

Unity of the Church: the ELCA's In-House Controversy on the Historic Episcopate

Colleagues,

Last week's posting, a series of your responses to ThTh #111, asked me to re-think the historic episcopate [HE], specifically my contention that if HE is now a YOU GOTTA in the ELCA, then it could indeed be a no-no for Reformation-rooted Lutherans.

Several of you respondents went to the Lutheran Confessions themselves to show that the Confessors' critique of YOU GOTTAs was regularly linked to YOU GOTTAs that were "contrary to the Gospel," items prescribed as add-ons to faith-in-Christ for the sinner's salvation. Nobody, either among the Episcopal Church USA [ECUSA], nor in the ELCA, is saying anything like that, you reminded me. In both communions it is consensus: Salvation is by faith in Christ alone—sola!—regardless of one's opinion/practice of HE.

You went on to say: It is in another sense that HE is now a YOU GOTTA in the ELCA. That is in the realm of church order, in Lutheran lingo, the "left-hand-of-God" rules and regulations whereby we manage our life together in the ELCA. Church constitutions and bylaws are full of YOU GOTTAs. Nothing wrong with that. It's not about salvation!

So HE is now a YOU GOTTA in the ELCA. But is not one contrary to the Gospel; it's not about salvation. It is not a YOU GOTTA that "they" [ECUSA] laid upon "us" [ELCA]. We ourselves decided to adopt it as a "left-hand-legitimate" assembly of the ELCA, by more than the constitutionally kosher 2/3 majority vote. No more

coercion there than when we elect our own national bishop and supporters of other candidates “lose.” It’s Roberts Rules of Order process, our chosen form for doing things “decently and in order.”

The “loyal Anglican reader” among you responders also noted that if polity [for Lutherans] is an adiaphoron, then the ELCA could adopt the historic episcopate as a strategy for Christian unity. So, you asked, what’s the fuss from the grumblers? Lutheranly—from confessional theology—they don’t have a leg to stand on, do they? [One quip that I didn’t sent out last week wondered if my words weren’t “adolescent objection to any kind of authority at all.”]

Here’s how I see it.

Who says YOU GOTTA? I was not at all saying in ThTh #111 that “they” laid this YOU GOTTA upon us. I was taking it now as a given in ELCA canon law, that all future pastoral ordinations will have an HE-connected bishop among those doing the ordaining. The YOU GOTTA is now “in house.” It’s a YOU GOTTA we prescribe for ELCA future pastors of ELCA congregations.

That’s one reason I went to the Formula of Concord, Article 10, in the Lutheran Confessions. The FC is an in-house document aimed at settling (?) intra-Lutheran hassles. The contenders then were all Lutherans. The squabble now is inside the ELCA. And the rhetoric gets shrill, such as bread-crumbs down to me even though I’m pretty far away from the main tables. I’ve heard from more than one source talk like this: “If the gripers within the ELCA don’t like our decision for HE, let them seek their fellowship elsewhere.” Seminex veterans recall that we were told those very same words by the the LCMS President in the 1970s.

But at the time of the Missouri civil wars, one of you said, the YOU GOTTA was indeed an add-on to the Gospel, a doctrinal opinion being forced upon us. It was not a matter of church order freely chosen in a left-hand-kosher convention. Is that a "Gospel-issue" or not? That all depends on how it's carried out, now that it's on the books. If the execution of an item of church order concludes with: "Seek your fellowship elsewhere," then it IS a matter of the Gospel, isn't it? Is it not an add-on? Not an add-on to what you MUST believe, but an add-on to what you MUST do or accept to stay a member of the church, at least of "this church." It impacts the unity of the church, and unity of the church is a Gospel issue. Telling people to seek their fellowship elsewhere, or coercing their departure, for any reason other than that they no longer trust the Gospel, is itself "contrary to the Gospel."

The issue in FC 10, though labelled adiaphora, is actually the unity of the church. When adiaphora become YOU GOTTA's for staying membered to Christ's church, says FC 10, then the YOU GOTTA's must be disobeyed. Not only disobeyed by those who didn't like them in the first place, but also disobeyed by those who DO like them. Even these folks are called upon by FC 10 to join in confessing that adiaphora, likeable though they may be for them, when they become YOU GOTTA's for staying church'd, are a no-no in the church of Christ. They create a "time for confessing," in the language of the FC, a time to take the "witness stand," and to testify what really creates and maintains church unity. Coerced adiaphora dis-unite Christ's church. They are themselves schismatic.

So if the HE polity in the ELCA is administered in such a way that some folks are forced to seek their fellowship elsewhere—which as far as I've heard has not yet actually occurred—then the exact opposite of "loyal Anglican reader's" claim has transpired. Not at all will the new canon law of HE in

the ELCA have been a sign of the unity of the church. It will have rent asunder what the Gospel has joined together.

