

Greater Accuracy on the ELCA's agreement with US Episcopalians

Colleagues,

I have to eat crow. I was wrong, simply mistaken. About what? About the picture I had of the document "Called to Common Mission" [CCA], the agreement between the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America [ELCA] and the Episcopal Church USA [ECUSA] pertaining to ordination of future pastors in the ELCA.

Here's what I now know. The specs of the agreement do NOT require a bishop with historic-episcopate-connections to be involved when future ELCA pastors are ordained. The specs DO call for such a bishop to be involved when future BISHOPS of the ELCA are installed into office. But it is not so for pastoral ordinations.

When ELCA bishops who received the HE-connection as they came into office subsequently ordain ELCA pastors, the HE-connection passes on to the new pastor. So HE-connection for ELCA clergy is a long haul. How long? If this process continues uninterrupted (and if the ELCA and ECUSA stay in existence that long) it may take most of the entire 21st century before all pastors serving in the ELCA do so with HE-connections.

My new clarity was brokered by friend and colleague Walter Bouman, who finally saw some recent ThTh postings on this topic. His basic counsel was: "Read the text." To wit, the CCM text. I did. Here's what Walt said:

Dear Ed:

I now have a printout of your postings. You are mistaken on some stuff.

- 1. No ECUSA bishops will be involved in ANY ELCA ordinations. ELCA bishops will preside at ELCA ordinations. It's in CCM. Read the text.*
- 2. Nothing is changed for remaining in unity with this church, i.e., the ELCA. CCM calls for us to change two things internally:*
 - a. Bishops in succession from LWF churches (at first) and at least one ECUSA bishop will lay hands on FUTURE NEWLY ELECTED ELCA bishops at their installation.*
 - b. ELCA bishops will preside at all FUTURE ELCA ordinations. Because we have agreed to do this, and in fact, have already adopted these internal changes constitutionally, the ECUSA recognizes our intention to have our bishops and clergy eventually share in the succession which they have, and on the basis of this intention has adopted our proposal (CCM) to them for full communion.*
- 3. Nobody is asking anybody to do anything except abide by an internal ELCA decision, like the decision on diaconal ministers (who will be consecrated, not ordained, by a synod bishop) about which nobody has raised any objections, and like the decision to require all newly ordained clergy to do three years of ELCA-approved and -organized continuing education, a proposal with far-reaching time commitments by all newly ordained clergy, and about which no one has raised any objections.*
- 4. The ECUSA version of the HE is mandated in the 1662 preface to the Ordinal in the Book of Common Prayer: clergy who are not episcopally ordained (i.e., ordained with a bishop presiding) shall not serve in parishes of*

the Episcopal Church (and other churches of the Anglican Communion). The ECUSA is suspending the applicability of this preface to all current ELCA clergy. Future ELCA clergy will be episcopally ordained, though not all by bishops in the HE for the next 15 to 20 years. And the ELCA will have non-HE ordained clergy who will be able to serve in Episcopal parishes for the next 60-80 years.

- 5. What we are doing here is trying to reconcile the ministries of a "protestant type church" (the ELCA) with a "catholic type church" (the ECUSA). I think this is an ecumenical breakthrough involving an issue that up to now has proven to be very sticky (in COCU, for example). Our Reformed full communion partners are very interested. The Methodists are interested. Rome is interested.*
- 6. The Episcopal Church has no Prayer Book definition of what the succession means. And the Prayer Book is the only thing that defines an official position in the ECUSA. Some Anglo-Catholic Episcopalians believe in what Cyrille Vogel ("An Alienated Liturgy," Liturgy: Self-Expression of the Church, Vol 72 of Concilium) calls "absolute ordination," (in contrast to relational ordination) an ordination that conferred absolute power on the priest to effect the eucharistic miracle. It had to be carried out by a bishop who was consecrated in the succession that supposedly went back to the apostles. Many if not most Anglicans do not believe this notion of what the succession means. But the Anglican "way" of keeping peace in the family (the unity of their church) is do the practice even if they do not agree on what it means.*

Succession involves what CCM and BEM say it involves: a sign, though not a guarantee, of the church's unity and continuity. That is the way I understand succession.

[Ed again]

Two news items from the outside in recent days impinge upon the CCM agreement, I think.

