

Readers' Responses

Colleagues,

Today's edition, ThTh #115, offers readers' responses to recent postings. There's quite a bunch. If possible I'll try next week to address some of the items raised here.

Peace & Joy!

Ed

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1. Last week's critique (ThTh 114) of a Christ-less sermon we encountered on the weekend of the Schroeder family reunion elicited this from an ELCA pastor in California—

"Your monologue was forwarded to me by a friend . . . my comments: Hard up for content in the late summer, Ed? If the goal of Christian conversation is mutual consolation / edification, perhaps a bit more reflection on a poor sermon by some overworked pastor might be in order before speaking. I assume your missives are read by casts of dozens if not hundreds who just might be Lutheran enough to remember the word 'grace' if not 'gracious.' That would, I believe, put some moral requirement on you to 'impart grace to the hearers.' (see Eph 4:15, 29) All I could think of is that I am glad you and your Schroeder clan don't drop in on me. Shame on you."

Three weeks earlier ThTh 111 was posted, my answers to two questions from an ELCA bishop—one about Luther and the Jews, the other about the "historic episcopate," now that it is canon law (or something close to that) for

ordinations in the ELCA. That elicited a lot of response.

2. From an ELCA pastor in Wisconsin, Seminex grad, Crossings veteran—

I have pasted in this section from TT #111. It is, I think, the only argument possible to make that the confessions forbid us to have only bishops ordain & to have bishops installed always by three other bishops. My bishop made the same argument you do, and I was for a time persuaded by it.

That's where the old term "adiaphoron" comes in—something neither PREscribed nor PROscribed for the church living according to the Gospel. By itself such hist. epis. ordinations are an adiaphoron, the confessors (would) say. BUT if someone says YOU GOTTA have such an ordination, then, say the confessors — this time in Formula of Concord Article X — it ceases to be adiaphoron. Then it's a "time for confessing." And then you must resist it even though by itself it is no big deal.

What is a big deal is the YOU GOTTA that's added on to the issue. Any such add-on that amounts to a YOU GOTTA, is a no-no for Reformation Lutherans.

Already back in the Augsburg Confession and its Apology, Article 28, Melanchthon was speaking against such things. Such church ordinances that make adiaphoron-stuff into YOU GOTTA's, he says there,

- a. burden Christian consciences,*
- b. undermine Christian liberty, and*
- c. conflict with the Gospel.*

Well put! I take no exception to your description of the

issue, only to its application in this case. If anyone were saying that only by the aforementioned rubrics can we be saved, can we be the church of Christ, can our sacraments genuinely convey forgiveness, then it would be an objectionable GOT T0. But ECUSA and CCM are explicitly denying this.

I think what is needed by well-intentioned Lutherans is a bit more discrimination about GOT T0s. It is those which touch on conscience or justification that are objectionable. "Honor your father and mother [and aged professor]" is certainly a GOT T0. It becomes objectionable only when linked to my righteousness. Keep it in another realm, and it is good.

A very good friend, with whom I am sharply disagreed about CCM, always says these rubrics "are being imposed on us." Well, at the 1999 CWA the ELCA – we ourselves – decided to take this upon ourselves. Is that imposition? He would argue that the majority is imposing it on the minority but, heavenly days, if THAT is outlawed then we can no longer govern ourselves in any way by vote. Those who voted for Bp Anderson's opponent could argue that he is imposed on them as bishop, and that is a GOT T0 which destroys Christian liberty. Well, I think this reductio ad absurdum is persuasive.

Et tu?

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3. Here's one from a good friend, the ecumenical officer of an Episcopal diocese in the midwest–

Several brief Anglican thoughts on the question of Dr. Bohlmann's comment on the historic episcopate. Is he

perhaps saying that the confessions are not negative on the historic polity? that they even express a willingness to use it in order to preserve the unity of the church if the (then) bishops would ordain gospel-preaching pastors? [which, alas, they weren't] Is his second point perhaps that since polity is an adiaphoron for Lutherans one today could oppose any given form for a variety of practical or even theoretical reasons? e.g. that the historic episcopate has too much negative historical baggage or doesn't support lay ministries enough, etc. [Likewise, one could support any given form including the historic episcopate for a variety of practical or even theoretical reasons, including common mission and the unity of the church.]

