

Lutheran Confessional Perspectives in Today's World

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Three-point outline:

- 1) SOCIETY;
- 2) JUSTIFICATION;
- 3) FAITH/FORGIVEN-NESS

- 1) Learn from SOCIETY, as from God's lawful creation,*
- 2) but not as if society defined our JUSTIFICATION;*
- 3) that (justification) comes only by FAITH via Christ's FORGIVING community—where society, too, is being upgraded.*

The point of departure for my comments is the blue memo we received, dated 12/9/88 and entitled THE CHURCH IN SOCIETY: A LUTHERAN PERSPECTIVE, A Foundational Study—hereafter referred to as BLUE. That memo already anticipates what the “Lutheran Confessional Perspectives in Today's World” might be for the upcoming “Foundational Study,” though only of course in the form of brief and intriguing hints. The comments which follow are elaborations of BLUE's hints.

- 1) BLUE, 1st par.: “...how this church relates faithfully and critically to society, its

institutions and emergent trends.”

a) The above quotation pictures the church speaking TO society, as indeed the church is called to do, and ought to do more than it does. But a confessional reminder is in order. Much of what the church has to say TO society is what it, the church, is learning FROM society, as indeed the church is called to do, and ought to do more than it does. Isn't that why BLUE proposes that we draw not only upon “theological” but also upon “ethical and social analysis?” (In fact, also a good bit of our theological analysis is drawn from “society,” and rightly so.)

b) A case in point is the very proposal which this present theological consultation has convened to consider, the proposal of “a community of ethical deliberation.” That model of community is one of our secular society's more promising “institutions” or, if not yet an institution, certainly one of its “emergent trends.” I admit to being one of those who strongly encourages our Office of Studies to foster that model of community as a way of understanding the church as well. I also admit that some of the best recent proponents of that model (not to mention the New Testament writers) have been Christians—in this country, notably, John Courtney Murray, S.J. At the same time it is only fair to admit that some of the strongest supporters of “a community of ethical deliberation” have been outsiders to the church, yet on this score teachers to the church. Such God-given outsiders come to mind (with all their warts of course) as Thomas Jefferson, Karl Marx, Hannah Arendt, John Dewey, Juergen Habermas.

c) To admit the church's debt to “society” is not only fair, ethically. It is sound theologically. One way to say theologically that the church learns from “society” would be in terms of the Lutheran theology of “both kingdoms.” Another way

to say much the same thing would be as BLUE does: The theological framework for the proposed Foundational Study should be “a Trinitarian framework.” That is, as we read in another memo, the Foundational Study should not be limited to The Creed’s “second article.” What is prior is the First Article, on creation, over which the church of course has no monopoly. Only God does. But through Christ the church is heir to the whole of creation. So the church is authorized to appropriate also such creaturely boons as “a community of ethical deliberation,” no matter how worldly such an idea may be in its pedigree.

d) The Lutheran confessors had to contend against a brand of otherworldliness, or anti-worldliness—“foolish monastic theories,” also among the “sectarian” reformers—which stigmatized such secular institutions as holding public office, owning property, contracting marriages, enforcing the law. Against such pious stigmas the confessors pitted “the kingdom of Christ,” which “lets us make overt use of legitimate (legitimis) public ordinances of the notions in which we live, just as it lets us make use of medicine or architecture, food or drink or air”—the whole range of God’s lawful creation, social as well as ecological. (Apol. 16)

e) In our churches today we may be up against some of the same anti-worldliness, that “contempt of civil ordinances” which the confessors criticized. Oh, there may not be all that much resistance to describing the church as “a community of ethical deliberation,” except perhaps from those impatient few who think the church’s ethical pronouncements do not require all that much “ethical deliberation.” Ironically, the whole idea of “a community of ethical deliberation” may be most welcome by those in our churches who are most other-worldly.

They may like the idea for the same bad reason that the sectarians in the Reformation liked communitarianism: “How they have praised the theory that the Gospel requires us to hold

property in common!”—or in this case, to hold ethical ideas in common. These are the Christians who would remake, and if necessary by means of legislation, not only the church but its remake, and if necessary by means of legislation, not only the church but its environing society into what Melancthon spoofed as a “Platonic commune.” (ibid.)

f) One way to test whether our churches can operate as “a community of ethical deliberation” and yet do so in a way which freely and Christianly “uses” God’s world, and so “relates faithfully and critically to society, its institutions and emergent trends” is to ask ourselves this confessional question: Can we include as full partners in our “community of ethical deliberation” also those most worldly members of the Body of Christ whose very vocation it is to hold public office, contract marriages, own property, enforce laws, carry the sword—those “many good people involved in politics and in business?” (ibid.)

g) And no one so eloquently affirms the godliness of politics and business and property and marriage and police protection and military deterrence as do those in our society who, through poverty and powerlessness and divorce and abuse and tyranny, are deprived of those callings of theirs yet dignify them by their very yearning for them. But can such Christian worldlings be included in our “community of ethical deliberation?” Could poor people become bishops in ELCA or teach at LSTC or be employed at Higgins Road or even get sent to a “churchwide” assembly, unless they somehow renounced their poverty? Could millionaires, unless they renounced their millions? Might both groups (and many more) be unwelcome in our churchly “community of ethical deliberations,” and all because of the same stigma common to such groups, namely, their shocking, precarious nearness to the world?

h) Still, might not that worldliness of theirs—not their

poverty or wealth as such but their firsthand acquaintance with it—be a gift which these experienced Christians have from their Creator, and potentially a gift to their church? Might that not be their own best contribution to our “community of ethical deliberation?”

