

# The Historic Episcopate Question?

On August 8 John Rosenberg, regular receiver of ThTh, wrote me the following:

*Say, are you planning on doing anything in Thursday Theology about the “historic episcopate” question? Perhaps you’ve written about this and I missed it. At any rate, I need some enlightenment on what YOU think is at stake in that discussion. What brought the matter to mind for me was your response to Cassidy’s misunderstanding that JBFA was one doctrine among many rather than a hermeneutic. I’m having trouble seeing how the hermeneutic applies to the historic episcopate and its relationship to the “rule of faith,” etc. I seem to recall from church history classes that at one time (3rd century?) the “rule of faith” as expressed in the creed(s), the canon, and the historic episcopate were all considered guarantors of orthodoxy. If we Lutherans are both evangelical AND catholic, why wouldn’t the historic episcopate be a useful sign of unity with the rest of the church? What about those parts of Lutheranism (like the Church of Sweden) that already are part of it? Have they betrayed their Lutheran birthright for a mess of adiaphora? Perhaps I’m just dense but I have a sense that many other colleagues are also confused about this.*

Now back from a week and a half “out east” (Bowling Green OH, Washington DC, Princeton NJ and Bethlehem PA) I can speak to John’s inquiry “from experience.” I’ve witnessed two bishops being put into office, both of them students of mine from days gone by. Two Saturdays ago (Aug. 29) I was present for Marcus Lohrmann’s installation as ELCA bishop of the Northwest Ohio Synod.

On the following Saturday (Sept. 5) Marie and I were guests in the home of the new Episcopal bishop of Bethlehem PA, Paul Marshall. Paul was graduated from Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, in 1973, the year before Seminex happened. But in his first call he too fell victim to Missouri Synod inquisitors and eventually found refuge in the Episcopal church. Paul was "ordained," not just installed, to the office of bishop two years ago. Since a professional video crew recorded the event for posterity, we viewed it on our Saturday evening with them in "virtual" reality. With these two exposures I'm clearly an expert on episcopacy. So I'll now address John's inquiry.

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Dear John,

My personal druthers are to avoid the issue of the historic episcopate [HE] altogether. But if good guys like you bring it up, then I'll try to say something.

1. JBFA [justification by faith alone] laid alongside HE suggests that no HE ever guaranteed JBFA anywhere in the church's past or present history. E.g., it is today's Roman Church through its spokesman Cassidy with its alleged HE that finds JBFA unacceptable. [See ThTh #10-12] So what sort of "guarantor of orthodoxy" is HE today, or was it in the 16th century, or in the 15 before that? If we Augsburg Catholics define orthodoxy as the "fresh preaching of the Good News and the sacraments administered congruent with that Good News," how would you ever "guarantee" that this is happening anywhere that Christians gather?
2. The expression "evangelical and catholic" has become a shibboleth these days methinks. Who wouldn't want to claim both for his/her own teaching on gospel and church? But what do folks mean when they lay claim to that pair of

terms? Our Augsburg tradition says: Anyone's claim for each of those terms needs to be measured by the one criterion, JBFA. Anyone's claim to being evangelical and catholic needs to be tested by the criterion to learn what they mean substantively with each of the two terms and how that impacts/commends the Gospel.

3. My own conviction at present is that HE is an unprovable historical claim. I don't want to call it a "historical fiction," but that sometimes comes to mind. Even RC scholars, as I hear them, say that the early history of the church at Rome, including Peter's alleged work there, is too fuzzy to document (beyond a reasonable doubt) anything like the HE. Is this just another instance of the emperor having no clothes, but claiming to look super spiffy? Church relations—along with ecclesiology and ministry—shouldn't be built on sand, or legends, or probabilities. We need better foundations—and we have them.
4. I don't think the church of Sweden has betrayed its birthright. [But then you never know with those Swedes, or those Norskies—as we learned in Seminex!] Methinks the Lutherans in Sweden are just continuing with what they received when the Reformation happened. But I've got no close links to Lutherans in Sweden itself. So it might be another story. And given the drought-like situation I keep hearing about in the parishes in Sweden, even their HE hasn't helped grass-roots church life as far as I can tell.
5. You ask about HE as "sign of unity." What does that mean? Or how does it work? Unity is itself a disputed point in church history & theology. Just what is it? One might say: the conflict about church unity is what the reformation was all about. Is church unity "us and them" agreeing with each other and being friendly, or is church unity "sinners