Your YOU GOTTA argument is a good one if the issue is one touching on doctrine, gospel, salvation, or conscience, but I wonder about its scope in this area of discipline, i.e. polity. If polity is an adiaphoron, then the ELCA could adopt the historic episcopate as a strategy for Christian unity. In fact, the ELCA constitution is full of YOU GOTTAAs that are adiaphora as well as confessional. No organization could exist without them.

My take on CCM is that the ELCA is saying that it is willing to exercise its freedom to shape its polity whatever way is best for its mission by adopting the historic episcopate in order to make the interchangeability of clergy possible with the Episcopal Church. Since the Episcopal Church has for almost twenty years practiced mutual eucharistic hospitality with the ELCA, the issue is not the validity of the Lutheran pastoral office. The willingness to accept current pastors who have been ordained by other pastors is further evidence. The acceptance of ELCA's full communion

with other Lutheran bodies as well as with Reformed Churches is a recognition that the ELCA will always have pastors in its ranks who were not ordained within the historic episcopate. The rub seems to be on our insistence that in the future interchangeability of clergy requires such an ordination. That is our internal requirement as we seek to be faithful to a discipline that goes back to Canon 4 of Nicea and which is observed by a large majority of the Christian world. As a norm, we want our clergy to live within that discipline, hence the interchangeability rule.

But, what of those who for whatever reason conscientiously cannot accept such an ordination? To force them to do so would be wrong, in my opinion. We faced that issue when we decided to ordain women and found ways to accommodate conscience. I suspect that the ELCA will find ways to do likewise. Hopefully, in time the issue will be seen in a different light and cease to be divisive. Meanwhile, we must learn how to work cooperatively with those whose consciences are burdened by our internal rules and who feel they must reject ordination by bishops, all the while rejoicing in the exciting new possibilities that interchangeability will make possible with those who freely accept such ordination as God's gift for expanding our common mission.

Peace, Your loyal Anglican reader

4. From a retired ELCA pastor on the East Coast—

Re: ThTh #111, part 2—hist. episcopate and the Episcopalians and ELCA. Do you really think so? I have my

doubts. It seems to me that both Article 28 of the Augsburg Confession and Article 10 of the Formula of Concord have to do with the imposition of adiaphora that are CONTRARY TO THE GOSPEL. "It is patently contrary to God's command and Word to make laws out of opinions or to require that they be observed IN ORDER TO MAKE SATISFACTION FOR SINS AND OBTAIN GRACE ...that by such works GRACE AND EVERYTHING GOOD MIGHT BE EARNED FROM GOD" (AC XXVIII, 34-38). "Inasmuch as such regulations as have been instituted AS NECESSARY TO PROPITIATE GOD AND MERIT GRACE are contrary to the Gospel it is not at all proper for the bishops to require such services of God" (50). "We believe, teach, and confess that IN TIME OF PERSECUTION, when a clear-cut confession of faith is demanded of us, we dare not yield to the ENEMIES in such indifferent things...In such a case it is no longer a question of indifferent things, but a matter which has to do with THE TRUTH OF THE GOSPEL...(FC, X,6). (Emphases added.)

When our Episcopalian sisters and brothers ask us to join them in the historic episcopate they are not our "enemies," their making of that request does not constitute "a time of persecution," and is certainly not made with the understanding that the HE in any way "makes satisfaction for sins" or that we "obtain grace" by means of it.

So I'm mystified by the invocation of AC 28 and FC 10 in this matter. It doesn't seem to me to fit.

ThTh #111: "Any such add-on that amounts to a YOU GOTTA, is a no-no for Reformation Lutherans." Really? Any such add-on that amounts to a you gotta TO OBTAIN GRACE or MAKE SATISFACTION FOR SINS is a no-no, yes, but joining

them in the HE is not such an add-on.

