

# Requests from Bishops

Colleagues,

Two ELCA bishops have asked me for some theological help on sticky questions. That doesn't happen often, so when it does, I perk up. Each bishop had 2 such tough questions. One bishop's pair was:

1. What did Luther really say about the Jews (and why)?
2. Do the Lutheran Confessions give us any real help in the ELCA's in-house hassle about historic episcopate and all that?

The other bishop asked:

1. Was missions the "great omission" in the Lutheran Reformation, and if so, why?
2. In a post-modern world what does it mean to talk about the Bible as "source and norm" as we Lutherans do?

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I tackled the first pair first. Maybe next time the second pair. Here's how the first two questions were presented and then what I said.

*"My wife is taking a master's course on Diversity, Equity, and Social Justice. Recently they focused on the ways Christianity has made its unfortunate contributions, and a page in one of the text books was 'dedicated' to Luther's writings against the Jews. They quoted him and linked the European hatred of the*

*Jews in the last 500 years to him. Sandra (not her real name) was quite unhappy about this—probably the first time she came face to face with those quotes. I thought I'd heard that later in his life, Luther had other words to say that showed he came to a more grace-filled understanding of the Jewish people's place in our world. But I don't know. Have you got any information I could hand on to her?"*

## **My response—**

I'm no expert on this one, but sorry to say, Blessed Martin did NOT say nicer things about the Jews toward the end of his life. Just the reverse. All the super-nasty things came in the last years of his life. Earlier on he was more friendly as far as is known from his published stuff. There are lots of publications about this end-of-life nastiness. Some painting ML as a forerunner of Hitler—as apparently is the case in your wife's class—others putting it into the overall context of the times, where it still sounds bad, but is not Hitlerian.

I called our local Luther-and-the-Jews expert, Prof. Steve Rowan, German history prof at Univ. of Missouri/St. Louis (UMSL). Steve gave Bible classes at our church on the topic some years ago, has researched and written considerably on the issue. Steve's a Lutheran, non-cleric, big name academic in the field.

The essay by Steve that I'm sending is titled "Luther, Bucer and Eck on the Jews." In the essay, and over the phone in our conversation, Steve points out that as nasty as Luther's old-age cranky comments were, guys like Eck (Luther's opponent at the Leipzig debate) were even worse in some of the things they said. Also Bucer, reformer of Strassbourg, and thus reformation ally, was awful. But among the close insiders of the reformation, Luther's colleagues, his anti-Jewish statements toward life's end were an embarrassment. And when no one picked them up to

agree with him, he got even more ticked off, says Steve, and thundered on.

So why was he so friendly in earlier years and then such an ogre toward the end? Steve says:

*In the early years of Luther's life Jewish scholars helped him with translation of the OT; other Christian humanist scholars whom ML honored, Reuchlin, for example, were affirmative about Jews; and Luther apparently had the hope that when the Gospel got presented clean of its frightful papal incrustations, European Jews would hear it, read it, and come to believe it. In the final years of his life, of course, this hope did not come true. Thus in these awful things at the end ML is hollering: "Why don't they see that Jesus is the merciful Messiah, the promised seed of Abraham, the suffering servant Isaiah proclaimed? 'Reason' itself should show them that, and still they resist."*

Remember that Luther thought Judgment Day was just around the corner, maybe even before he died, and so he gives voice to his desperation. Another factor, says Steve, is Imperial politics. European Jews allied themselves with the Holy Roman Emperor, who was not exactly friendly to the reformation folks. Another item was the appearance of Judaizing among folks in "Lutheran" circles, some of it promoted by the Lutherans themselves, some of it linked to Jewish missionizing efforts. The pitch was perhaps something like this: "You want to throw off the incrustations of 1500 years of papalism? Then why go back just to the NT documents, why not all the way back to the originals of the Hebrew scriptures." Luther knew very well how that had had great appeal for the early Christians in Galatia, as Judaizing messengers entered the Christian community there. And if it was now being repeated in the places where the Reformation

gospel had taken root . . . well that was the last straw.

Historically (from the 16th to the 20th century, that is) Steve says there is no line of connection between Luther's nasty anti-Judaism (note, it is not anti-Semitism: not contra Jews as Jews, but contra Jews for not believing their own Messiah) and the philosophy that the Nazis worked out for their Holocaust program. The Nazi philosophy drew on other sources for its extermination program.

Well, so much for that.

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## **For his #2 M says:**

*"I heard Ralph Bohlmann say to a group of LCMS/ELCA clergy several weeks ago that [the ELCA people fussing about the imposition of the historic episcopate in our church] do not have a confessional leg to stand on against the historic episcopate. He said, 'if we know our Lutheran confessions well, we would know that the confessions are not the place to base an argument against HE.' But then he did not elaborate and I was unable to stay long enough to hear further conversation. Have you or has anyone you know done a thorough piece on this?"*

## **My response—**

I have rejoiced that Marie and I were out of the country (as ELCA Global Mission Volunteers) in the last year or two as this episcopacy hassle hit the fan in "this church." So I'm really out of the loop. Most of the pro-and-con publications I don't even get. It's clear that God has another calling for me, I think. But when dear guys like you ask, then that's my "another calling" showing up, I guess.

I wouldn't quite know what Ralph is referring to about the critics in the ELCA not having a confessional leg to stand on in their opposition to hist. episcopate. Granted the 16th century Lutheran Confessors did not critique the hist. episcopate. They did, however, in practice ordain new pastors without the benefit of bishops in the hist. episcopate putting their hands on the new pastors. All of that was occasioned, of course, when existing bishops said: "I'll not ordain anyone who learned his theology at Wittenberg." And the confessors had no difficulty finding Gospel-grounded theology for such a "new" practice.

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 things. Such church ordinances that make adiaphoron-stuff into YOU GOTTAs, he says there,

- a. burden Christian consciences,
- b. undermine Christian liberty, and
- c. conflict with the Gospel. Seems to me that amounts to:  
Three strikes and you're out! Don't you bishops talk about stuff like this?

And again I ask—doesn't someone somewhere in the mix of your bishop meetings ever ask: Is there really anything like the historic episcopate in the first place—a hands-on line right

back to St. Peter? Is that fact or fiction—even if it's pious fiction? All the stuff I've heard on the subject—even from RC church historians—says that it is impossible to document any such connexion back into the church of the first and second centuries. So if that is so, and I believe it is, this whole schlamozzle is worse than just a tempest in a tea pot. It's a case of "The emperor has no clothes on!"

And I'm sure that you, a Seminex grad, see the connexion between an ELCA "ordinance" which is now a YOU GOTTA in our church with the LCMS New Orleans convention taking the Bohlman/Preus statement of 1973 and making it a YOU GOTTA for us in those days. Here's one place where the old LCMS constitution had it right: "Matters of doctrine and matters of conscience will not be decided/cannot be decided by majority vote. Only the Word of God [call it Gospel] can do that."

So Luther (at the end) was wrong about the Jews; Paul (here and there) was wrong about women; Bohlmann was wrong in 1973ff (dunno about 2000). So whom can you trust? I'm glad you know WHO that WHO is.

Peace & Joy!

Ed