getting united to Christ and thus with each other and then staying that way?" "For the true unity of the church [i.e., for getting sinners united to Christ] it is enough that the Gospel be preached (uncluttered by legalisms) and the sacraments be done according to that Gospel." So said some folks at Augsburg long ago. Their critics (who revelled in the clout they had from their HE) said this was heresy. So what does HE do for the church's unity if that unity really is what the Augsburgers said it was?

6. The canon of scripture and the creedal "rule(s) of faith" are also unable to guarantee unity or orthodoxy. Except for Christ and the Spirit, there is no such thing as "guarantor of orthodoxy," is there, John? Whoever it was that coined the phrase "ecclesia semper reformanda" (the church is always needing reformation) was saying the same thing. Example: Paul had just recently been in Galatia and given them (we trust) the orthodox Gospel. He no sooner heads on to new territory and the Galatians get hornswoggled by "another" Gospel. What does Paul do? He does not invoke any "guarantor of orthodoxy," which would almost "have to be" something legal, but says, in effect: OK, you foolish Galatians, back to square one. Let's start with the genuine Gospel all over again.
7. "Episcopoi" as overseers—even in the NT usages of that term—are misread, I think, when we link them to what the word "bishop" has become in today's church, also in our ELCA. Nowadays it regularly signals a "legal" (I'm not saying legalistic) magisterium of some sort, an "authority over" congregations, doctrine, pastors, policies, finances, etc. Thus it's already suspect ala JBFA hermeneutics. Why? Because the law, whether canon law, even God's law—by definition—can never "guarantee" the Gospel.
8. Some missiologists today say: NT episcopoi were not

magisterial at all, no “legal” overseers of any sort. Rather in NT times the episcopos was the mission director, the mission developer, the “overseer” of outreach, of the church’s evangelism and mission operations. Nobody was “in charge” of groups of existing congregations. Early church structure was not vertical—us and those above or below us in the organization chart. Instead it was lateral: us and the mission we’re doing here in our territory alongside of “them” and the mission they are fostering in their neighborhood. The episcopoi were the hustlers, the makers and shakers, in this lateral expansion operation.

9. This perspective on episcopos goes along with the “new look” that missiologists have uncovered for the word “apostolic,” also as it surfaces in the Nicene Creed. One, holy, catholic, and apostolic, as Bob Scudieri has shown, originally meant one, holy, catholic and missionary. The ancients understood it that way. “Apostello” literally means “I send you out.” So apostolic means missionary, and apostolic succession is missionary continuity, not the passing on of magisterial management.
10. Every one of those four Nicene Creed adjectives for the church needs to be Gospel-grounded, normed by the JBFA dipstick. “One” is the Christ-connection that comes from JBFA. “Holy” is the OK-ness of forgiven sinners via JBFA. “Catholic” is the world-wide validity that JBFA has from this time forth and forevermore. “Missionary” is the motion that JBFA engenders to concretize the three previous terms.
11. So both terms, apostolic and episcopal, signal that the church is constitutionally a missionary enterprise, always sent and sending out. Isn’t this a better angle on what the “historic episcopate” and “apostolic succession” are all about? I think so. Both of those terms are about the Gospel, and finally about what it means to be a “bishop

according to the Gospel," as Melanchthon says in Augsburg Confession 28.

Peace & Joy!  
Ed Schroeder