

The Augsburg Aha! – Class Session #3. “Church and Ministry”

Colleagues,

I’ve just been alerted to a Luther bash coming up next weekend at Northwestern University (of all places!) in Evanston (north-Chicago suburb) Illinois. Big, big, big. Scads of Luther gurus according to the PR—nine of them from overseas.

The Global Luther: Reconsidering the Contributions of Martin Luther An International Conference February 21-23, 2008

I’ve got this Confessions class to teach that weekend, so (sob!) I’m booked. Otherwise I’d want to be there. Some of you should go—and then give us a ThTh report to share with the readership. So far as I know, the conference is FREE! Here’s where to find the details:

<www.religion.northwestern.edu/conferences/global Luther/program.html>

Meanwhile—back at the ranch—Ron Neustadt and I were in Springfield, Illinois, again last Saturday and what’s pasted below is the first half (morning session) of what we did. Second half [Sacraments] comes your way next week.

Peace and joy!

Ed Schroeder

Theology of the Augsburg Confession: Church and Ministry.

AC 5 The Office of the Ministry [=God's Pipeline System]

AC 7 The Church

AC 8 What the Church Is

AC 14 Order in the Church [Who should lead public worship]

AC 15 Ecclesiastical Order—Rules and Regulations in the Church

AC 5. In order to promote faith (what was just presented in AC 4: Justification by Faith) God has set up a delivery system, something like a pipeline. Nowadays we might call it “media.” God has created media [literally, “middle agencies”] to mediate the promise from the days when Jesus did it “live” on into the future to folks—like us—who weren’t in his audience in Palestine in those days. The “media” that transfer this promise are Gospel-proclamation and the sacraments-enacted. It’s like a pipeline from the city waterworks to your kitchen sink. That’s what the word “ministry” means. It’s a delivery system. When the valves on the pipeline are opened, when the faucet’s turned on, the promise flows to its intended receivers.

Sure, it’s people who open the valves, who turn on the faucets, but “ministry” [the German word is “Amt” =the job to be done] is not the people taking care of the pipeline, but the pipeline itself. If there were no pipeline, the valve-and-faucet-turners would be spinning their fingers in the air. The pipeline is the ministry, God’s marvelous invention for getting Christ’s “goodies” into the hands of folks centuries away and oceans away from where Jesus once lived and walked. Ministers, pipeline operators, valve-turners, are in the picture, sure. But the “big deal” is the pipeline, not the valve-tenders.

The Holy Spirit uses these media to connect people to Christ’s promise. The Anabaptists and others are wrong who say: Holy

Spirit comes without any pipeline, without any “tangible” media.

[The fuller exposition of this goes as follows: Because the promise is so Christ-specific, who himself was so tangible, so “incarnate” [en-fleshed, see-able, touch-able, hear-able] as the New Testament presents him, he has tied promise-transmission to tangible media. The “Holy” Spirit is not the overall movement of the Spirit of God as witnessed throughout the scriptures. The “Holy” of Holy Spirit is fundamentally a NT term. In the NT the “Holy” Spirit is always Christ-specific, the promise-conveying Spirit—now after Easter—“proceeding from the Father and the Son.” There are no NT grounds, no word from Christ, for expecting the Christ-specific Spirit to mediate the promise “im-media-tely,”—with no media, not via tangible “instruments,” as AC 5 says. And given what this promise actually is, how might one even envision receiving it without someone tangibly offering it? It’s because of the specific character of the Gospel-promise at the hub of the wheel in Augsburg theology that the spoke labelled “Holy Spirit” says: “works through media to transfer the promise.”]

Confutation 5 says: AC 5 is OK. But when AC5 speaks of “faith,” that would be OK if they did not say: “faith ALONE justifies.” That’s wrong. It takes “faith, hope, and charity (love)”-all 3—before you have a de facto justified sinner.

[There is no Apol 5. Melanchthon spent most all of Apology 4—pages and pages—responding to what the Confutators said against “faith alone.”]

AC 7 The church will last forever—that is Christ’s promise. The church is a gathering of people where something special is happening: Gospel preaching and the sacraments. What is needed, and what is not needed, for church unity? ONLY this: Gospel

proclaimed “purely” [= without any legalist contamination] and sacraments administered in a way congruent with that Gospel-promise.

Confut. 7: AC 7 is not OK. It speaks only of believers in the church. What about “wicked people and sinners” in the church. AC 7 says nothing about that.

