



The Historic Episcopate: What It Means and Why We Should Restore It

PHILIP HEFNER

Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago, Chicago, Illinois

There are three primary reasons why I support the restoration of the so-called “historic episcopate” in the ELCA: (1) such a restoration would be a step toward closer identification with the catholic tradition of the church; (2) it would be a step closer toward ecumenical unity, particularly in light of the WCC Faith and Order document, *Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry*; and (3) it would provide the best leadership for the ELCA as a total ecclesial community and for its synodical sub-communities, because it is the best way for those communities to actualize their Christian identity in the world as well as within their own internal life, with both focus and freedom.

Before this argument for the restoration of the “historic episcopate” can be properly entertained, however, there must also be a proper understanding of what it means. Consequently, most of what follows will be clarification of what I think it means to consider such a restoration. I advance four propositions to elaborate what the “restoration” might mean for us in the ELCA.

I. *We will restore the historic episcopacy in light of who we are and have been.* The pathway for the ELCA toward the historic episcopacy leads through a specific history of where we have already been. It will not be easy to determine what it means for the specific trajectory of the ELCA to restore the historic episcopacy, and it will be fraudulent to deny the size of this task. For example, our identity requires that, whatever else it means, the historic episcopacy in our midst will take account of ordained women, the insistence on evangelical freedom and the critique by the Protestant Principle, and democratic processes in the context of our sense of the priesthood of all believers. Heretofore, the historic episcopate has taken none of these into account very adequately (except, we must note, within the Anglican and Swedish churches). The innate paternalism and home-grown versions of authoritarianism in our past may give us romantic ideas about the ease with which we can restore the historic episcopate. But the reality of evangelical freedom and democratic traditions will soon show that this romanticism is more Alice in Wonderland than real possibility.

The specific history of the ELCA will also remind us that we have been “catholic” without the historic episcopate, and that, furthermore, some of our most important strides toward re-possessing our catholic heritage, namely, in

liturgy and doctrine, have been pressed forward with great energy quite apart from the episcopacy. This makes us innately resistant to any claim that our catholicity somehow *depends* on the restoration.

II. *Our restoration of the historic episcopacy will bring the ELCA into closer relationship with other churches who now possess such an episcopate, but will also provide a critique of their episcopate, since we cannot accept their traditions fully.* This points to the dialectic that appears immediately when we approach our catholicity within the context of ecumenical relationships. We look to Rome and Constantinople, quite naturally, as important models, because of their historical experience, but we cannot do the historical episcopacy in the way that they do it. Indeed, we have yet to define what “historic episcopacy” means, and we may not be able to define it in a way that satisfies these churches.

III. *Since there is no sufficient or direct “Theology of the Episcopal Office” in the Book of Concord, we proceed in this matter with an uncertain confessional foundation.* Neither Luther nor the other members of the Reformation generation give us either an adequate theology or a very useful experience for guiding us in our restoration work. Therefore, even more than is usual in other spheres, our theological rationalizing of the restoration will be innovation.

IV. *The restoration will require certain changes and critique of our present traditions.* The merging churches of the ELCA tended to deceive themselves in their explanation of the introduction of bishops as simply a terminological change over previous practice. It has been more than that, even though we have had no clear explanations of what the change is. The confusion we are in is dangerous, because a good deal of the “difference bishops make” has been interpreted romantically, as if our bishops can go on doing pretty much what they have always done, except that now it is sanctified with some sort of aura that makes it more catholic and more traditional.

What will have to change? (a) We will have to recognize that bishops are central in the governing of the church; they are not only pastoral care-givers in their dioceses, but they also govern the church in its life as a national and international community. (b) We will have to recognize the source of the bishop’s leadership. A president presides and has the top authority to execute policy; presidential leadership derives from this. A bishop embodies the community in his or her person; episcopal leadership derives from this. A bishop presides and has authority to execute policy—we understand this well. But the bishop’s office is more spiritual in that the holder of the office has ideally a deep symbolic identification with the community and its tradition which, in a sense, makes the bishop a microcosm of the macrocosm. We are speaking of the ideal, that to which our theology and practice are accountable, and it is a difficult ideal because of the intangible and elusive character of the quality of which we are speaking. Nevertheless, it is real, and if we do not recognize that microcosm/macrocosm quality of bishops, we will not have true bishops.

Why should we go through the difficult process of restoring the historic episcopate? Because it represents the leadership option that is most appropriate to the church, because it offers us the best chance to exercise our identity as church in the world with focus and freedom, and because it represents an important step in repossessing our catholicity, both with respect to the tradition and to the contemporary Ecumene.

