

“Honest-to-God Gospel as Source of the Church’s Life and Mission”

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“Honest-to-God Gospel as Source of the Church’s Life and Mission”

or

“From Dualistic Misunderstanding to Dialectical Pragmatism: Brief Notes Toward a Two Kingdoms Ecclesiology”

We begin with Article VII of the Augsburg Confession:1

VII. [THE CHURCH]

1 It is also taught among us that one holy Christian church will be and remain forever. This is the assembly of all believers among whom the Gospel is preached in its purity and the holy sacraments are administered according to the Gospel. 2 For it is sufficient for the true unity of the Christian church that the Gospel be preached in conformity with a pure understanding of it and that the sacraments be administered in accordance with the divine Word. 3 It is not necessary for the true unity of the Christian church that ceremonies, instituted by [humans], should be observed uniformly in all places. 4 It

is as Paul says in Eph. 4:4, 5, “There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call, one Lord, one faith, one baptism.”

Thus far the text.

If we take seriously the title of this presentation, “Honest-to-God Gospel as Source of the Church’s Life and Mission,” then the most important thing I can say in light of Article VII is to call your attention to worship this evening, where, assembled in hearing the Word and receiving the sacrament, we will not talk about church but will be church, will be gospeled into life and mission.

The Augsburg Confession does not stop with article VII, however, nor will I. It seems to me that our task this morning (and our ongoing task as church) lies in the tension between AC VII on the church and Article XV on church usages.

Here, then, is Article XV of the Augsburg Confession:

XV. CHURCH USAGES

1 With regard to church usages that have been established by [humans], it is taught among us that those usages are to be observed which may be observed without sin and which contribute to peace and good order in the church 2 Yet we accompany these observances with instruction so that consciences may not be burdened by the notion that such things are necessary for salvation.

But what exactly does this mean for us in 2007?

Ecclesiology has been a contested issue in the ELCA from its very beginnings and this from those who would point (or pull?) the church in different directions. My interest in – and sense

of urgency about – this topic has been informed by several ongoing conversations in the church, including debates about the role of bishops (prompted by the Lutheran – Episcopal full communion proposals) and about the status of gays and lesbians in the church and in the church’s ministry.

In January 2005, I was asked to write a brief response to the recommendations of the ELCA’s sexuality task force for the *Journal of Lutheran Ethics*. I quote from those brief remarks in full, because that invitation served as the germ for these reflections on ecclesiology.

[1] When I have spoken publicly on these issues in recent years, I have said that if decisions concerning blessing same-sex unions and rostering persons in such unions split the church (in either direction), it will not be because of the issues themselves but because we have failed to understand and to live out what it means to be the church of Jesus Christ. For generations Lutherans associated “church” too closely with ethnic identity. In our current politicized climate, the danger is that we define “church” as the community of the like-minded.

[2] In that spirit, I commend the task force for the first and foundational recommendation that we seek to maintain the unity of the ELCA by “liv[ing] together faithfully in the midst of our disagreements.” I am pleased by the clear statement of the task force report that people taking diverse positions on the issues before us all hold to the authority of the scriptures as the inspired Word of God, although they interpret and apply those scriptures differently in some areas. As a survivor of the civil war in the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod in the 1970s, I see no value in attempting to justify one’s own position by impugning the faithfulness of others.

[3] Some will doubtless see the Task Force recommendations to

exercise pastoral discretion as a cop-out. I am not at all convinced, however, that the Task Force has taken a “safe” position. Rather than making a recommendation that would alienate one “side” of the church, the Task Force has attempted to carve out a middle way that will surely bring criticism from both ends of the spectrum. I hear the two dissenting positions – one to change the rules, one to enforce the rules more firmly and consistently – as expressions of the desire to “settle this once and for all,” and that the Task Force refuses to do. If the recommendations are received by this church primarily as an attempt at political compromise, then we have created a “lose-lose” situation in which everyone is left unsatisfied. If we are to continue to be church together, the recommendations of the task force must be embraced actively as an invitation to ongoing discernment as members of one body.