AC 28 also says, "To this our teachers reply that bishops or pastors may make regulations so that everything in the churches is done in good order, but not as a means of obtaining God's grace or making satisfaction for sins, nor in order to bind men's consciences by considering these things necessary services of God and counting it a sin to omit their observance..." (53). Granted that the Es get closer than is comfortable for us Lutherans to making the HE "necessary" and "a sin to omit," but do they not, in this dialog, make it clear they are NOT doing that? Are they not including the HE as part of "everything in the churches [being] done in good order"? Should we not be content with that? I think so.

Besides, the FC says (7), "We believe, teach, and confess that no church should condemn another because it has fewer or more external ceremonies not commanded by God, as long as there is mutual agreement in doctrine and in all its articles [past experience makes me very unhappy with those last five words, but there they are] as well as in the right use of the holy sacraments..." Since we have found mutual agreement in doctrine and in all its articles (?) as well as in the right use of the holy sacraments, we ought not condemn them for holding to the HE, nor they us for not. Well, they're not condemning us for not having the HE, since they recognize our ministry as valid without it. They are asking us to adopt it for the sake of a common mission because they cannot do otherwise (I don't think we appreciate this sufficiently). Neither do we condemn them for having the HE, but are willing to join them in it for the sake of this common mission.

Back to ThTh and the YOU GOTTA add-ons. There are a lot of “you gottas” added on in the church’s life, e.g. you gotta call a pastor who is on the ELCA roster, you gotta get the bishop’s signature on the letter of call, you gotta be willing to call a pastor of either gender, you gotta have your congregation’s constitution approved by the synod, you gotta attend synod assemblies, etc. None of these is a “no-no” to Reformation Lutherans because they are not prescribed to obtain grace or make satisfaction for sin.

As Marty emphasized when defending Called to Common Mission, if we were merging all this would have to be looked at in an entirely different manner, but we’re not merging. We’re recognizing each other as church, and joining each other in mission. So cool it. Well, those last words are mine, not his.

Can we really compare being asked to accept the HE to the LCMS demanding that the Bohlmann/Preus Statement be affirmed as the true teaching of the Gospel in all its articles? It doesn’t seem comparable to me. The latter compromised the Gospel (we didn’t, after all, oppose it simply because we were in a snit because somebody said, “You gotta”), whereas the former is indeed a simple acceptance of an adiaphoron for the sake of peace and the fulfilling of God’s mission and does not compromise the Gospel.

Well, then are my doubts to ThTh #111 for whatever they’re worth. Know, though, that in your real calling, man, are you appreciated!

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5. From a lay theologian, Crossings Community member here in St. Louis–

Thinking about your comments #2, concerning the historical episcopate and the YOU GOTTA that makes it non-adiaphoron. Writing off the top of my head (and you can picture that if you want!), I would hope that the Concordat didn't say "we gotta do the h.e. thing" but it should have said "the Lutherans agree that they will do the h.e. thing." This would still be adiaphoron in a doctrinal sense; it has no more theological force than the documents that say the ELCA will adopt a budget by majority vote at the conventions and other such business matters. We agree to do the h.e. to make our guests (new brothers/sisters?) comfortable; and there is Scriptural precedent for this. "To the Greeks I became as a Greek, that I might win the Greeks." Of course, there is Scripture that can be brought to bear against it, such as Paul castigating Peter for changing his dining patterns when the circumcision party visited (did I get that right?), but I suspect the key difference is how and why you do things – "that I might win the Greeks" is a much better reason than "so I don't get embarrassed." And the reason here? To promote church unity. Sounds like a Godly reason to me.

Pax

6. From a newly ordained ELCA pastor, former student of mine. She came for a Lutheran seminary degree from her Roman Catholic heritage after years of work (and a PhD) in RC contexts–

Your words on the historic episcopate interested me very much, considering my history and all. From where I stand, I believe you have the reasoning on this one right. That is a theological reason why I became Lutheran (Gospel/Jesus Christ centered.) Episcopalians are RC “wannabes” without pedigree—at least institutionally, that is. Cheers!

7. From an Anglican priest in Canada, once upon a time my Seminex TA—

Glad you are getting some comments on TT 111. Any of it from Anglicans? I’ve just been re-reading some Richard Hooker. He makes it quite clear in his polemic against the Calvinists that the Episcopate is a matter of indifference, but defends it as good for the Church of England.

So, Lutherans say the same thing about their polity and its appropriateness to their situation.