My reason for bringing in AC 28 was to signal the theological roots of the adiaphora stance in FC 10. There in AC 28, of course, the hassle is about salvation and the YOU GOTTA's impacting it by what the bishops of the time were doing. It now depends on what the ELCA bishops will do with the dissenters. "Loyal Anglican reader" gives sensible counsel: "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." That Anglican counsel is rooted in good old common sense, which even Lutherans can appreciate. But YOU GOTTA's about polity and practice in the church are even more than that for Reformation-rooted ELCAers. Because they impact the Gospel, they betoken times for confessing. Such times are always intra-ecclesial, protests by some in the church against others in the church, often the underdogs against the overdogs, for the sake of the unity of the church.

The adiaphora hassle reflected in FC 10, as I recall it and I haven't researched it anew, was making YOU GOTTA's out of things that would make it easier to live with RC folks in some of the religiously diverse territories (Lutherans and RCs in the same neighborhood)—really adiaphoron stuff like wearing chasubles, elevating the chalice, and such like. What makes that an issue of the GOSPEL, says FC 10, is not that these requirements were claimed to be "necessary for salvation," (an obviously contra-Gospelly item), but that they were necessary for the "unity of the church" (also a fundamentally Gospelly item, but not always immediately visible as such). The practice was that you can't stay in "this church" if you don't do what the YOU GOTTA calls for. Isn't that an analog to HE, if that's what it now means in

the ELCA?

Back in my seminarian days, I remember Jaroslav Pelikan telling us that with the 1870 dogma of the infallibility of the pope “the Roman church made itself a sect.” The claim that the Bishop of Rome was infallible in some of his judgments—and thus not subject to evangelical discipline—and making that a YOU GOTTA for the faithful, relegated the huge RC church into sect-hood and separated it from the Una Sancta body of Christ. I didn’t realize then what chutzpah there was in Pelikan’s statement. But actually he was just applying Lutheran confessional theology to the issue of the unity of the church.

The Lutheran confessions, well before FC 10, were also confessing what church unity is. Luther was in hot water in the days before Augsburg as much for his dubious obedience to the Bishop of Rome as for his explosive Gospel teaching. That’s why “true unity of the church” was a hot potato issue in the days leading up to the Augsburg Confession [AC] of 1530. Luther (and all those agreeing with him) had been excommunicated. They were no longer members of “the church,” but were cut off from the Bishop of Rome and the clout he allegedly carried by virtue of his own HE. Can one be “the church” without Roman connections? Are you Christian if Rome says you are an outsider? So Augsburg Confession 7 (church unity) is really a flip-side of AC 4 (justifying faith). They are two spokes of the wheel of Christian faith and life, two of the spokes coming from the hub of the Promising Good News called Gospel.

Concerning what “is sufficient for the true unity of the Christian church” we have some simple specs in AC 7. For the “true unity of the church it suffices that the Gospel be preached purely [= with no legalist add-ons] and that the sacraments be administered in accord with this Gospel.” HE is not on that list. It couldn’t be, since the reigning HE

authority had un-churched those who thought AC 7's specs were "sufficient" for the church's unity ["genug" in German, "satis est" in Latin].

One might say that these AC 7 specs amount to YOU GOTTA's for the unity of the church, but they are the unique YOU GOTTA's without which there is no unity of the church at all. "Preaching the Gospel purely and doing the sacraments in accord with that Gospel" constitute, create, maintain the church's unity. Without these it doesn't exist. If HE or chasubles or whatever, including, yes, all those YOU GOTTA's in church constitutions and bylaws, if any of this stuff becomes the criterion for whether or not "you must seek your fellowship elsewhere," then we are in effect back to 1530 (not just 1577 and the FC) where the bishops are adding something to the Gospel as a requirement—not for salvation, but for (what is the flip-side of the same thing) the unity of the one and only church that there is. In Pelikan's words from half a century ago, bishops (or church assemblies) making such requirements are sectarianizing themselves from the una sancta. The Gospel's "Platzregen" will be moving elsewhere.

I don't know whether the major protesters within the ELCA are saying anything like this. I don't see their stuff—and I think I'm grateful that I'm spared. Whether or not they are, anyone in the ELCA articulating what's said above is on solid ground, I'd say. And the folks on the other side better scramble if the ELCA is to stick to its moorings in Reformation theology.

The "YOU GOTTA's" in church constitutions—"church-wide" and local—are always dicey because they regularly dance back and forth on the line of distinction between God's two regimes, between the rhetoric of law and the rhetoric of promise. If church constitutions, the ELCA's too, were just about the management of a left-hand kingdom organization—let's say a religious club called so-and-so—then YOU GOTTA's are in order to

see who's finally in and out of the club.