1. ONE COMES FROM THE BISHOP OF ROME, in the recent statement (Sept. 5) that neither Anglicans nor Scandinavian Lutherans (along with many others) have HE-succession no matter what they claim. Consequently they are not be be called "church" [although "ecclesial communities" is OK]. In addition their celebrations of the Lord's Supper are defective. Question: If the chief honcho of HE-succession, the bishop of Rome, says such claimants haven't got it, what is/is not being passed on into the ELCA as the CCA goes into effect in our church? Simplest is to say the pope's wrong, for sure, about what constitutes church and sacrament—as I believe he is—and my reasons for that are Gospel-grounded.

But what about HE-succession? Is the pope wrong about that too? And if he is wrong here, can that critique be Gospel-grounded too? Which is but one step away from asking the fundamental question: 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? I wonder if that question ever arose as the CCA was being fabricated. But, you may say: Just what is Gospel-grounding?

Thought you'd never ask. Back in Seminex days, we had a "Reader in Systematic Theology" called "The Promising Tradition." The preface to the collection came from the pen of Bob Bertram, at that time chair of the dept. of

systematic theology. It's good enough to reprint in full, despite its blindness to inclusive language at that time.

ON THE NATURE OF SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

What is most "systematic" about systematic theology is not merely that it arranges its material—say the biblical data—in this or that orderly way, (that much is true of all theological disciplines) but rather that it consciously and explicitly insists on asking "Why." It asks for The Sufficient Reason, The Adequate Basis, The "fons" [Latin for "fountain," the source where a stream comes from], never resting until it has found "Reason Enough." Why, for what reason finally, is this or that Christian claim made? By saying that the systematician ASKS for the "why," I am not suggesting that he does not know what it is.

On the contrary, because he does know, at least in principle, what that sufficient reason is, his asking is meant chiefly to ask it into clarity, into the full prominence it deserves. He cannot even settle for the explanation, "Why, because Scripture says so." He still persists and asks again, "And why, in turn, does Scripture say so?" His job is done only when he has traced the reason back to THE SOURCE: namely, God's reconciling the world unto himself in Christ Jesus—in other words, the gospel. The systematician's task is to "necessitate Christ."

The systematician's task is properly to distinguish law from promise. But this distinguishing is not an end in itself. Law and promise need distinguishing so that they can be restored to the original RELATIONSHIP in which they

already operate within scripture. The trouble is that we all come to that biblical law-promise relationship prejudiced by a perennial pre-conception—the Reformers called it “*opinio legis*,” a legalist mindset. And thus we re-combine law and promise unbiblically, with the resultant loss of both, law and promise. The systematician disentangles this mis-meshing, does the proper distinguishing, so that law and promise can be restored to their original biblical—i.e., evangelical—order.

So far Bertram. Now linking that to the topic: HE-succession is a claim made by the bishop of Rome and—though he disallows it—also by numbers of other Christians. “Why, for what reason finally, is this Christian claim made?” Can we “trace the reason back to THE SOURCE, namely, God’s reconciling the world unto himself in Christ Jesus—in other words, the gospel?” That is the question. I don’t know of any one who has. But—as illustrated above—I’ve been wrong before.

2. A SECOND ONE COMES FROM THE BARNAS RESEARCH GROUP. The October issue of THE LUTHERAN, the ELCA’s monthly magazine, publishes a Barna report that the majority of USA Lutherans (54%) and Episcopalians (58%) answered “yes” to this question in a recent survey: “Can a good person earn his or her way to heaven?” Seems to me that any Call to Common Mission between the ECUSA and the ELCA has got to address this datum as fundamental to such a call. If these percentages are not a “call, a Macedonian call, to common mission,” I don’t know what is. Note well, the unbelievers are not outside, but inside our denominations. Works righteousness, the Pharisee-heresy, “*opinio legis*,” still gets a majority vote from both Episcopalians and

Lutherans. Can the HE-succession elements in the CCM agreement impact this “in-house” mission field in any palpable way? That would indeed be a “sign of the church’s unity”—first of all with Christ and, on the rebound from him, with each other. If there is a “yes” answer for that question, the Gospel-grounding question about HE-succession will probably have its “yes” answer too.

Even so, Peace & Joy!

Ed

P.S. Next Thursday, Bouman’s theological reflections on the conflict within the ELCA now that it has adopted the CCM.