

A Case from AC 28 for Women in the Pastoral Office Today

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1. Instructive is AC 28 on the power of the bishops.
2. The issue in AC 28 is the confusion of the powers on the part of the bishops of that day.
3. The powers being fused were the power of the church (later simply called the Gospel) and the [coercive] power of the sword. These are later designated “ecclesiastical and civil power.” By contrast, say the Reformers, “our teachers distinguish the functions of the two...[so that] both be held in honor and acknowledged as gifts and blessings of God.”
4. “According to the Gospel—no jurisdiction belongs to the bishops as bishops except” the exercise of the means of grace and church discipline “according to the Gospel.”
5. “Bishops do not have power to institute anything contrary to the Gospel.” “When bishops teach or ordain anything contrary to the Gospel, churches have a command of God that forbids obedience.”
6. Things ordained “contrary to the Gospel” are destructive of both evangelical pastoral theology [“they burden consciences”], and evangelical soteriology [“for the glory of Christ’s merit is dishonored.”]

7. "Where did the bishops get the right to impose such traditions on the churches & thus ensnare consciences when Peter forbids putting a yoke on the disciples and Paul says [the same thing]?"

8. Often (but not in every case) such references to "requiring" the practice of traditions are linked to justification –"as though they were necessary for justification."

9. Question: can any "requirement" within the church (other than the requirement that the Gospel and Sacraments happen and that discipline be practiced according to the gospel's own norm) ever avoid impacting de justificatione? Note in Apol.4 the brief excursus on the rhetoric of law and Gospel. "Require" is the law's favorite verb. "Offer" (and that "freely") is the Gospel's.

10. No problem, of course, "for bishops or pastors to make regulations so that things in the church be done in good order, but not... that consciences are bound so as to regard these as necessary services."

11. Ambiguous is the matter of "offense." Sometimes the ones whose consciences are burdened by a regulation/restriction are the ones "not to be offended" and "not to be burdened" by enforcing the tradition. Elsewhere the ones "offended" when customary traditions are "omitted" are to be granted consideration.

12. "Abrogating" long-standing traditions begins in the Scriptures themselves, "for after the revelation of the Gospel all ceremonies of the Mosaic law can be omitted." Since Christ himself is source of the abrogation of such traditions, it is a "false notion . . . that Christ commissioned the apostles and bishops to devise new ceremonies which would be necessary for salvation."

13. The deeper root of such false notions is soteriological: "These errors crept into the church when the righteousness of faith was not taught with sufficient clarity." Subsequent moves to tone down the traditions are "but snares of conscience. Although they try to mitigate the traditions, moderation can never be achieved as long as the opinion remains that their observance is necessary. And this opinion must remain where there is no understanding of the righteousness of faith and Christian liberty."

14. Even ordinances "the apostles commanded" are mutable. Cf. "that one should abstain from blood, etc. Who observes this prohibition now? Those who do not observe it commit no sin, for the apostles did not wish to burden consciences with such bondage but forbade such eating for a time to avoid offense. In connection with the decree **one must consider what the perpetual aim of the Gospel is.**"

15. "Canons become obsolete from day to day even among those who favor traditions." "Perhaps there were acceptable reasons for these ordinances when they were introduced but they are not adapted to later times." To alter such ordinances "does not impair the unity of the church."

16. Of these bishops, says Melanchthon in conclusion, "we ask for this one thing, that they allow the Gospel to be taught purely and that they relax some few observances that cannot be kept without sin."

17. Women in the pastoral office in Australia today is "adapted to our times." It does indeed alter an apostolic tradition articulated primarily by Paul in some of the congregations in his care. In no way is such an alteration in practice "contrary to the gospel." Au contraire, it is an alteration in "decrees" that "considers what the perpetual aim of the Gospel is." Q.E.D.

[In Apology 28 Melanchthon, aggravated by the Confutators' response, is even more forceful on this point. "Our opponents reply...with sheer slander... [to] defend their own position." "Such bishops are not bishops according to the Gospel," "burdening consciences with such traditions so that it would be a sin to omit them." **Thus even the apostles ordained many things that were changed by time, and they did not set them down as though they could not be changed.**" Genuinely vexed by their manipulation of scriptural texts, Melanchthon says: 'These asses take a [Biblical] statement. . . and they misapply it to trifles.'" 'They also quote 'Obey your leaders.' (Heb.13:17) This statement requires obedience to the gospel; it does not create an authority for bishops apart from the Gospel. Bishops must not create traditions contrary to the Gospel, nor interpret their traditions in a manner contrary to the Gospel. When they do so, we are forbidden to obey them by the statement (Gal.1:8), 'If anyone preaches another Gospel, let him be accursed.'"]

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