

# Biblicism in the ELCA? Can that be true?

Colleagues,

A number of ELCA folks have emailed me in recent days telling of their unhappiness with the ELCA's recently published manual [Augsburg Fortress 2008] to promote Bible reading in the denomination. Its title: OPENING THE BOOK OF FAITH. LUTHERAN INSIGHTS FOR BIBLE STUDY. The common theme of these complaints has been: What this manual says is "Lutheran" about how to read the Bible—and says it over and over again—is NOT Lutheran. Frequently it actually contradicts what Luther himself said about the Bible—and even more significant—contradicts the Lutheran Confessions. [Lutheran Confessions more significant than Luther? Yes. For it is not Luther, but the Lutheran Confessions that the ELCA constitution designates as its "official" theology.] Here's what the ELCA constitution says:

*2.05. This church accepts the Unaltered Augsburg Confession as a true witness to the Gospel. 2.06. This church accepts the other confessional writings in the Book of Concord.*

If this manual actually does contradict the doctrinal criteria of articles 2.05 and 2.06, how did it get official sanction in the ELCA? I too wonder. Who's taking care of the store?

Here's one such communication from Chris Repp, ELCA pastor in Carbondale, Illinois. He says: "These notes grew out of reading the OBF material and talking about the Bible with my Sunday morning adult class as a way of organizing my own thoughts."

Chris occasionally comes home across the Mississippi River into our Missouri-Kansas ELCA Synod as Russian-language interpreter

when our “companion synod Lutherans in Russia” are here for a visit. From 1999-2003 he was ELCA guest professor for Church History and Systematic Theology for the Russian Lutherans at their seminary in St. Petersburg. And in order to qualify for that he did a doctoral dissertation nearly a decade ago titled: “In Search of an Orthodox Way: The Development of Biblical Studies in Late Imperial Russia.” So he comments: “I’ve been thinking about things biblical for some time.”

Peace and Joy!  
Ed Schroeder

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Some thoughts inspired/provoked by “Opening the Book of Faith”

In the first paragraph of the first chapter of this book, the author seems to claim for the Bible what the Augsburg Confession claims for the ministry of preaching. “Through the Bible, God draws us to trust, to faith in the good news of Jesus Christ. Through the Bible, the Spirit of God calls, gathers, enlightens and makes holy the entire people of God.” (OBF, p.1)

But the Augsburg Confession, Article V, says “To obtain such faith God instituted the office of preaching, giving the gospel and the sacraments. Through these, as through means, he gives the Holy Spirit who produces faith, where and when he wills, in those who hear the gospel.” (German text in the Kolb/Wengert edition of the Book of Concord, p. 40)

The Augsburg Confession claims that it is the proclamation of the gospel and the administration of the sacraments (which are instances of the gospel – see AC VII where this connection is made explicitly) that do this. I think it’s significant that the AC does not say, at the beginning of article V, that in order that we may obtain such faith (namely, the faith that justifies

sinners, as was spoken of in article IV) God gave us the Bible, but rather that God instituted the office of preaching. “Preaching” always means “preaching the gospel” in the AC. The Bible (as an instance of the Word of God) is a resource for this proclamation, the resource, really – the source and norm of our faith (see Formula of Concord, epitome 1, Kolb/Wengert Book of Concord, p. 486). But it is the proclaimed gospel, not the Bible, that generates faith.

## **Inspiration**

What do we mean by saying that the Bible is inspired? It means that here the Holy Spirit is doing something. That something is communicating the gospel and creating faith. (See again AC V) OBF p.2 says “The Spirit of God speaks there.” But that only happens when the gospel is communicated on the basis of the biblical witness. Inspiration is about how the Bible is USED, not some intrinsic quality that the Bible HAS. The Bible is a resource – a uniquely valuable resource – for proclaiming the gospel. It spells out what the gospel is – and also what it is not. Because the Holy Spirit is active when the gospel is proclaimed, and because the gospel proclamation is rooted in the biblical witness, the Bible is inspired. See John 20 for John’s rationale for writing his gospel.

## **Authority**

The discussion of authority is unsatisfying here in this first chapter. Authority, I think, must be tied to the notion of Apostolicity. Why? Ultimately we are claiming for the Bible the authority of God. But we have to be careful how we do that. One easy, conventional way to give the Bible divine authority is to simply say that God, in effect, wrote it. Yes, humans were the means, but the words are God’s. (One thinks of old paintings of an evangelist at work, with an angel reaching over his shoulder

to guide his hand as he writes.) But God doesn't seem to have worked this way, and this is not the way Lutherans have tended to attribute to the Bible divine authority (except in their weaker moments – e.g. the LCMS throughout much of its history.)

Jesus gives the apostles the great commission to go into the all the world making disciples – baptizing and teaching. It's no coincidence that Jesus begins this famous passage with the words: "all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me." Jesus here delegates his authority to the disciples/apostles – the witnesses of his crucifixion and resurrection. The scriptures of the New Testament fall under this authority.

The early church used as a central criterion for inclusion in the canon of the NT the apostolic origin of each given book. All of the books of the NT are attributed to one of the disciples/apostles, with the exceptions of the gospel of Mark (a disciple of Peter) and Luke-Acts (written by a disciple of Paul). (These exceptions are significant for our time as scholars discover that some of the writings attributed to Paul, for example, were probably not written by him. They are, nonetheless, clearly influenced by his theology and belong to the school of his thought, and thus derive their apostolicity/authority in that way.)

