

Historic Episcopacy and the ELCA – Responses from Readers

Colleagues,

The last two postings (ThTh 121 and ThTh 122) offered Walt Bouman's corrective to my misreading of the CCM document, and then his perspective on the current controversy within the ELCA now that CCM has been adopted. Here are some responses that came my way from these postings.

Peace & Joy!

Ed Schroeder

1. From a prof at an ELCA college—Concerning ThTh 121

Ed— don't eat that crow just yet— you aren't as wrong as Walt Bouman seems to think you are. Just because it will take time for the HE to be instituted in the ELCA in no way negates your point about the "gottas" in the agreement— they will become ironclad, over time. The difference is in the amount of time it will take. What is undeniably true is the following: new ELCA Bishops MUST be "installed" by Bishops in a form of the HE, and the new ELCA pastors will have to be ordained by a Bishop, who will eventually all be in the HE. There is no provision for any other options. And whether the installing bishops are Lutheran, ECUSA, or whatever else, is of absolutely no difference. The exclusion of non-HE Bishops from counting in the "installation" of new ELCA Bishops is also another legalism— a "gotta," based solely on an historical fiction.

About some of the other points: The non-recognition of the

Anglican and other forms of the HE by Rome shows what a real ecumenical dead-end this thing (CCM) really is. It will not take us anywhere— COCU shows no real sign of any interest in this, that I can tell.

The idea that we are going from a “protestant” type of church organization to a “catholic” type makes no sense to me, especially given the often-repeated claim that CCM is only a minor change. Proponents of CCM often want to argue the case both ways – they want to claim that CCM is only a minor organizational changes which will affect nothing (“oil on the waters”), but then they turn around and make sweeping generalizations about how this will revolutionize the ways in which our church operates. Bouman makes both these claims in the same posting— so which is it?

As I see it, the substance of your original postings are as valid as they ever were.

[EHS' comment: The distinction between “protestant” and “catholic” types of churches deserves examination. Walt's sentence in ThTh 121 said: “What we are doing here [in the CCM] is trying to reconcile the ministries of a ‘protestant type church’ (the ELCA) with a ‘catholic type church’ (the ECUSA).” My question: what's the difference between these two church types of ministry? Especially for Lutherans whose Augsburg Confession, Art. V, gives clear specs for “the ministry of the church.” Are those specs catholic or protestant? AC V doesn't mention bishops. Even more surprising, it doesn't mention clergy either! As Luther so often says in the catechism: What does this mean?]

2. From an ELCA pastor in St. Louis—I agree with what you wrote a while ago—the whole alleged HE is little more than an historical fiction. And why, amid all the talk about succession, does the Lutheran accent on successio fidei [succession of the faith] come in for scant mention? HE is presented as a sign not guarantee of THAT succession. What do we say about a sign behind which there is so little substance? It's hard to escape the notion that all this is the preoccupation and, sadly, time-consuming occupation of bishops and ecumaniacs. Can there be much more persuasive expression of the Kluft [German for "chasm"] between the hierarchy and the church-in-mission below?

[EHS: Methinks this respondent has put his finger on something significant, the "Kluft" twixt the hierarchy and the congregations in the ELCA. Even though the magic word "mission" is in the title of the CCM, the "merely baptized" members of the ELCA don't see how the new arrangements for bishops and interchangeable clergy will impact missions at all—and I think I agree. It all depends, of course, on what you think mission is. Here's a fascinating example of mission today: the Ethiopian Evangelical Church – Mekane Yesus [EECMY]. Five years I was at their seminary as a guest prof. EECMY membership then was one-and-a-half million. Today it is 3,000,000. Why? Primarily because of a specific mission-mindset among the laity: "If you're baptized, you're a missionary." That's the basis of their call to common mission—and everybody understands it.

3. From a layman in the Twin-Cities—Greetings. As a lay leader I've felt some obligation to come to a better understanding of the CCM proposal, and toward that end

I've read with interest your recent communications that my dad has been forwarding.

In posting #121 you followed the correction by asking (at least I think these were your questions), a number of pertinent questions, including, "Can HE-succession itself be Gospel-grounded – both the one the pope claims for himself and the ones he disallows for Anglicans and Lutherans and others?" This is an interesting question that seems to me to come close to the heart of the matter.

A related, though prior, question I have is: Does ordination itself have a "ground" in the Gospel? Does baptism as a "prerequisite" for communion have a Gospel-ground? Is there a gospel ground for Lutheran pastors "doing" marriage? Where would I find Luther's answers to questions like these?

