authority," the very "keys of the kingdom of heaven." I would add, concerning our own ministries: if ever there were an authority by which today's ministers, ordained and unordained, need to be emboldened and cheered on, it is this "power of the Holy Ghost for castigation and relaxation of sin, wherein [is] fully accomplished that which the promise of the Keys did import."

Hooker was responding to those critics of the Prayer Book who thought it "foolish," downright presumptuous for mere humans to tell other mere humans, "Receive the Holy Spirit." You and I incur the same pious skepticism from our culture, even from our churches, but mostly from our own self-doubt. Who are we to forgive or retain someone else's sin – "such power as neither prince nor potentate, king nor Caesar on earth can give." Who are we, indeed? For Hooker that is not the question, but rather this is: "Can we at any time renew the memory [of our ordination and of the words, 'Receive the Holy Spirit'] and enter into serious cogitation thereof [except] with much admiration and joy? Remove what these 'foolish' words do imply, and what hath the ministry of God besides wherein to glory?" The truth is, we do

have for the least and meanest duties performed by virtue of ministerial power, that to dignify, grace and authorize them, which no other offices on earth can challenge. Whether we preach, pray, baptize, communicate, condemn, give absolution, or whatsoever, as disposers of God's mysteries, our words, judgments, acts and deeds, are not ours but the Holy Ghost's.

How to retrieve Hooker on ministry? By letting him simply speak that gospel to us. Isn't that what Luther meant by "the conversation and consolation of the brothers" and sisters, and not only of those still alive but also those who have gone before? That is "full conversation."

All that remains is to expand this empowering "Receive the Holy Spirit," this authority to remit and retain sin, beyond the inner circle of the ordained to the whole people of Christ. Indeed, isn't that precisely one of the fondest honors which accrue to the ordained, that they facilitate that very expansion of the Office of the Keys to the entire congregation? Thus in the Common Service the pastor declares at the outset

Upon this your confession I by virtue of my office as a called and ordained servant of the Word announce the grace of God unto all of you, and in the stead and by the command of my Lord Jesus Christ I forgive you all your sins in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

That of course comes first. One speaks, not only for them but for Christ to them. You have heard the distinction: "The priesthood of all believers, not the priesthood of each believer." That is an important half-truth. However, not long after the pastor has pronounced absolution, so do the parishioners – laterally, to one another – in the Passing of the Peace. By the same shalom with which they have been forgiven

they in turn now forgive one another. Each absolves the other, in Christ's stead, of their sin.

I once had a seminary president who grouched about long-winded faculty meetings, "It isn't that everything hasn't already been said, it's just that not everyone has yet said it." But the Holy Communion is not a faculty meeting. There it is important that everyone shall have said it, not only that they should but that they can: "The peace of the Lord be with you." For that they all are authorized. For that Office of the Keys they all in their baptisms "receive the Holy Spirit." If many of them do not in fact realize this gift, if many of us do not encourage them to do so, that does not invalidate the gift that is there. But then it is there, this power of the universal priesthood, like a frozen Niagara. What if old Richard Hooker, perhaps even in spite of himself, could help us thaw that latent dynamo and flood it back into our sanctuaries, our boardrooms, our bedrooms?

May I close with a personal confession, which is really just another tribute to Richard Hooker? Toward the end of his long, eight-book Ecclesiastical Polity he is waxing euphoric about the power of bishops and is moved to quote this line from Ignatius of Antioch's Letter to the Smyrneans: "What is the bishop but one who has all rule and power insofar as a man may have it, for in his power he is a follower of even God's own Christ." Leave aside that the bishops I know may not recognize themselves in that description. Leave aside that Ignatius may not have said that, at least in just those words. The point is, when I read that quote I confess to being miffed. How preposterous, I thought. No one in the church has any such power. But then I did a double-take. The catch-word (in English translation) was Ignatius' word, "follower." Wasn't Hooker mistranslating Ignatius? Mustn't Ignatius have meant "successor?" Come to think of it, the word "follower" does have a double meaning. To say

that Linus “followed” Peter as bishop of Rome can mean merely that he succeeded him. Chronologically he came immediately after him, replaced him. But the same verb can mean something far more radical, as in Jesus’ words to Peter, “Follow me.” (Jn. 21:19) And “follow me,” not merely to the See of Rome (maybe that too) but to the cross! Granted, Peter was being called to a position of leadership, sheep-feeding. But here there was no talk at all of his leadership qualities, only of discipleship. And Hooker is right, that does take immense power. Is that what Hooker had in mind? I wouldn’t put it past him. And surely he knew, gutsy biblical scholar that he was, that the power to do that sort of “following” – to the cross and beyond – is what every believer is ordained to.

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