[4] Nonetheless I find the task force’s understanding of church and of law to be somewhat limited. I believe our deliberations would be strengthened by a two kingdoms lens, specifically by the recognition that the church exists not only as the body of Christ constituted by the proclamation of the Gospel and administration of the sacraments but also as an institution in a world of institutions. The discussion of law in the task force recommendations and in the church at large has tended to focus on the law’s theological and (much-debated) pedagogical uses. I am struck by the lack of attention to the civil use of the law, for the question of rostering persons for public ministry is (contrary to appearances, perhaps) a civil matter of church polity rather than a theological matter of church identity. That there is a ministry of Word and sacrament is God’s gift and command; how we choose to order that ministry and who we call to it are subject to change with time and circumstance. The task force’s first recommendation is a theological call to unity, to journey

together faithfully as we continue to discern together the mind of Christ. Its second and third recommendations are policy recommendations. Perhaps naming these latter two recommendations explicitly as policy (which is always provisional) rather than as doctrine will help us move forward.²

How might a two kingdoms approach speak to our situation? When I introduce two kingdoms thinking in my Lutheran Heritage course, I emphasize that two kingdoms is not at all the same thing as the modern western separation of church and state, since the latter intends to limit God to the church side of the so-called wall of separation while the former insists stridently that both kingdoms belong to God. Ironically, I believe that the church makes a similar error when it attempts to locate itself, as church, only within the realm of spiritual authority (sometimes called “the kingdom of the right”). Certainly the church is the assembly of believers constituted by the proclamation of the Gospel and the administration of the sacraments (AC VII). But it is also true that “we have this treasure in earthen vessels” (2 Cor. 4:7), i.e., actual, albeit penultimate, structures. A two kingdoms perspective suggests an ecclesiology that acknowledges church *both* as the assembly constituted through Word and sacrament *and* as an institution among institutions within God’s created and ordered world. When we disparage the church as institution, we are left with an ecclesiology that is basically docetic, in which the church appears to be human, but it isn’t really.

From Either/Or to Both/And

In his treatise “On Temporal Authority,” written in 1523, Luther divides humanity into two categories that seem to be mutually exclusive: “true believers” in Christ belong to the kingdom of God while “all who are not Christians belong to the *kingdom* of the world” (LW 45:88, 90).³

For this reason [Luther states] God has ordained two *governments*: the spiritual, by which the Holy Spirit produces Christians and righteous people under Christ; and the temporal, which restrains the un-Christian and wicked so that—no thanks to them—they are obliged to keep still and to maintain an outward peace (LW 45:91).

Christians, among themselves and by and for themselves, need no law or sword, since it is neither necessary nor useful for them (LW 45:93).

Nevertheless, according to Luther, Christians willingly subject themselves to temporal authority (and participate in that authority through holding temporal office) for the sake of their neighbors.

At least by 1525, Christian subjection to temporal authority is no longer, for Luther, primarily a matter of service to the neighbor. In “Against the Robbing and Murdering Hordes of Peasants,” it is clear that, for Luther, Christians are subject to temporal authority precisely as Christians. In support Luther appeals both to Jesus (“Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s”) and to Paul (Luther states that Romans 13:1 “Let every person be subject to the governing authorities” is addressed “to all baptized Christians”) (LW 46:51).

Now, if the Christian as Christian is properly subject to both spiritual and temporal authority, what can we say about the church in relationship to spiritual and temporal authority?

Temporal authority exists, according to Luther, to restrain sin and to promote the general welfare. Certainly, insofar as the church’s members remain both saints and sinners, the church would seem to have need of temporal authority to restrain sinners from taking sinful advantage of each other, within the church as much as within the world. But is the presence of

sinners and sin in the church the only reason to say that the church has need of temporal authority? If the Christian, precisely as Christian, is subjected to temporal authority, can one say that the church, precisely as church, is subjected to temporal authority? Let's test a few claims.

