

Tuesday, March 25, 2008

When a Synod Errs...

Can an orthodox congregation remain part of that synod? Can an orthodox pastor?

Speaking to that matter is Thesis II of the document "Communion Fellowship" in volume 1 of *Essays for the Church* by C.F.W. Walther.

A fellowship in which the Word of God is fundamentally falsified, or in which a fundamental falsification of it is tolerated, is not a true orthodox church, but a false, heterodox church or sect.

I've read this before, and intend to read the section again when time permits. It serves as an excellent basis for discussion of several different circumstances in present-day Lutheranism.

Posted by Jesse Jacobsen in Synod at 17:23

Monday, March 24, 2008

"Authentic" Worship

Just last night, I was reading a book recommended by dear members of one of the churches where I serve. It comes from the Evangelical tradition, written by a highly influential minister that I've been mostly unfamiliar with. I haven't avoided his work purposely; I just don't enjoy listening to Evangelical sermons on the radio, watching them on television, or (usually) reading their materials. Part of my problem is that I have a considerable library of excellent theological writing that I still need to read through for the first time --- including Luther's Works.

Because of the recommendation, I began reading this book last night and found it rather easy to read. Most of what is written there so far is edifying. My only criticism is that the author seems to have little appreciation that our Christian growth and identity are rooted in Law and Gospel, the basic messages of holy scripture through which God acts upon us. Instead, he (so far) has expressed that our experience as Christians in cognitive contact with the events of Jesus' life is what provides our growth in the faith.

One thing gave me pause, since I had never noticed its use before. The author described the worship of his congregation as "authentic." On the surface, it meant little to me. Then I wondered what the alternative would be. Inauthentic, false worship? Still, it made little sense, because I could only think of false worship as that which focuses upon false gods. On the other hand, the Bible is replete with examples of people who want to worship and express their spirituality in a way of their own choosing instead of God's way. Could the author simply mean that his church worships as God has directed in Holy Scripture, instead of incorporating the spontaneity that characterized the Israelites' decision to bow down before a golden calf, or the independence that characterized the sin of Jeroboam? I was skeptical.

By a happy coincidence (if there is such a thing), [Gene Edward Veith](#) calls attention today to [an article](#) in *Touchstone* by Michael Horton, which sheds light on the term "authentic worship." "Authentic" is paired with "spontaneous" and contrasted with "predictable and disciplined." In other words, it's pretty much the opposite of worship in the churches I serve, where the attendees always know what sort of things will happen before they arrive. Yet I still wonder if the author of this book and I are still understanding his expression in the same way. Is his "authentic" worship also predictable and disciplined? Is it spontaneous? I wonder.

The Horton article contains a lot of other food for thought. Since he is a bit closer to the Evangelical world from which this book comes, I'm inclined to believe that he understands its language better than I do.

Posted by Jesse Jacobsen in Doctrine, Life at 09:17

Saturday, March 22, 2008

Christ is risen.

The historic fact of Jesus' resurrection from the dead makes all the difference.

It sets Christianity apart from every alternative as the one, true faith.

It confirms what Jesus said about Himself, about His death, and our connection to Him.

It shows us where we who follow Christ are headed: eternal life.

In the perspective of Easter, the intramural contests and controversies in our Lord's Church can be seen in their proper light. To lose the Gospel is to lose everything. Yet during this temporal life, this time of grace, we can afford to be as patient with one another as God has been with us.

May we be faithful to our risen Lord with the greatest confidence of His favor, and also faithful to one another, in the deepest humility.

[Christ is risen indeed!](#)

Posted by Jesse Jacobsen in Doctrine, Life at 22:35

Tuesday, March 18, 2008

LCMS Gets Tough on Fellowship

If you read this blog, you probably already know that today, the radio show *Issues, Etc.* was canceled by the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod. Christians all around the globe are wondering why. I'm not, because it seems rather obvious. I could be wrong. What do I know? On the other hand, I can see a church by daylight.

It's not that *Issues, Etc.* had fallen into some grave doctrinal error, and was unwilling to be corrected by holy scripture.

