

The debate within the ELCA about HE-succession (continued)

Colleagues,

The core of last week's ThTh 121 was Walt Bouman's analysis of the specifics of the document "Called to Common Mission" (CCM), the recent agreement between the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and the Episcopal Church USA. Walt corrected some misinformation I'd passed on in earlier ThTh postings. His words drew interesting responses from a number of you on the listserve. I intend to hold these responses till next week and send out today another piece, a sequel, from Walt. It's his thoughts about the current brouhaha within the ELCA now that CCM has been officially adopted. For folks who may be outsiders to the ELCA, "Word Alone folk" in Walt's essay refers to an organized movement within the ELCA of folks critical of the provisions of the CCM and calling for something to be done about it.

Peace & Joy!

Ed Schroeder

Walter R. Bouman

Dear Ed:

Here's my take on the current controversy in the ELCA. If there are those who give "consilium abeundi" [Latin: counsel to depart, i.e., "If you don't like it, you ought to leave."] to the Word Alone folk, they are wrong, and they at least give you grounds for the theological analysis which you had in [THTH #116](#). But the Word Alone folk also deserve a theological

analysis. Mine starts with Wilhelm Maurer's historical commentary on the Augsburg Confession. Maurer claims that Charles V [Holy Roman Emperor at the time] requested the princes and cities who had introduced reforms (e.g., marriage of clergy, vernacular use of the mass, chalice to the laity, relaxation of fasts, and the non-observance of certain saints days) to justify what they were doing.

The Saxons went to Augsburg with the concerns and the proposal of Article XXVIII ["The Power of Bishops"]. The concerns were that bishops could not do two things,

1. Govern with the sword as if by divine right such coercive power belonged to the office of bishop,
2. Introduce human regulations with the stipulation that they were necessary to salvation.

Such bishops burdened consciences and betrayed their office. They cite Augustine that "one should not obey even regularly elected bishops if they err or if they teach or command something contrary to the divine Holy Scriptures." (XXVIII, 28) Because the bishops in Saxony refused to permit the reforms, refused to ordain clergy who supported the reforms, or were absent from their dioceses (69-70), "the princes are obliged, whether they like to or not, to administer justice to their subjects for the sake of peace and to prevent discord and great disorder in their lands." (29) This was the legal right of the civil authorities according to both canon law and civil law."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 even when this is done without offense." (53) Examples from St. Paul follow (54). "It is proper for the

Christian assembly to keep such ordinances for the sake of love and peace, to be obedient to the bishops and parish ministers in such matters, and to observe the regulations in such a way that one does not give offense to another and so that there may be no disorder or unbecoming conduct in the church. However, consciences should not be burdened by contending that such things are necessary for salvation or that it is a sin to omit them, even when no offense is given to others.” (55-56)

The proposal is best articulated in the Latin text of AC XXVIII: “It is not our intention that the bishops give up their power to govern, but we ask for this one thing, that they allow the Gospel to be taught purely and that they relax some few observances which cannot be kept without sin.” If the bishops cannot do this, they are responsible for schism. (76-78)

The Torgau Articles from early 1530 then served Melanchthon as the apologia [= supporting argument] for the reforms (Articles XXII to XXVII). Largely because of Eck’s charges (“The 404 errors of Luther”), Articles I to XXI were added, based on the Schwabach Articles, the Marburg Articles, and Luther’s 1528 “Confession.” Thus the Augsburg Confession became a confession as well as an apologia and a proposal. Other princes and cities [represented at Augsburg] joined the Saxons to make the AC their own.

By 1555 it became one of the two legal bases for “church” in the Holy Roman Empire, although the adherents of the “old religion” did not fully recognize the adherents of the Augsburg Confession as “church,” or even regarded them as heretics. This is the basis for AC VII [“The Church’]. The confessors at Augsburg were insisting on two things with regard to “church.”

- 1. The Gospel proclaimed in its purity and the sacraments administered according to the Gospel are alone*

constitutive of church.

- 2. Differences in human traditions (e.g., mass in the vernacular, marriage of clergy, fasts, observance of saints days) do not destroy the unity of the church, that is, one may or may not have mass in the vernacular and still be church.*

Applied to CCM, Lutherans insist that the practice of having bishops at all, and of installing bishops with the laying-on-of hands by bishops who share in a succession that goes back to the 2nd or 3rd centuries A.D., is not required for being church, and Episcopalians agree. In order to make their case, Lutherans insist that they can be in full communion (i.e., have interchangeable ministries) with Presbyterians, the United Church of Christ, and the Reformed Church in America, and Lutherans requested and required a "sign" from Episcopalians they truly agree. This "sign" that Episcopalians truly agree and truly recognize Lutherans as church is the suspension of the 1662 preface to the ordinal so that Lutheran clergy who have not been ordained with bishops presiding (as I was not) can be interchangeable with Episcopal priests.

The ELCA has not violated Article VII because CCM is not about our recognition of other churches as church. It is only about full communion with a particular "denomination," the Episcopal Church. For the sake of communion with that particular denomination, but not as a general rule for communion with other churches in the LWF or with the churches of the Reformed tradition, the ELCA will in the future install bishops with the laying-on-of-hands by bishops who share in the succession (and also with the laying-on-of-hands by bishops who do not share in the succession, and with the laying-on-of-hands by Executive Presbyters from the Presbyterian Church or Conference Ministers from the UCC). And in the future ELCA bishops will "regularly" (which the Denver Churchwide Assembly defined as "no planned

exceptions," meaning there could be unanticipated exceptions caused by a bishop's sudden illness, or inability to travel due to bad weather, or an unavoidable breakdown in travel arrangements) preside at ordinations. Again, the possibility of unanticipated exceptions testifies to the Lutheran conviction that the presidency of bishops at ordinations is not absolutely necessary.

Lutherans can do this without sin because it contributes "to peace and good order in the church" (Article XV). The Episcopal Church does not believe that these practices are necessary for salvation, nor were the traditions of succession of bishops or the presidency of bishops at ordinations "for the purpose of propitiating God and earning grace" (Article XV). The Word Alone folk claim that the opinion of a panel of Episcopal Bishops in the case of Bishop Walter Righter has made the Church Lambeth Quadrilateral (which includes the so-called Historic Episcopate) "necessary for salvation."

But every Episcopal authority in my acquaintance, including the House of Bishops, has stated that this opinion is not the position of the Episcopal Church, and even the bishops who issued the opinion have indicated that they were simply casting about for some definition in their tradition of "core doctrine," and seized upon the Lambeth Quadrilateral because of its reference to Scripture, Creeds, and sacraments. They were trying to exonerate Bishop Righter, not make the HE "necessary for salvation." If, on such shaky ground, the Word Alone folk are right, then Lutheran participation in the HE violates a number of articles of the AC, including XV and XXVIII.

The Word Alone folk also refuse to recognize the provisions of CCM which keep the ELCA in communion with churches that do not have the HE as preserving the ELCA's commitment to AC VII.

What this means is that the Word Alone folk believe that they have grounds for disobeying the bishops and the Churchwide Assembly (contrary to AC XXVIII, 53) or for leaving the ELCA. No one is persecuting them for their teaching of the Gospel. They are allowed to disagree with the Denver decision and work for its reversal. Although an individual here or there may have wrongly suggested that they leave the ELCA, that is not the ELCA's official policy (in fact, quite the contrary).

Thus they are threatening to leave the ELCA not for the sake of the Gospel but because of a human tradition. That, in my opinion, is schism, and it is wrong. They should be admonished, and I would pray that they hear the admonition.

This can be shared, if you want, with your ThTh readers.

Walt