According to Luther's treatise "On Temporal Authority," temporal authority has jurisdiction over body and property while spiritual authority has jurisdiction over conscience and faith.

So ... Does the church have employees? Does the church own property? Does it carry insurance?

Temporal authority is enforced by "the sword," as Luther called it, or (we would say today) through political, legal and even military power, while spiritual authority is exercised solely through the Word of God. Spiritual authority is persuasive, rather than coercive; but, because of human sinfulness, temporal authority is authorized to use coercive measures to protect those who rely on it.

So ... Does the church rely only on Bibles and hymnals to do its work? Or does it also have constitutions, documents of incorporation, deeds of property, elected officers? Does it have established processes of discipline that it relies on when persuasion does not suffice?

Article VII of the Augsburg Confession defines the church as "the assembly of saints in which the Gospel is taught purely and the sacraments are administered rightly." The Gospel and sacraments are what constitute the church as church. But again, is this all that can be said?

The Apology of the Augsburg Confession notes:

The church is not merely an association of outward ties and

rites like other civic governments, however, but it is mainly an association of faith and of the Holy Spirit in men's hearts (Apology VII and VIII, 5).

If we were to define the church as only an outward organization embracing both the good and the wicked ... (Apology VII and VIII, 13)

So ... the church, in the Lutheran Confessional writings, is not merely an outward association, not only an outward organization, but *it is not less than this, either*. Just as the sacrament of baptism requires water as well as God's Word, just as the sacrament of communion requires bread and wine as well as God's Word, so the church requires some earthly "element," some structure, some tangible and recognizable expression. And just as the bread of holy communion can come in various forms – leavened or unleavened loaves as well as wafers – so too the structures of the church may vary.

This argument that the church rightly exists under and participates in temporal authority as well as spiritual authority is reinforced by an understanding of what has traditionally been referred to as "the orders of creation": family, state, and church. In Luther's own understanding, if not in the understanding of later Lutheran orthodoxy, these orders are not static. "Orders of creation" refers not to some fixed original pattern but to certain kinds of structures through which created life is ordered, that is, sustained and preserved. Some of us were taught by Bob Bertram to think of these orders as C2S2, the Creator's Critical Support Structures, and Ed Schroeder has suggested that a better translation of the German would yield "the Creator's ordainings" rather than "(static) orders of (a static) creation."

In "On the Councils and the Church" (1539), Luther writes:

The first government is that of the home, from which the people come; the second is that of the city, meaning the country, the people, princes and lords, which we call the secular government. These embrace everything—children, property, money, animals, etc. The home must produce, whereas the city must guard, protect, and defend. Then follows the third, God’s own home and city, that is, the church, which must obtain people from the home and protection and defense from the city (LW 41:177).

It’s nothing short of striking that Luther places the church within this broad category of government. Family, secular government, and the church are specific forms in which temporal authority is embodied. This does not at all undermine Luther’s definition of the church as “holy believers, and the sheep who hear the voice of their Shepherd” (Smalcald Articles, Part 3, Article XII). Just as the Christian is simultaneously saint and sinner, so too is the church simultaneously a means of God’s (right-handed) grace and a structure through which God’s (left-handed) authority is at work in the world. It’s my contention that this is not only an accurate claim about the dual reality of the church but that it is also a good and useful thing.

Crossing the Church

When I presented a preliminary form of these reflections at a scholarly seminar 18 months ago, one prominent Lutheran academic responded by saying “Nobody disputes that.” I promptly concluded that the scholar, while rostered, had probably not been in attendance at a synod assembly in recent years, nor, I imagine, does he read *The Lutheran* magazine on a regular basis. I see and hear people challenge the legitimacy of the institutional church all the time. (I’m reminded of the story about the pastoral candidate who, when asked whether he believed in infant baptism,

responded, "Believe in it? I've seen it!")