2) BLUE 3rd par.: “take a fresh look at ... particularly the meaning of justification.”

a) Besides such courtroom words as “justification,” BLUE uses similarly forensic words like “critically” (“this church relates ... critically to society”) and “witness” (“the church’s witness in society”). And I suppose we might include the title assigned to my paper, “confessional.” For what else is it to “confess” but to recognize that we are on a “witness” stand (status confessionis), being “critically” interrogated to give an account of our stewardship, daring to trust that the answer we give will be good enough to “justify” us?

b) Incidentally, it is much that same courtroom picture which is being used today by secular theorists who talk about “a community of ethical deliberation,” such otherwise diverse theorists as Wilfrid Sellars, Alasdair MacIntyre, Richard Rorty, Alvin Gouldner, Juergen Habermas. For within “a community of ethical deliberation” the whole purpose of the “deliberation” is not just to argue or to take a stand or even to learn from one another but rather to be able to “justify” our stand in face of “critical” scrutiny by others and, failing that, to find a stand which can be “justified.” If secular society can demand that much “justification” of its ethical deliberations—“in a society where ... public discourse about issues is increasingly impoverished”—then, as BLUE seems to be asking, can the church do less? That is, can it do with less “justification?” Hardly.

c) On the contrary, if Christians know anything they know that

as individual believers and as one Body they are accountable to provide “justification” to the most “critical” of all Judges, their Creator. True, the “witness” they must give is, as BLUE says, a “witness IN society.” But it is not TO society that they make their witness ultimately, or even TO one another, even when society or the church as “a community of ethical deliberation” calls them to account. To be sure, their “witness stands” are always social, never solitary (“whether as father, mother, son, daughter, master, mistress, servant”—Small Catechism). But that social “status” of theirs (German: Stand) is in reality their “witness stand” before a highly critical Creator, who is “calling” them, right where they are in human society, to give an account of their stewardship coram Deo. Hence the term “calling,” which also is part of the larger forensic idiom of “justification.” In fact, that same forensic picture underlies the most dominant theme in recent theological ethics, the theme of “responsibility.” An ethic of responsibility presupposes an interrogator who demands of us a responsum, an Antwort, for what in creation has been entrusted to us.

d) What Christians know, in other words, is that the creation is not only “good” but critical. Indeed, just because it is so incalculably good (‘all of this out of fatherly goodness and mercy, without any merit or worthiness on our part”), the only natural response we should spontaneously give to such bounty (“to thank and to praise, to serve and obey Him”) we do not and cannot even begin to give. Consequently, “to thank and praise, to serve and obey” becomes anything but natural. It becomes sheer “debt,” not just “duty” as the usual translation puts it, but “debt” (schuldig). Since all of us are thus mortally indebted, all of us are desperately poor, every pretense to the contrary notwithstanding. And for all of us, the poor, there had better be a preferential option from the critical Creator, but especially for those of us debtors “to whom much has been

given.”

e) Recently on the sign-board of St. Charles Lwanga Catholic Church, which serves one of this city’s poorest neighborhoods, the motto for the week read: “Lord, it is so hard to be thankful when we have so much.” The very lavishness of the Creator interrogates us “critically.” How can we, ingrates that we are, “justify” all this? The Court waits for our answer, our “witness” (confessio), but not forever. Often, so it seems to me, it is those Christians among us who are most visibly, most grindingly poor who also know best how staggering is the world’s debt, including their own.

f) For a Commission on Church and Society it is especially incumbent that it stress “particularly the meaning of justification.” And by that I mean our justification not only within “a community of ethical deliberation,” our justifying of our ethical positions to one another—that, too—but first and foremost our own life- and-death justification in face of the critical Creator, our right to live.

g) A Commission on Church and Society may be tempted to omit this depth dimension of justification in the church’s ethos, or to take it for granted. Understandably it might do that, since it has been commissioned to focus upon what our confessional tradition calls the Law’s “social function” (usus civilis legis). But that function of the Law is already a concession to human frailty. It reflects, one might say, the Creator’s provisional pragmatism, just enough of a compromise with sin and unbelief to still demand the most morality that the market will bear yet without over-asking it to the point of unrealism. For instance, sexual intercourse may well be the Creator’s way of uniting two different-sex lovers into an inseparable, “one flesh” bond for life, such that any even imagined violation of that bond alienates the Creator. Still, the immediate

necessities of sustaining flawed marriages and families at all—and aren't they all?—may require that adultery and infidelity and other widespread sexual aberrations, not of course be condoned yet also not be so socially ostracized as to make society impossible altogether.