The problem then becomes one of two individual communions, ostensibly agreeing on the nature of the Gospel and the Sacraments, but unable to work in fellowship, because both are putting each other in statu confessionis by asserting their Christian Freedom to use a particular polity. In much of the discussion I’ve heard from both sides of the Thames/Elbe waterway, it seems that people are so busy exercising their Christian Freedom and rarely, if ever, discussing the practical advantages of either system.

Probably you and I would disagree about which system is more advantageous, but I find it tragic that this is a

barrier that none seem to be able to surmount. Canada is doing okay, it seems, in this regard, but the situation here is different than that in the States. Personally, I think most of the people on both sides who voted in favour of the concordat in the States (and probably Canada) did so for the wrong reasons. Here I agree with Eliot's Beckett...this is the greatest treason, to do the right thing for the wrong reason.

Anyway, it reminds me of two spoiled children refusing to play ball unless it is on their turf in their way. Saddest is that the game is never played, and the two churches could do such wonderful things together.

- 1. Anglicans might learn something about preaching and practical systematics and*
- 2. Lutherans might learn something about the spiritual life.*

Enough for now.

8. From a lay theologian in Mississippi–

Well, this whole topic–Luther and the Jews– just stirred my pot. We have a Jewish branch in our family, so I have had some exposure to typical middle class modern Jewish thinking and concerns. Just like we are typical middle class modern Christians. In other words, not theologians, not the best example of what we should be, with views tempered by the societal pressures. This response to Luther's anti-judaism views did not satisfy me. It was a little too ethereal. Doesn't hold up under the best mudslinging. To me, Luther missed the big boat. The issue should not have been "Why are the Jews so pigheaded [sic!]", but rather, "Why hasn't God changed their

hearts?" Isn't it God he needed to rail against?

If we believe that our own works cannot accomplish our salvation; that only the work of the Holy Spirit can open our eyes, open our hearts; then I'm left wondering what was God doing with the Jews of Luther's day. Why isn't Luther respectfully railing at God? David did. Moses did. Jonah (my fav) certainly did. Why didn't Luther write about spending days fasting and praying for God to move among the hearts of the Jews? (perhaps he did, I don't know).

Maybe ol' Luther was more like Jonah than we like to think. After all, Jonah didn't want to go to Nineveh because those folks were political enemies. Jonah also knew that God was going to work in their hearts and cause them to change. Jonah knew that God would forgive those who repented and bless them. SO maybe for all the reasons your friend Steve lists, Luther was not fond of the Jews. Perhaps it was a little threatening for Luther to think what those mighty OT scholars would be like if their minds and hearts were opened to the gospel.

I think we Christians need to say to the world, Yes, Luther was dead wrong about this issue. His writings do not reflect God's method of grace. His writings may have made others feel justified in bigoted behaviour. Jews with closed hearts are no different than anyone else with closed hearts. We will beg God to open hearts and minds of all men. In the meantime, we as Christians ask God to enable us to provide common grace and justice to those we live with, regardless of their spiritual status. Sorry about the soapbox, but I think we have to speak very plainly to the secular world, even if we have to eat a bit of crow on behalf of the mothers and fathers of the

church.

Your Armchair Theologian

9. From a pastor (LCMS, I think) in Florida–

Not that you asked: In ThTh 111 you say that “the other bishop” asked:

A. Was missions the “great omission” in the Lutheran Reformation, and if so, why?

B. In a post-modern world what does it mean to talk about the Bible as “source and norm” as we Lutherans do?

Is it possible that a part of the reason why mission was and still is a “great omission” of the Lutheran on going Reformation is the way we think? We want to clarify, what does it mean and all that. We want to explain why we are right, instead of just doing or confessing the truth of the Gospel. Maybe that has something to do with the second question as well. A source and norm to ground our statements makes us more comfortable with what we say. Mission is more about helping another person see God’s Yes in his life in the person of Jesus. It really doesn’t matter what the Bible, the Confessions or the other sources and norm, including the Historic Episcopate, say or contribute. That comes later. Mission is not rational, and what it means is that someone comes into the kingdom, not that someone understands what it means to come into the Kingdom.