The American cultural emphasis on the separation of church and state has contributed to a privatized understanding of faith. It has also contributed to a privatized understanding of church. At its most extreme, we have the phenomenon of ordinations via internet, available with or without the start-up kit for establishing your own tax-exempt ministry. But there are examples much closer to home: consider the letters to the editor published in *The Lutheran* complaining that "churchwide" is disconnected from the people in the pew, and consider also the synod assembly resolutions calling for churchwide assembly actions to be ratified at the congregational level. The common assumption of these latter examples is that congregations are "the real church." I'm not convinced that this parochialism is even really about the congregations themselves; my sense is that, even more, the focus is a privatistic or clique-ish focus on the individuals in those congregations.

Such congregationalism has sometimes been buttressed theologically with an appeal to Augsburg Confession Article VII, as if to say that anything other than preaching and sacraments is not truly "church." For the ELCA in particular, this is a potentially divisive stance, given our understanding of congregations, synods, and the churchwide organization as three structural expressions of the church, each distinct yet all interdependent. In short (let's be blunt), there is no shortage of folks quick to say that "Higgins Road" is not really the church, or the bishop's office is not really the church. "They're just bureaucracy. We're the church." (Mind you, I'm not denying that there's bureaucracy but am asserting that the bureaucracy is also church.) This reductionistic use of Augsburg VII is flawed in several senses: it forgets that the churchwide assembly and the churchwide organization also gather regularly and centrally around word and sacrament. It forgets that the

local congregation is and does more than worship. And it forgets that the proclamation of the word and administration of the sacraments always takes place in and through actual historical institutions – earthen vessels – that exist in specific times and places with specific structures and policies and within specific contexts with which the institutional church must interact.

In recent years, there has been a renewed attention to the core Lutheran emphasis on the vocation of Christians in the world. However, many who affirm the vocation of the Christian in the world draw the line at identifying any vocation for the church in the world other than evangelism. The institutional church is acknowledged primarily as a support system for global mission, and any social or political speech or action is ruled out of bounds.

To show the limitations in this narrow understanding of the church, it's fruitful to apply the Crossings model to the church itself as text. The model is a familiar one for most of us here, with diagnosis and prognosis each progressing through three levels: from the external, through the internal, to the eternal, and back again.

D1 External diagnosis

Controversy

Controversies concerning human sexuality, authority in the church, etc, etc, threaten to fragment the ELCA (even more than it already is). Membership numbers are declining, and our membership is aging.

D2 Internal diagnosis

Infidelity

Our fault lines reveal deep doubts (Are we faithful?) as well as

deep suspicions and even accusations (Are you faithful?) The two Call to Faithfulness conferences of the early 1990s framed the question in terms of the “evangelical catholics” vs. the “radical Lutherans” (to themselves) or the “denominational Lutherans” (to the evangelical catholics), with each group claiming that it was the legitimate heir to the sixteenth century Lutheran reformers. More recently, the “Pastoral Statement of Conviction and Concern” sees the ELCA on the brink of apostasy: “we observe that the ELCA is becoming schismatic and sectarian.” And there’s more: Word Alone or Called to Common Mission? Solid Rock or Good Soil? There are factions among us. (So much so that I find myself wondering what the always-contextual apostle Paul would say in an Epistle to the ELCA.)

D3 Eternal diagnosis

Whose church? Whose body?

In the end, God says, as in the old Burger King commercial, “Have it your way,” and there’s no good news for us sinners in that! What’s the God-sized problem here? I think it’s that we want to define and defend the church on our own terms. The problem is not just the opposition between “our church” and “your church” but finally the opposition between “our church” and God’s church. If we win this battle, we lose the war. When we fail to discern the body of Christ, in all its members, we bring judgment upon ourselves. When we dis-member ourselves from the one body of Christ, who then will deliver us from this our own body of death?