The Historic Episcopate: Not Essential for the Office of the Ministry

PAUL S. BERGE

Luther Northwestern Theological Seminary, St. Paul, Minnesota

In the Lutheran tradition, ministry is shaped by the word of God. This Reformation “rediscovery” was always present in Hebraic and Christian scriptural traditions. From the creation accounts of Genesis to the Gospel of John, Scripture proclaims the Word of God to be the source of creation. The God who creates life is the same God whose breath of life creates the Christian community in the risen Lord: “And when [Jesus] said this, he breathed on [*enephusesen*, Gen 2:7, LXX] them, and said to them, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit’” (John 20:22). God’s breath (Spirit) creates the Christian community in the one who is the Word of God.

The reformers knew that it was only a theology of the Word of God that could stand against the medieval tradition that had buried a theology of the Word under a theology of the visibility of the church, expressed in the guarantee that the church is present in the ministry of “apostolic succession” in an unbroken chain back to Peter. The papal office, the bishops, and priests guaranteed the succession of the apostolic tradition, and one could see the church in its clergy. The sacrifice of the Mass repeated the sacrifice of Christ; it could be seen and experienced in the transformed elements. Over and against this convincing medieval theology of visibility, the reformers expressed a theology of the Word in the Augsburg Confession.

The genius of the Augsburg Confession is the incarnating of a theology of the Word in the opening articles. The trinitarian form is understandable from the credal tradition of the church and expresses the heart of the gospel. Article I on “God” is followed by Article II on “Original Sin,” which expresses the reality of life in the presence of God. Article III on “The Son of God” is followed by Article IV on “Justification,” which expresses the new reality of life in the presence of God in Jesus Christ. But where we might expect to find Article V entitled “The Holy Spirit,” we find instead “The Office of the Ministry.” Then follows Article VI on “The New Obedience,” expressing the reality of the work of the Holy Spirit in the Christian life. What is being said in the title of Article V is precisely what the reformers understood the heart of the office of ministry to be, for Article V is the article on the Holy Spirit.

The linking word among Articles IV, V and VI is “faith,” which occurs six times, twice in each article. Article IV on “Justification” proclaims that we “become righteous before God by grace, for Christ’s sake, *through faith*,” and concludes: “For God will regard and reckon *this faith* as righteousness, as Paul says in Rom. 3:21-26 and 4:5.” The first sentence in Article V on “The Office of the Ministry” expresses the connecting pattern: “To obtain *such faith* God instituted the office of the ministry, that is, provided the Gospel and the sacraments.” The next sentence identifies the center of this article: “Through these, as through means, he gives the Holy Spirit, *who works faith*, when and where he pleases, in those who hear the Gospel.” The first sentence in Article VI on “The New Obedience” continues the connecting pattern: “It is also taught among us that *such faith* should produce good fruits and good works.” At the mid-point of this article appears the sixth occurrence of faith: “For we receive forgiveness of sin and righteousness *through faith* in Christ.”

The article on “The Office of the Ministry” is precisely where the reformers knew it had to be in expressing a theology of the Word. The focus is not on the visibility of the church in its clergy, but the heart of the Reformation alternative is the ministry of “the Holy Spirit, who works faith.” This is the radical Reformation proclamation, radical because it goes to the “root” (*radix*), to the heart of the Hebraic and Christian scriptural traditions, which proclaim a theology of the

Word of God.

It is the Word of God in Christ—in its oral confession and sacramental means, and in the written Scriptures—through which the Holy Spirit “works faith.” It is always a dialectical Word of judgment and redemption, Law and Gospel. Because it always stands over and against those who proclaim and those to whom the Word is proclaimed, it always remains God’s Word and expresses the proper relationship of the Creator and the created.

The ministry of the church is called to serve this Word, but it does not preside over it, which is precisely what had taken place in the medieval church. To be sure, there is a call for the Reformation church to exercise ministry through a “regular call” (Article XIV) and an orderly understanding of ministry (Article XXVIII), but it is only one call, one ministry—pastor and bishop—for the teaching and preaching of the Word of God and for the administering of the sacraments.

Perhaps there will always exist in the Lutheran tradition the “romantic” notion that church unity could be served when the “radical break” of the Reformation church is recognized in its ordained ministry. This is romantic because the link of “apostolic succession” is not continuous in the history of the church, and there is no biblical foundation that the visibility of clergy expresses the unity of the church. If anything, clergy have been a sign and cause of the disunity in the church. When such temptations occur, we are called back to the reality of our “radical rootedness” in the Hebraic and Christian scriptural traditions. The Lutheran confessional tradition reflects a theology of the Word which serves the ministry of the Word in an orderly and appropriate way, through which the Holy Spirit “works faith.”