

Bishop's Job Description: What does Augsburg 28 say to us today?

Ed Schroeder was on a high two days ago when he e-mailed me to say that two—yes 2!—of his former students, both Seminex alums, were elected bishops last weekend in ELCA synod assemblies. As far as Ed knows none of his former students have made the cut. So you can see why he was bubbly. 'Course he doesn't take all the credit. Could be that these two actually made the cut, Ed says, despite having him as their sem prof. Who knows?

But here's the point, Ed says: these two are not just "former students," they are pastor-theologians in the Augsburg Confessional tradition. They know how to parse God's law and God's Gospel properly, and have been doing so in their previous pastoral callings. They have not merely once read Augsburg 28. They're committed, vowed even, to doing their work according to its specs. Who are these new overseers? Marcus Lohrmann of the Northwestern Ohio synod and Robert Rimbo of the Southeast Michigan synod. Geographically adjacent to each other their two synods bracket the western end of Lake Erie. So keep an eye on that end of the lake for future developments. Ed then asked me: what word might we send along to these new bishops, a greeting (and blessing even) from our Crossings Community? I took another look at AC 28 and here's what I heard—

What can we expect from bishops today? The world seems so different from the days when bishops' job descriptions were being written that one wonders whether or not it's even worth looking at what Melanchthon said in AC 28.

"The power of bishops is a power and command of God to preach

the Gospel, to forgive and retain sins, and to administer and distribute the sacraments.” (5) Yes, of course. “The two authorities, the spiritual and the temporal, are not to be mingled or confused.” (12) Right. “Bishops and pastors may make regulations so that every thing in the churches is done in good order, but not as a means of obtaining Gods grace...nor in order to bind men’s (sic) consciences.” Uh huh (stifled yawn).

We don’t live in the Holy Roman Empire anymore, we don’t even live in Christendom. We live in a world where Christianity must stand in the marketplace along side all the other gods. Our world is not unlike the Athens of Acts 17 where Paul stands in front of the Areopagus and proclaims to the Athenians the unknown god.

People don’t know our God today. They know the building on the corner called the Catholic church or the Lutheran church or the Baptist church, but competition among gods is so fierce today that Christianity no longer holds “favored religion” status. Who are we if we are no longer THE religion? Who are we if we no longer make policy, dictate moral behavior, call the shots?

What can be expectations for bishops in such a world?

“The power of bishops is a power and command of God to preach the Gospel, to forgive and retain sins, and to administer and distribute the sacraments.” Oh yes. As we serve, speak, live our lives as Christians in this world that is so different, we need to know that the center holds. The grace of God’s word, the assurance of forgiven sins, the strength from the bread and cup are essential to our life as the church in this strange new world.

“The two authorities, the spiritual and the temporal, are not to be mingled or confused.” Of course they’re separate. We need to be reminded that there is spiritual power in this world that

seems so completely overwhelmed by the temporal. We need to be assured that global capitalism is not the only possible worldview. We need to be told again and again that Jesus is, indeed, Lord.

“Bishops and pastors may make regulations so that every thing in the churches is done in good order, but not as a means of obtaining God’s grace...nor in order to bind men’s (sic) consciences.” We must experiment with different worship styles, different leadership styles, different structural styles – not for novelty’s sake, but because we are the church in this time and this place. We need room to move, to make mistakes, to learn to be church with sisters and brothers who have been excluded for so long. We need good order without bound consciences so that we don’t despair of fulfilling our callings.

Expectations for bishops? Keep the light on for us, keep the door open, Bishop, we need your leadership now more than ever.

Robin Morgan
21 May 98