But not so the holy Christian church. For the "true unity of the church" one might even say that there actually are no YOU GOTTA's for the members! All those YOU GOTTA's in AC 7 are addressed to the bishops, pastors, apostles, evangelists: YOU GOTTA be offering the law-free Good News and offering the Gospel-grounded sacraments. Punkt! Gospel and the sacraments are not what YOU GOTTA believe; they are what must be offered so that faith can happen. They're the only thing that connects sinners to Christ. Christ-connected sinners ARE what the unity of the church is all about. Christ-connected sinners are what the church is.

To add people on, or to peel people off from the church by any other criteria is seen in the confessions as:

1. Burdening consciences that Christ wants un-burdened,
2. Destroying Christian freedom which Christ wants preserved,
3. Contradicting the Gospel, which hardly qualifies as church work.

We did have an ELCA mini-precedent on this a few years ago, I think, in California, when a congregation there (or was it two of them?) called gay/lesbian pastors to do the "unity stuff" (Gospel/Sacraments) in their midst. As I recall they were eventually disciplined OUT of the ELCA. Sticky as this is, it seems clear to me that AC 7 and FC 10 were contradicted by that action. Additional criteria were invoked for staying united with "this church." They were Gospel-add-ons.

[The ancient parallel to LCMS a quarter century ago was the way "The Handbook" got used at that time to determine who was in and who was out. Already back then the Preus-crowd granted that excising us from the LCMS by these Handbook/Convention criteria to "seek our fellowship elsewhere," did not cut us off from the Una Sancta. Seems that they did not notice who DID get cut off

from the Una Sancta by such action. Namely, the cutters themselves. Add-ons to the Gospel always do that, even when “good guys” like us ELCAers have the knife in hand.]

So am I morbid? Pessimistic about the ELCA? Don’t think so. Here’s an opportunity for “this church” to get its Gospel-grounding improved. The focus is the unity of the church. Linked to that, of course, is the exercise of authority in the ELCA. You might call it, as realtors do, a matter of “location, location, location.” The location for the UNITY of the church is the locus that AC 7 specifies. The location for church AUTHORITY, if not already there, needs to be re-located in the same Gospel, viz., Christ’s upside-down authority articulated in Matt. 20, vis-a-vis which all other models—also in the ELCA—“shall not be so among you.”

To ground HE similarly in the Gospel is more difficult. If, as I understand present historical scholarship, HE cannot be documented as genuine history back through the fuzziness of the church’s early generations, then its Gospel-grounding is a lost cause. Do we have the oxymoron of a non-historical HE? What is it really? Fiction? A phantom? Is it what we LCMS Germans used to call an “Un-ding?” Could it still be a pious Un-ding? Even for “common mission and the unity of the church” as our CCA-document says? I don’t see how, if AC 7 is our dipstick for that common mission and church unity.

Peter himself, prime primate for the HE, was no great shakes as a sign for the unity of the church. At Antioch he showed signs of an “other” Gospel, one that split the congregation there. So even Peter—long after his return to the fold—was no guarantor of the true unity of the church (ala AC 7). Ditto for the subsequent bishops of Rome—not only during the Reformation era, but (ala Pelikan) including the infallibility pope who sectarianized his own communion. Why would anyone expect that

bishops of any sort, let alone those with possible HE connection to Peter, could by that connection be signs of the unity of the church?

Church unity is not a 2-millennia-long human chain of holding hands all the way back to Peter who has his hand linked to Christ. That's possibly "left-hand" kind of unity, but hardly the churchy kind. Church unity gets created ad hoc and on location when something specific happens. The connection element is not the bishop's connection to an HE chain, but the sinners' connection to the crucified and risen Christ. It's not a succession, but a procession, as Ghanaian theologian Kwame Bediako says, "third article stuff." The Holy Spirit proceeding from the Father and the Son, proceeding to connect sinners to Christ and thus to God the Father. The signs that do such connecting, that "suffice for the unity of the church," are pragmatic actions, irrespective of the person doing them: a specific sort of preaching, alongside a Gospel-grounded mode for administering the sacraments.

My frequent drumbeat about Christ's "real absence" in much of today's preaching—also within the ELCA—is at root the same issue. It's about the unity of the church. It bemoans the absence of what "suffices" to create that unity, what fashion Christ-connections for those in the pews. Interchangeable clergy between ECUSA and ELCA won't faze this a bit. HE-ordained pastors from now on in the ELCA won't make any difference here either. What will it take? Probably a reformation, a reformation not unlike the one we claim as our heritage. "Ecclesia semper reformanda" is a shibboleth among theologians, viz., "the church always needs reforming." Well then—what about reformation in "this church?" The HE controversy within the ELCA could be its catalyst. The call of the hour is: "Don't let this trouble go to waste!" And some, like the 16th century heroes we hype, may well have to go to the mat to do so.

Even so, Peace & Joy!

Ed