

Saturday, June 9, 2007

Unpacking Cause and Effect

I need to clarify some things I wrote in the Cause and Effect article. It's a little densely written.

Stemming from the PMW document

The first problem that comes to mind is the disagreement and confusion we saw from the time it was introduced, through the time it was adopted, and even to the present. There is disagreement about what it says between those who are sure about it. There is confusion among the rest, because they're not sure what it says. This situation could have been avoided with the right kind of public study and discourse *before* the adoption of the statement, but that's now water over the dam. Instead of containing that water, our job is now to evacuate the villages downstream.

Our Preconceptions

There has also been disagreement about what "the office of the holy ministry" actually refers to. Is it a position? Is it an activity? We have people arguing against each other both ways, but the PMW document tries to say it's both, which gives rise to yet another argument. This is an argument over words! [This paper](#) might shed some light upon the argument, but what we really need is agreement about our terminology. Yes, it's a little late for that, but better late...

Effects of the Premature Adoption of the PMW, as seen in the Appeals Commission Report

First, the Appeals Commission had to be a little creative in trying to figure out just what the charge was that ended with the suspension of Pastor P. The charge was not clear. Many (including the accused, apparently) thought that the Appeals Commission would see the charge against him as "accusing the synod of false doctrine." The Commission chose something else. I don't criticize their choice, but I point out that it was not an easy one.

How unexpected this is in a case of synodical discipline! Our synod constitution provides a list of possible charges that can result in discipline. It would be reasonable to expect to see one of them in the explanation of the suspension, but none appeared there. In fact, the explanation was vague in that area.

Why? If the vagueness was purposeful, it was because Pastor P. was/is not alone. A large number of other pastors and congregations agreed with his teaching, and many also publicly agreed with his paper. Yet only Pastor P. faced discipline. If the Commission were to say that Pastor P. holds to false doctrine, then the others must also hold to false doctrine.

If the Commission were to say that Pastor P. was guilty of an ungodly life (i.e. he was removed "for cause"), because he voiced his rejection of contrary doctrine, then the same would have to apply to others who have *not* been suspended.

The Commission either had to exonerate the accused, or it had to be vague. This situation can be traced back to the adoption of the doctrinal statement by only 5/8 of the 2005 convention, like cause and effect.

Second, the Appeals Commission followed the synod president's lead by avoiding the objective *doctrine* under discussion, and instead making an issue out of the subjective *manner* that Pastor P. used to present it. (They considered it to be "inflammatory," thereby making it acceptable for the president to bypass the established "due process.") Why did both the commission and the president avoid engaging on the doctrine? Because they -- like much of the synod -- are unable to cope with substantive doctrinal disagreements. This condition has probably existed for some time, but the premature adoption of the PMW has worsened it.

Third, the Appeals Commission apparently discarded most of the appeal as being not pertinent to its deliberation, since a large part of the appeal assumed that the charge against Pastor P. had been "accusing the synod of false doctrine." Because the commission chose a different charge, those parts of the appeal could be ignored or simply denied without further explanation. I call that pattern "selective hearing:" ignoring some points and only responding to other points. This example is not the first in our midst. Selective hearing has described much of our synod's discourse on the ministry, because we never bothered to figure out what the issues were to the satisfaction of all parties. The premature adoption of the PMW has only worsened the pattern.

Fourth, the Appeals Commission writes as though there is agreement in our midst on the doctrine of the ministry. This is closer to being true than it was five years ago, but it's still not true today. Though the PMW was adopted, its meaning is in dispute. It's dishonest to pretend otherwise. Unfortunately the adopted status of the PMW encourages such dishonesty.

A Way Out

The only way out is to do the homework that we've left unfinished. Define the controversy. Mutually agree upon the meaning of our terms, so that we can use them with care and precision. Undertake public exegesis of holy scripture, so that we know exactly what God's Word says on this topic.

The problem is, someone may have to say or write something "inflammatory" in the process. Since the PMW is presently an adopted statement, we really can't criticize it. So the first step is to change that status. Instead of being an adopted statement, it can be a study document. That way we won't lose the work it represents, but we'll be able to criticize it honestly. In the meantime, we'll have to fall back to our (many!) other doctrinal statements on the ministry, such as in *We Believe, Teach and Confess*, in the Confessions, and elsewhere.

Posted by Jesse Jacobsen in PMW, Synod at 22:19