P1 Eternal prognosis / solution (God in Christ for the church)

Root of church as body of Christ, crucified and risen

The church is the body of Christ, the crucified and risen one.

As God in Christ reconciled the world to Godself, taking upon himself the sins of the world, so too the Holy Spirit calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies the church on earth. “One holy Christian church will be and remain forever.” Neither the gates of hell, nor our internal doubts and our external squabbings, can prevail against it. And it is to this church, this body, that we have been joined through baptism into the death and resurrection of Christ.

***P2 Internal solution (God in Christ in the church)
The faith-full solution is the church as the assembly constituted by and gathered around the Gospel and sacraments.***

Consider P2, the internal solution, as an expression of Augsburg Confession VII. Rooted in the body of Christ, the “shoots” of the church are our actual assemblies around Word and sacrament.

P3 External solution (God in Christ in the world through the church)

The Crossings model is not complete until it bears fruit. Aye, there’s the rub, for it’s precisely our disagreements about the fruit that fuel our controversies, which takes us right back to our initial diagnosis. The church, like the Christian individual, remains in this life *simul iustus et peccator*.

Given this analysis, it seems to me that one way of describing the state of church life today is to say that many of our operative ecclesiologies are marred by a gap (if not a wall) between P2 and P3.

Some of those who are quick to quote Augsburg Confession VII on the unity of the church through Word and sacrament never move beyond P2. (I’m thinking here particularly of the response of

theologians such as the late Gerhard Forde to ELCA ecumenical proposals.) There's sap running through the veins of the church, but it's not allowed to bear fruit outside the sanctuary.

Then there are those (on both the right and the left, interestingly enough) who are willing to talk accurately enough about the external responsibilities and the institutional character of the church (P3 sorts of externals) ... but in such a way that those matters are disconnected from the root. This is more obvious perhaps among the peace and justice lobby, who commend good works but often as got-to mandates rather than get-to fruits of faith. I think the situation is similar with the "home to Rome" folks (those Lutherans who have been received into membership with the Roman Catholic Church as well as those who remain Lutheran but see reunion with the church of Rome as the ultimate ecumenical goal); these, it seems to me, commend a certain form of church structure for reasons that are at least as historically conditioned as they are theologically rooted. Whatever may have been the case in the 1530 attempt to reform the church while preserving its unity, it is simply a fact that today the Roman Catholic Church is one denomination among other Christian denominations. Neither of these approaches – justice or unity – seems faithful to Philip Melanchthon's insistence in Apology IV that evangelicals commend works (and I include structures and policies within this category) without losing the promise. In a passage oft-cited in the Apology, John 15:5, Jesus tells the disciples, "Apart from me you can do nothing." In other words, without being rooted in the vine, without being connected to the circulatory system, we will not bear good fruit.

Within a Crossings framework, the P3 fruits are the actions of the institutional church in the world. They are, if you will, the external expression of the internal solution. It seems to me that what's needed for the life and mission of the church today

is a clearer articulation both of the *fruits* of the church in and for the world in all the particularities of our contexts *and* a consistent proclamation of the *ways* those fruits are continually rooted in the church's identity as the body of Christ, watered and nourished through Word and sacrament. Like the individual Christian, who is a citizen both of the church and of the world, the church as a civic institution, as a structure for the ordering of creation, will bear fruit in the world. These fruits, broadly considered, relate to all expressions of the church: from the soup kitchen sponsored by the local congregation all the way to the church's social statements, the socially responsible investing of church pension funds, and open letters from the presiding bishop on matters of public concern. (Not to mention the role the institutional church plays as, for example, a consumer of health care, insurance, etc.)