[There is no Apology 7. It is combined with Apol 8 below.]

AC 8. The church is “strictly speaking” only the believers, but there are unbelievers in the congregations and church organization, even among the pastors. Nevertheless, even when the ungodly do as Christ commanded—proclaim the Good News and administer the sacraments “gospelly”—these actions are “good” and they work to bring people to faith and to keep them Christ-connected. The pipeline functions even when the valve-openers are not Gospel-trusters. The only issue is: did they, or did they not, open the Gospel-valve? The Donatists in the early church were wrong about this, saying that wicked/unbelieving priests didn’t do, couldn’t do, “pure” Gospel preaching and “good” sacraments.

Confutation 8: This article is OK.

Apol 7 & 8 There really is a disagreement between us and the Confutators on the topic of church. Our definition centers on “Sinners connected to Christ. People who trust Christ. And the pipeline that supplies the connection so that sinners may ‘obtains such faith,’ as AC 5 puts it.” They are talking about the churchly institution with all its rules, regulations, and especially the structure of the papacy, and all that goes with that. Connection to the Bishop of Rome, not connection with Christ, is their main criterion. There are no Biblical grounds

for such a claim. It is not true that our idea of “church” is “platonic,” imaginary, just an idea, with no concrete structure. No, ours is very concrete: it’s people, where the concrete “marks” are happening, Gospel and Sacraments. That is tangibly real, not imaginary. At a number of places in Apology 7/8 we hear Melanchthon’s sarcastic definition of what the “opponents” think the church is. He is not a happy camper about this.

Of course, there are unbelieving sinners mixed in to the empirical church. So we make the distinction between “strictly speaking,” and “broadly speaking” when talking about this. [Melanchthon doesn’t speak of visible/invisible church. He favors the language of revealed/hidden church. Things “hidden” are not invisible. Something is covering them, but they are really there. The church is regularly (always?) “hidden” when viewed with the world’s lenses, “hidden beneath the cross,” just as Christ’s own Messiahship was. Nothing razzle-dazzle about it in contrast to the pomp and show of the papal church. [“Sub cruce tecta” was one of Luther’s favored phrases: hidden beneath the cross.]

The “true unity of the church” does not come from being connected with the church organization, the Church of Rome. Unity happens when people are on the receiving end of the pipeline, for that joins them to Christ. When they are joined to Christ, they are joined to each other. That’s the simplest definition of church: sinners connected to Christ by trusting him—which makes them forgiven sinners—and therefore forgiven sinners connected with each other.

AC 14 For public preaching and sacrament administration, people should be called (by some concrete church-agency outside of themselves) and not take the job just because they hear an “inside” call.

Confut. 14 That's OK. But make sure that the process follows the rules of the church, the rules of "our" church.

Apol. 14. We do follow the rules. Still we say: these rules come from human authority, not God's authority. So they can be changed.

AC 15 As far as Church customs and practices, we follow much of what has been passed down [=tradition] to us in the (Roman) church. Two points we make: these are human, not divine, things. In our pastoral work we make a point not to "burden consciences" and to emphasize that such traditions are "not necessary for salvation." Things that do burden consciences and are said to be necessary for salvation "are useless and contrary to the Gospel." So we modify them "according to the Gospel."

Confut. 15 It's good that the Confessors follow the church's customs and practices. But the "appendix" they add [not burdening consciences and not necessary for salvation] is wrong. No, you MUST keep some rites and customs and they do contribute to salvation.

Apol 15 is also predictable. It is a re-run of Apology 4. If any "must"—something you've "gotta" do or be—gets added to "trusting Christ," it's a no-no.

Class discussion.

1. If "ministry" (AC 5 and 14) in the Lutheran dictionary really means "the promise-pipeline," what help would that offer for the ongoing debates about ordained ministry, ministry of the laity, and, above all, the program all 12 of you students are following to become un-ordained

“Synodically Authorized Ministers” here in the Central/Southern Synod of the ELCA?

2. If “Church” really is what AC7/8 say it is, what “reforms” are needed in your congregation? In your denomination? What might be a first step in one particular case where such reform is needed?
3. What are the “you’ve gotta” items vexing Christians today—liturgical, musical, ethical, experiential, cultural, linguistic, or whatever else? E.g., What about the “worship wars” nowadays? How might “according to the Gospel” be used today for “reformation” in these conflict areas?

Next session: Sacraments according to the Augsburg Confession.