h) A Commission on Church and Society may be tempted to confuse “the social function of the law,” because of its accommodation to human sin, with what the gospel calls forgiveness. But that would be, at best, a half-truth. Forgiveness is infinitely better than that. Actually, the Law even in its usus civilis is accusatory. The very fact that our economy, an economy of “usury,” or any other economy for that matter, has to institutionalize greed lest there be no exchange of goods and services at all, is hardly a sign of divine forgiveness but rather a deeply incriminating reflection on us all and on our collective future. In any case, the Commission's proposed Foundational Study does well to emphasize “particularly the meaning of justification.” That should discourage reducing the Law's “theological function” to its “social function,” and should encourage the church to relate to society, and to itself, truly “critically.”—But BLUE asks the church to relate to society not only “critically” but also “faithfully.” Let us turn next, and last, to that emphasis upon faith.

3) BLUE, 4th par.: “As the body of Christ we have been freed to deliberate and disagree, yet act.”

a) At first glance this quotation seems to say nothing about how the church relates to society “faithfully,” that is, full of faith. But look again. How else is it that in “the body of Christ we have been freed to deliberate and disagree, yet act,” if not by faith? “Freed,” indeed. For without faith the whole project of “disagree yet act” would be anything but freedom. It would be more like chaos or anarchy or, at best inconclusiveness

and indecision. For those who have no such faith, “disagree yet act” might be what they have to settle for in face of irreconcilable differences between them, a rationalization for an otherwise hopeless pluralism. But freedom it is not. Especially not, if those who “deliberate and disagree yet act” are people of conscience who know they are up against a critical Creator to whom they must justify their “acts,” including the acts of their community. If our congregation is persuaded that ELCA’s investment in South African businesses is God-vexing and yet our synod, for other reasons, finds it God-pleasing, and so “acts,” and acts also in the name of our congregation, how in God’s name can we call that “freedom?” Answer: only by faith.

b) That answer, I grant, may sound cheap and well-nigh blasphemous. Often it does. I also grant that there may come times, what the Formula of Concord calls “times for confessing,” when Christians who ordinarily have no such authority must seize the microphone, risking blasphemy to testify publicly against their church in the name of the church. But such moments are extremely exception, if only because they presuppose on the part of those confessors an exceptional grasp of the gospel. But that is all they have, a grasp of the gospel. Yet isn’t that what faith is? Beware of those self-styled confessors who claim something more, like being right, or brave, or indignant, or the voice of the people.

c) So we are back to faith, by which alone “in the body of Christ we have been freed to deliberate and disagree, yet act.” For, blasphemous as it sounds—and blasphemy is indeed what believers risk—it is not our “acts,” either our individual acts or the acts of our community by which we are justified. On the other hand, what does justify us, as the confessors rejoiced to rediscover in the biblical gospel, is faith—sola fide—independently of the “works” which faith of course and always does. Else it is not faith. But what gives to the

believers' faith its surpassing value, their claim on the critical Creator, their right to live, is that One whom they dare to trust, Jesus the Christ. In Him, so they "believe, teach and confess," it was "very God" who was free "to deliberate and disagree, yet act." God disagrees with God's own contrary judgment against the world, "yet acts," overcoming that ultimate disagreement through Christ's cross and resurrection. That divine action is what the body of Christ believes and, by believing, that is what the body of Christ "has." Glaubst du, hast du.

d) Perhaps that is why BLUE refers to Christian congregations as "communities of faith." (2nd last par.) Ordinarily I would not quibble with that designation. How could I, considering how indispensable faith is to justification? Furthermore, is that not how the Augsburg Confession defines the church, as "the assembly of all believers?" Yes, but that is not all it says. The church, says the Augustana, is that community of believers who share Christ's gospel and sacraments. In fact, as the same document goes on to acknowledge, not all of us who are in the church, the empirical church, are believers. Whether we are or are not is "hidden" to one another. Yet that does not mean the church is invisible, or inaudible. On the contrary, the church is something for all the world to see and hear, not always with respect to the genuineness of its communicants but surely with respect to what it communicates, out loud and in full view: the gospel and sacraments of Christ. The church is not just its personnel but its personnel (believers and unbelievers) engaged in a unique communication process.

e) What they communicate is the forgiveness of sin, and they do that in many different ways. One way—would that they took greater advantage of it!—is in the exchange of Peace on Sunday mornings. That is one version of what the Smalcald Articles call "the mutual conversation and consolation of the brothers" and

sisters. Another version might well be the “community of ethical deliberation,” provided that that too communicates the forgiveness of sin. If it does, then that is enough—satis est—for the community’s authentic unity. However they may disagree, even when some are right and others are dead wrong and they cannot produce a single concerted front or even an ethical one, they are still united by that prior meta-ethical “act” of the closest kind, mutual forgiveness in Christ. And do not be surprised if that prior unity shows up in new ethical unities as well, and surely in the quality of their ethical differences.

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