In short, the Augsburg Aha! frees us not only to be the church *per se* but to be the church in the world. Freed from the need to justify our ecclesiologies and our ecclesiastical structures, and to justify ourselves by getting them all right, we get to bear fruit. We get to create structures that will serve the church's mission. Honest-to-God Gospel gives us honest-to-God law, not only the honest-to-God theological use of the law which condemns us and all our efforts at self-justification but also the honest-to-God civil use of the law which we are empowered to use, as God's faithful stewards, for the ordering of creation, in ways that serve church, world, and neighbor. The church, precisely as the assembly among whom Gospel is preached and sacraments administered, rooted in the crucified and risen Christ, is freed also to be a civil institution in the civic arena. Like it or not, the institutional church has temporal authority. It interacts with the other institutions through which God is at work ordering the created world. The Augsburg

Confession condemns the church's use of temporal authority insofar as the church claims ultimacy for that authority, either vis-à-vis God's Gospel authority or vis-à-vis other legitimate temporal authorities. It acknowledges, however, that the institutional church (the precise reference is to bishops) may well possess temporal authority "by human right." Such authority is, by definition, provisional. It is subject to change and subject to error, but it exists. We get to have this treasure in earthen vessels. We *get to* have bishops. We get to formulate social statements. What we say in them is a matter for our best reasoned discourse, but we get to do so.

God works through means. God works faith through Word and sacrament. God works sustenance for the world through the provisional, historical structures. If state, family, and church are orders of creation, by which we mean kinds of structures through which created life is sustained and preserved, then we have some warrant for a two kingdoms ecclesiology, or, in Crossings language, for a church that is concerned not only with faith but with fruit. While the faith in Christ created and sustained through Word and sacrament meets our deepest needs, the external problems of the church in the world are still real and still there. Just as we are not disembodied souls, neither is the church just a spiritual epiphenomenon. When Jesus commands Peter, "Feed my sheep," might that not include literal fodder for hungry bellies?

We have long recognized that government is an order of creation, yet specific forms of government are malleable; no one insists that only a single ideal form of government is acceptable. Similarly, the institutional structures and policies of the church are malleable. One of the strengths of Lutheran ecclesiology from the beginning has been its adaptability. Specific contexts evoke specific structures and policies.⁴ The church has the freedom to shape and to reshape its institutional

life. The challenge, to paraphrase Apology IV, is how to commend church structures and policies without losing the promise and how to determine which particular structures and policies will best serve us and God's created world. The criterion is what serves the ministry of Gospel.

Roots, Shoots, and Fruits: But Which Ones?

Formula of Concord Article X is labeled:

X. The Ecclesiastical Rites That Are Called Adiaphora or Things Indifferent

Those of us who were fortunate enough to study the Confessions with our departed colleague and teacher Bob Bertram were taught to frame this article contextually: not adiaphora in a vacuum but, in the context of the 16th century adiaphoristic controversies, "When is an adiaphoron no longer an adiaphoron." In times of persecution, when the Gospel itself is at stake, those externals that would otherwise qualify as adiaphora are no longer indifferent things:

Nor do we include among truly free adiaphora or things indifferent those ceremonies which give or (to avoid persecution) are designed to give the impression that our religion does not differ greatly from that of the papists, or that we are not seriously opposed to it. Nor are such rites matters of indifference when these ceremonies are intended to create the illusion (or are demanded or agreed to with that intention) that these two opposing religions have been brought into agreement and become one body, or that a return to the papacy and an apostasy from the pure doctrine of the Gospel and from true religion has taken place or will allegedly result little by little from these ceremonies (FC X:5).

This very point was one of the centers of debate concerning the

proposal (and eventual decision) for the ELCA to enter into the historic episcopate as part of our full communion agreement with the Episcopal Church. Opponents of “Called to Common Mission” argued that adopting the historic episcopate undermined Augsburg Confession VII’s witness that Word and sacrament are “sufficient” for the unity of the church and that the very fact that ordination by bishops was being made a requirement made it illegitimate. While I am not unsympathetic to this point of view, I find it finally problematic.