It's not that *Issues, Etc.* was bad-mouthing or embarrassing the historic identity of the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, or any of its historic values.

The problem is one of fellowship. The doctrinal and practical principles guiding *Issues, Etc.* are deemed by someone to be no longer compatible with the doctrinal and practical principles guiding the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod.

How can that be? The LCMS has changed, over time. It's not so surprising, because most things change over time. In the case of the LCMS, change has been happening for a long time already. Some of the confessional frogs have already left the simmering pot behind. (syncretism, anyone?) Others have not. I write this not to denigrate them. I respect them deeply, though I may have chosen differently. *Issues, Etc.* was having a profound cooling influence on the pot, and someone didn't like it. Well, now the LCMS can really turn up the heat. Watch out, CPH, or you'll be ablaze before you know it.

I'm admittedly ignorant of LCMS politics on the whole. Doctrine concerns me more than politics. Yet we've had our share of politics in the ELS, too. What a waste.

However, the great thing about being a Christian, and being a Lutheran, is that the biblical doctrine we treasure *really is* all that. It is the only genuine basis for unity, and if we give it more than lip-service, we will find that we are not alone -- even when we are.

The dirty little secret is that *all* synods change over time. Practically speaking, an orthodox synod is a myth of modern Lutheranism. When someone claims his synod is orthodox, it would often be more accurate to say that his synod has become *the measure* of orthodoxy. These days, "orthodoxy" is seldom meant the way Walther meant it. It's relativized in the ELS, in the WELS, in the LCMS, and anywhere else that the word orthodox has more than historic relevance (that does not include the ELCA, unfortunately; watch for its disappearance in the LCMS too). That's why we should constantly learn the meaning of fellowship, as it is defined in the Lutheran Confessions. It's a good antidote for the myth of the orthodox synod (HT: RDP), and it's encouraging for those who are martyred by "orthodox synods."

Kudos to *Issues, Etc.* for your faithful work. Perhaps we will soon be able to recognize church fellowship with each other. You are a witness for confessional Lutheranism.

VDMA

Posted by Jesse Jacobsen in Doctrine, Life, Synod at 20:10

Tuesday, March 4, 2008

Expelled

I've been entertained by Ben Stein, and was impressed with what he achieved with his game show. I had no idea about his past. This guy knows stuff! He's done stuff!

From the advertising, it seems he's involved in [a forthcoming movie](#), which aims to educate its viewers about an important contemporary cultural issue. In particular, the long trailer available at the movie's web site smartly presents a problem with the free exchange of ideas on their own merit, within some segments of academia and science. If its premise is true, the movie is virtually guaranteed not to win any academy awards, but I'd like to see it anyway. Will it improve conversation on this topic? I doubt it. The adherents of Darwinism follow its doctrine more zealously than most Christians follow the Bible.

Posted by Jesse Jacobsen in Life at 16:07

Which ministry did Christ institute?

There is a perception that this point has been hashed through thoroughly by this time, but that perception is mistaken. While statements have been made on the subject from time to time, they have not been directly answered. The closest to an answer that we have seen was in a paper delivered to the official General Pastoral Conference in 2006, entitled "An Exercise in Parsing."

I understand the knee-jerk reflex that some will have when this topic is touched upon: "Quick! Quote the relevant part of the adopted statement, and wash our hands of the matter!" However, that reaction doesn't qualify as doctrinal discussion. Whether we like it or not, genuine discussion includes the possibility that either side might be won over, however strongly-worded their arguments may be. Quoting "the adopted doctrinal statement" is an attempt to end discussion, equivalent in effect to pulling rank. The only way to "win" in a theological discussion is to agree with clear scripture. Hopefully, both sides "win" in the end.