[EHS comment: The respondent is a family friend, so I already responded saying "no, I don't think so" to his first 3 questions in the last paragraph. As far as "Luther's answers" go, I said I didn't know of such direct quotes. But they might well exist. And even if Luther didn't say so, he should have. See my last comment below.]

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4. From a doctoral student at an ELCA seminary. I am a PhD candidate concentrating in 16th century history and Luther Studies. While I was doing a search for the keywords "historic episcopate called common mission," I was directed to the "Crossings" website and to the July 27, 2000, edition of Thursday Theology #111 (titled, "Requests from Bishops"). I write merely to respond to your statement, "Granted the 16th century Lutheran Confessors

did not critique the hist. episcopate.” I’m afraid such a statement grants more than what is suggested by the historical record.

In 1539, Melanchthon wrote in an essay titled: Concerning the Church and the Authority of God’s Word: “Carnal opinions...imagine the church to be a state of bishops and bind it to the orderly succession of bishops, as the empires consist of the orderly succession of princes. But the church maintains itself differently. Actually, it is a union not bound to the orderly succession but to the Word of God.” (Melanchthons Werke in Auswahl, ed. by Robert Stupperich [1951], 1:330.)

[Ed’s comment: I checked the Latin original. The essay is linked to Melanchthon’s “conversations with Canterbury (sic!)” in 1539. I’ve not yet been able to check out what that means. Here’s the fuller context (my translation) of the citation above. Melanchthon has just cited a number of Bible passages and then he says: “I have cited these testimonies so that first of all we consider what the church is, and move our minds away from the carnal opinions, which imagine the church to be a pontifical republic and connect it to a regular succession of bishops, just as empires rest on the regular succession of princes. But the church operates differently. Instead it is a community not connected to a regular succession, but to the Word of God. The church is renewed wherever God restores its teaching and gives the Holy Spirit. And in this way he governs and conserves the church, not via regular succession, as Paul testifies in Ephesians 4. He gives gifts to people—apostles, prophets, etc. He teaches indeed that the real church is a community in which Christ is at work and to whom he gives true teachers.”]

And here's brother Martin himself (in 1541): "The succession of bishops does not make a bishop, but the Lord alone is our bishop." (WA 53:74.)

[Ed's comment: I checked the original Latin again and here's the full context of this citation (my translation): "Notice that before the time of the kings (of Israel) there was no fixed succession of leaders from one specific tribe, but the Lord himself was their Leader and King. Just as Gideon said: 'I will not rule over you, but the Lord, etc.' And in Samuel's case God says: 'Not you, but me they have rejected from being king over them.' Thus God chooses leaders indiscriminately from the tribes. Also in the church the succession of bishops does not make a bishop, but the Lord alone is our bishop raising up bishops wherever, from whomever, and whenever he wills—as we see to be the case with Jerome, Augustine, Ambrose, Huss and ourselves—neglecting succession which the papists keep insisting on." (WA 53:74.)]

Furthermore, I recently completed reading "An Example of How to Consecrate a true, Christian Bishop" ("Exempel, einen rechten, christlichen Bischof zu weihen" in WA 53) in which Luther, while supporting the concept of a bishop's office, and in the wake of installing Nicholas von Amsdorf as Bishop in Naumburg, nevertheless thumbs his nose throughout at the idea that Roman bishops have sole rights where the creation of new bishops is concerned. Luther is at his sarcastic best in this work. That the work has remained obscure is, I think, due to the fact that it appears only in the WA [=Weimar Ausgabe, the scholarly edition of Luther's Works in his original German and Latin – over 100 volumes] and that it was written during the "cranky" (as some would have it) last years of

Luther's life. Nevertheless, it is unfortunate that the editors of the American Edition did not see fit to include it. Had they done so, Luther's contempt for the idea that Christian authority hinges on the orderly succession of bishops would have been more accessible to American readers and the ELCA would not be in the mess it is in now.

Anyway. . . the concept of HE as it is presently understood was not even on the reformers' collective radar screen when the Augsburg Confession was drafted. But clearly, once the issue of historic/tactile succession came before them toward the end of the 1530s, the two chief Lutheran Confessors of the time were less than "deeply desirous" of historic succession. Those who support CCM by arguing that the reformers never said anything against historic succession are, at best, ignorant of the historical data which proves otherwise.

[Comment: Just because Luther or Melanchthon said something doesn't make it authoritative for Lutherans. But if any claim, theirs or someone else's, is indeed Gospel-grounded, then Lutherans can't ignore it. Come to think of it, other Christians shouldn't ignore it either.]