The institutional church has established plenty of other requirements over time. Clinical Pastoral Education, for example, is a requirement for ordination in the ELCA, as it was in some, but not all of this church’s predecessor bodies. While there may be a few of us in the room who are grateful to have slipped in before the rules changed, I have never heard anyone complain that by requiring CPE, the church is burdening consciences and undermining the Gospel by adding something to the *satis est* of Augsburg Confession

VII. Yet that is precisely the argument that was – and continues to be – made in some corners regarding ordination by bishops.

Whether or not the particular requirement of ordination by bishops serves the church well in this day and age is something about which reasonable people can disagree, but it cannot be ruled illegitimate from the outset. To return to Formula X, despite our internal fault lines – and the not insignificant quakes they generate – these are not times of persecution. It is rhetorical overkill – and a violation of the 8th commandment – to construe those with whom we differ as “opponents of the Gospel.” We need to learn to recognize when an adiaphoron is *still* an adiaphoron.

In a memorable phrase, Robert Jenson referred to adiaphora not

as “things that don’t matter” but as things that we make matter. The fact that something is neither commanded nor forbidden by God does not make it unimportant. Rather, things neither commanded nor forbidden are things that God entrusts to us to make wise decisions about. Change in such temporal matters is not only permissible but can be downright good and faithful.

Formula X continues:

We further believe, teach, and confess that the community of God in every place and at every time has the right, authority, and power to change, to reduce, or to increase ceremonies according to its circumstances, as long as it does so without frivolity and offense but in an orderly and appropriate way, as at any time may seem to be most profitable, beneficial, and salutary for good order, Christian discipline, evangelical decorum, and the edification of the church (FC X ,9).

Luther makes a similar argument in “On the Councils and the Church” where, discussing worship places and times, he says:

These matters are purely external (as far as time, place, and persons are concerned) and may be regulated entirely *by reason*, to which they are altogether subject. God, Christ, and the Holy Spirit are not interested in them – just as little as they are interested in what we wish to eat, drink, wear, and whom we marry, or where we want to dwell, walk, or stand (LW 41: 173).

He continues:

We will regard these externals as we do a christening robe or swaddling clothes in which a child is clad for baptism. The child is not baptized or sanctified either by the christening robe or by the swaddling clothes, but only by the baptism. And yet *reason* dictates that a child be thus clothed. If this

garment is soiled or torn, it is replaced by another (LW 41:175).

What Luther and the Confessions say about rites and ceremonies applies by extension to church structures and policies that are adiaphora. The ultimate criterion in the church is the Word of God. But in penultimate matters, the things that we make matter, reason and good order are core criteria.

Ordination: A Case Study in Faithful Change

The church is entrusted with the proclamation of the Gospel and the administration of the sacraments. Church structures exist to serve this function. In the temporal revision of structures, then, particularly the office of ministry and access to it, the criterion is what promotes the lively, life-giving proclamation of the Gospel. Although the office of ministry itself is established by God, the institutional church makes some determinations about the filling of the office.

Luther was clear that any man could fill the office of preacher. Not women, children, or the infirm, except in exceptional cases. There are useful lessons to be drawn from an essay by John Reumann, examining the historical and theological processes leading toward the ordination of women in Lutheran churches in the U.S.⁵ Although he does not use the word, Reumann seems to see the issue of women's ordination, to some extent, as an adiaphoron. The scriptures neither prohibit nor command the ordination of women, nor do they command it. It's important to note that this is as much a conclusion about the scriptural understanding of ministry as it is about the scriptural understanding of women. And it's also important to note that the conclusion that the scriptures do not prohibit the ordination of women, while it may seem obvious to many of us now, was once

held as just as obvious in the other direction.