So read this thoughtful explanation of the term "representative ministry" from a certain controversial figure in recent ELS history:

[There is an opinion] that the public or official ministry of the church exists by means of a delegation of the private authority of every individual Christian to preach the gospel, administer the sacraments, and forgive and retain sins. We may call this the "representative ministry" definition, because it claims that whenever one Christian uses God's word or sacraments "on behalf of" other Christians this is the divinely instituted public ministry of the word. According to this opinion, every time one person exercises the keys (or uses the means of grace, or teaches the word -- the language varies) on behalf of believers, this is the divinely instituted public ministry of the word, whether it is a "full use" of the keys or a "limited use" of the keys. In either case it is representative ministry and that is what is divinely instituted, according to this opinion.

That quote came from [a certain controversial writing](#), but has been mostly ignored because of the inordinate amount of attention lavished upon another paragraph (to the detriment and sorrow of all).

[Another writing](#) from a month prior says this, explaining the problem the author had with the concept of a divinely-instituted "limited public use of the keys."

These texts allegedly address the matter of the church calling someone to exercise a limited part of the public ministry of the Word but none of them does. Nowhere does the New Testament speak of the church assigning the responsibility of teaching God's word to someone who is forbidden to preside over the congregation, preach publicly, and administer the sacraments. What the specific duties of the deacons were is uncertain, but the Scriptures nowhere say that anyone taught God's word but was not permitted to teach the entire congregation. Simply put, the very concept of a limited public use of the keys as this is set forth in the PCM document is foreign to the Scriptures. Nevertheless, these texts are cited as biblical proof that "the extent to which one is authorized by the call of the church to exercise the keys publicly is the extent to which one is in the Public Ministry of the Word." Being "in" the Public Ministry of the Word to this or that "extent" is quite impossible if this office is the concrete office of preaching of the gospel and administering the sacraments.

Whereas the texts cited to prove a limited public use of the keys in the Bible don't teach this, these texts do show that the Holy Spirit moves freely in giving His gifts to men. The Wauwatosa Gospel teaches that it is the evangelical activity of the Holy Spirit here and now in the hearts of Christians that constitutes the divine institution of the office in whatever form it may take. Here we see the Wauwatosa influence on the PCM document. John Schaller put it this way: "For whatever the Christian congregation decides upon to further the preaching of the gospel it does at the instigation and under the guidance of the Spirit of Jesus Christ." [29] The PCM document puts it this way: "But it is by divine right that one exercises that work on behalf of the Christians through whom the call has come."

What is divinely instituted is representative ministry in whatever form it may take. When I argued at the microphone during the convention against applying Romans 10:15 ("how shall they preach unless they are sent?") to the calling of a parochial school teacher I said that nowhere in the New Testament is a woman told to preach. The President of the Synod took issue with me and cited Mark 16:15, words that were spoken to the "eleven." But the exegetical tradition to which we have become bound insists that this text teaches the giving of the means of grace to all Christians. The fact that nowhere in the New Testament is a woman told to preach must yield before this tradition. The fact that AC XIV refers to the call of men who are ordained and hold the concrete office of preaching the gospel and administering the sacraments must be reinterpreted to accommodate the new definition of the office. [emphasis added]

It should be noted that the author has focused in these quotations on part II.B of [the PMW](#) and any statements elsewhere that support it.

This is how the concerns were addressed in [the 2006 GPC paper](#):

God permits, approves, blesses, and works through those external vocational arrangements that are made in an orderly way for the purpose of carrying out public activities that he wants to be carried out. But this does not mean that God has directly *instituted* all such external vocational arrangements. In fact, he has not. The PMW document acknowledges this when it says that those offices which have only "a limited public use of the keys" exist as distinct positions of responsibility -- if and when they do exist -- because of the *church's* sanctified judgment, and not because of a divine command. If God has directly instituted something for the church, this would mean that the church cannot ordinarily do without it, and that the church would in fact be sinning against God's will if it declined to have that divinely instituted thing. According to God's will and institution, the church cannot do without the public use of the keys. More specifically, the church cannot do without the *full* public use of the keys. But the church often *can* do without specific external offices of one kind or another that are set up for the purpose of carrying out only a *limited* public use of the keys, or only a *limited part* of the Public Ministry of the Word. Such positions of responsibility are not commanded for the church of all times and places, and they are therefore not indispensable for the church of all times and places. [emphasis original]

And again:

Section II B of the PMW document is an elaboration on, and an explanation of, the "Public Ministry of the Word" in its wider sense. The focus and purpose of this section must be kept in mind when we consider the meaning of antitheses 8 and 9, which appear within it, and which can be a source of some confusion if they are not interpreted and applied according to their context. These antitheses state that "We reject the teaching that only those qualified to carry out a full use of the keys are in the Public Ministry," and that "We reject the teaching that the Public Ministry is limited to any one divinely fixed form, that is, limited to the pastoral office to the exclusion of other teachers of the Word." Understood contextually, these statements are simply reaffirming that there is indeed a legitimate "wider sense" of the phrase "Public Ministry," which refers to the public use of the keys as carried out to any degree or level, from within any and all ecclesiastical offices. These statements should certainly not be understood as repudiations of the teaching that appears in section II A of the document: that the "Public Ministry of the Word" in its *narrower* sense *does* in fact refer exclusively to "the exercise of spiritual oversight" that is carried out (by divine design) only from within "the pastoral office"; and that the "Public Ministry of the Word" in its *narrower* sense *does* in fact require competency for a *full* public use of the keys. [emphasis original]

And finally:

But let's not forget that the "divinely instituted Public Ministry of the Word" -- which is synonymous with the "divinely instituted preaching and teaching office" -- includes *two senses* or meanings. From the perspective of the *narrower* sense of the phrase, we can say that when Jesus trained and sent the apostles, and entrusted to them the full public ministry of Word and sacrament, he was thereby inaugurating in and for the Christian church the *full public use* of the keys. This continues to be a defining trait of the Public Ministry of the Word in the narrower sense. Whenever the full public use of the keys is being exercised in an orderly and proper way, this is an example of the Public Ministry of the Word in the narrower sense -- and of "the pastoral office," from which, according to God's command, the full public use of the keys is carried out. From the perspective of the *wider* sense of the phrase, we can say that when Jesus trained and sent the apostles, and entrusted to them the full public ministry of Word and sacrament, he was thereby inaugurating in and for the Christian church the *public use* of the keys. This continues to be a defining trait of the Public Ministry of the Word in the wider sense. Whenever the public use of the keys is being exercised in an orderly and proper way -- either to the full extent by pastors, or to a limited extent by other ecclesiastical office-holders -- this is an example of the Public Ministry of the Word in the wider sense.

The full public use of the keys includes within it, at least potentially, any and every limited public use of the keys. There is no divine institution of a limited public use of the keys *per se*. There *is* a divine institution of the public use of the keys, as a whole and in all of its parts, from which, in the church's freedom, limited public uses can be vocationally extracted and entrusted to qualified individuals, according to the church's needs and circumstances. Section II B of the PMW document explains that when the church in this way calls individuals to fill positions of responsibility involving only a limited public use of the keys, it is thereby separating, "by human right," a "limited portion of the office" to such individuals, and is authorizing them to exercise or carry out only a "specific" and "limited part of the Public Ministry of the Word."

The answer given in this paper does not provide the scriptural basis for a divinely-instituted limited public use of the keys. It says that such a thing does not exist. Instead, there is a divinely-instituted *use* of the keys (not "limited public"), and the Church has freedom and authority to entrust a limited part of that use to certain individuals.

Is that "representative ministry?" Yes, in a sense. (See how nuanced this discussion can be?) It *is*

representative ministry, with the caveat that it is *not* divinely instituted. In other words, we may call it ministry simply because we need a word for it, and we want to call it that. By definition, it *is* ministry because it is a kind of service.

I have wondered why our doctrinal statement would take such care to describe what is more a matter of our choice than a matter of doctrine. That is, why not just let II.B say that the Church has freedom to entrust certain ministerial duties to individuals alongside the "office of oversight," and call it finished? Do we have to pollute a summary of biblical doctrine with descriptions of what the Church has elected to do in her freedom? In my mind, this is one of the most important criticisms of the PMW. In its current form, it leaves itself open to the charge of teaching human traditions as though they were the Word of God.

Posted by Jesse Jacobsen in PMW at 12:35