Something must be said now, though, for the Lutheran understanding of apostolicity, whence I suggest the scriptures derive their authority. This, I think, is the proper way to tie in the Lutheran hermeneutic to the question of authority (something, to be fair, that the author of the first chapter of OBF tried to do, though in my mind unsuccessfully). Luther claimed that the criterion for apostolicity was not merely that the apostles wrote or said something, but that a writing or teaching conveyed the gospel (i.e. inculcated Christ – "Christum

treiben" are his German words) in an unadulterated way. So his 1522 statement: "Whatever does not teach Christ is not apostolic, even though St. Peter or St. Paul does the teaching. Again, whatever preaches Christ would be apostolic, even if Judas, Annas, Pilate, and Herod were doing it." (Martin Luther, Preface to the Epistles of St. James and St. Jude.)

Thus, the Bible is authoritative because it is apostolic, that is, it teaches/proclaims what the apostles taught/proclaimed when they were doing what they were supposed to be doing – what Christ commissioned and authorized them to do (inculcate Christ.)

What about the Old Testament? I would suggest that the Old Testament derives its authority in a similar way to that of the New Testament: from Jesus. Because he used it as a source for his proclamation, so do we (See for example Luke chapters 4 and 24). The apostles, following Jesus' example and operating under his delegated authority, also used the OT as a source for their proclamation. (See Acts 8 for the story of Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch.) And in both cases the thrust of the interpretation was to show that everything God had done previously among the people of Israel was leading up to God's ultimate activity in Jesus Christ. Thus the OT too is authoritative because it is apostolic.

The Formula of Concord (Epitome 1) referenced above uses the category "prophetic" with regard to the OT's authority and "apostolic" for the NT. I would nevertheless prefer to subordinate the prophetic notion to the apostolic one for Christians. Would [did?] Luther say for prophecy something similar to what he said for apostolicity – at least so far as we Christians are concerned: "Whatever leads to Christ is prophetic"? Prophecy without Christ cannot stand on its own for Christians. An example from Luther's writings will help to

illustrate this point. Certainly Luther regarded Moses as a prophet, and the giving of the Ten Commandments as God's word. But they are not God's word for us Christians. They are not binding on us. (See his "How Christians Should Regard Moses," LW 35:164ff) It is rather Moses' example of faith that Luther finds compelling, and faith for Luther, as we know, always means trusting God's promise of mercy, fulfilled in Christ.

Further ideas to be developed/included with special reference to AC V:

1. A more explicit discussion of the notion of revelation is needed. This hasn't played much of a role in the above thoughts (or in OBF ch. 1, though there is a bit in ch. 2), except perhaps implicitly. It seems to me that in discussions of the nature of the Bible, revelation is usually subordinate to the question of authority (the Bible is authoritative because it is/contains God's revelation to us). But from the Lutheran perspective, any discussion of revelation in the Bible must hinge on Jesus Christ as God's ultimate self-revelation. (Here Luther's comparison of the scriptures to the Bethlehem manger is helpful. We go to the Bible, as the shepherds went to the manger, to meet the Christ-child.) [EHS responds (couldn't resist helping Chris out here): Bob Bertram taught his students to be suspicious of "revelation-theology." One chapter in his recently published book is a full-blown critique of "revelationism." Revelation-theology implies that the sinner's dilemma is insufficient information about God. So if God reveals to the sinner this missing information, then the sinner's problem is solved. Thus all revelation is basically Good News. It fills in the empty spots.

But that's not the biblical view of a sinner's dilemma. The Reformers discovered that the problem was much worse

than ignorance about God. The sinner's dilemma is "enmity against God." God is the enemy. Whatever sinners do know or perceive about God, they oppose it. They want to be the captains of their own souls. More information—even from God—is no help for sinners doing battle with God.

If we want to use the term revelation, then we need to follow St. Paul's lead. God runs two (not just one) revelation operations, Paul claimed. And in each operation two things get exposed—one about God, one about us. So four exposures, all told. See Romans 1:16-18 for details. One revelation exposes us as sinners and God as our lethal critic. The other revelation exposes God-in-Christ with mercy for sinners, which eventually "reveals" a forgiven sinner trusting Christ, the revelation of faith.

That's the Lutheran way to talk about revelation. OBF doesn't do that.]

2. The Bible is not a means of grace. (Was the manger?) Nowhere do the confessions make this claim. It is rather the source and norm for the means of grace, namely, our proclamation of the gospel and administration of the sacraments. But it is enough (*satis est* – see AC VII) for the Bible to be the source and norm of our proclamation. It's the well, but not the water; the manger, but not the baby.
3. I have long thought that AC V articulates a very specific, and very limited (by which word I mean no disparagement) understanding of the work of the Holy Spirit. It seems to me that the Lutheran reformers see the proper (only?) work of the Holy Spirit to be the working of faith in those who hear the gospel. Some folks at one of our synod's theological conferences reacted strongly to this assertion when I presented it several years ago. They didn't want to

limit the Holy Spirit. But is it not enough that the Holy Spirit works faith in the promises of Jesus Christ? What else matters?

Chris Repp