Back to Reumann's analysis. Because the ordination of women is neither commanded nor forbidden, it is a possibility and therefore something about which the church must and may make its own decision. Reumann is also clear that biblical interpretation legitimately includes not only exegesis but awareness of changing historical and cultural factors. A new understanding of the texts emerged over time. It's not that earlier generations got it wrong but that a new interpretation and application of the biblical word became possible over time.

But again to understand something as an adiaphoron is not to see it as unimportant. The church's decisions about that which is neither commanded nor forbidden are informed by reason. While the church is free to ordain women or not, the only grounds for excluding otherwise qualified people from the office of pastor solely on the basis of gender seems a bit arbitrary.

I think there's a parallel here to the issue of the ordination of gays and lesbians in committed partnerships. Many of our biblical scholars have concluded that the texts traditionally associated with homosexuality simply do not say what we thought they said. Personally I have come to the conclusion that sexual orientation is an adiaphoron (and I realize that this will upset those who take a justice stance on this issue as well as those who hold to the church's traditional views). But clearly there is not consensus on this matter in the church. It remains an issue for our reasoned and reasonable debate, not because church bureaucrats or liberals are attempting to impose their own position on the church. But because the presence of gay and lesbian people in our midst who are formed by the ministry of word and sacrament and in some cases have been trained for it but are exempted only by reason of their partnered status (or desire for partnered status). It is the

presence of these committed men and women in our churches that challenges us to rethink things that once seemed as sure to us as the prohibition of women's ordination.

Folks who know me will tell you that I sometimes reflect that one of my biographical gifts is that I've never been a part of a church body where I got my way. As a female growing up in the LCMS sensing a call to ordained ministry, as someone who arrived at Seminex only months before the decision to close up shop in St. Louis was announced, as a member of the only synod of the AELC to vote against full communion with the Reformed ... I find there's a tremendous freedom in never having "got my way." I don't gotta defend any particular ecclesial status quo. I get to keep starting over, not from scratch but from deep roots, fed and watered through Word and sacrament. For what it's worth, both CCM and the ordination of gays and lesbians in committed partnerships are things I have changed my mind about in past 10 years. I – we – get to come to new understandings.

In many conversations and debates, I've heard the fear expressed that if the church makes the wrong decision, does the wrong thing, we will somehow become faithless or apostate. Well, guess what?! We've already been judged and condemned. And we are already, daily, being raised to new life. Perhaps the church needs to heed Luther's advice to sin boldly but to repent and believe in Christ more boldly still. Trusting in the promise, we are free to act, to succeed or to fail, and to act anew.

In the coming of the kingdom, the church (both as a temporal institution and as the community constituted by Word and sacrament) will give way to the saints gathered in praise around the throne of the Lamb. The Revelation to St. John reminds us that the church is fundamentally a penultimate institution: "And I saw no temple (read: church) in the city, for its temple is the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb." (Rev 21:22)

Thanks be to God.

1 Quotations from the Lutheran Confessions are from *The Book of Concord*, ed. Theodore G. Tappert (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959).

2 Kathryn Kleinhans, "No Red Synods/ Blue Synods in the ELCA: Attempting to Hold the Middle Ground," available online at <<http://www.elca.org/jle/article.asp?k=497>>

3 All Luther quotations are from the American edition of *Luther's Works*, 55 vols., ed. Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut Lehmann (Philadelphia: Fortress and St. Louis: Concordia, 1955-1986) and are cited within the text as LW with volume and page number.) Italicized words indicate emphasis added by this author.

4 Church historian and former presiding bishop H. George Anderson describes the 1520s, 1530s, and 1540s as "experiments and adventures in church order." For example, some congregations called their own pastors, while others had pastors appointed by Luther. Early on, Luther encouraged ordination by neighboring pastors, but by 1535, the Elector ordered that all pastoral candidates be ordained by the Wittenberg theological faculty.

5 John H. P. Reumann, *Ministries Examined: Laity, Clergy, Women, and Bishops in a Time of Change* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1987), chapter 2, esp. pp. 98-100, 115-131.

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