

COMMENT

Satis Est?

What do we do when other churches don't agree?

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[Excerpted from an address to the August 1990 meeting of the "Association of Teaching Theologians" of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.]

Now, I say, if we want to begin to grapple with where we are and what is happening to us in the ELCA today, we ought to recognize that we are witnessing the agonizing end of the line for our Melanchthonian-based pietism. The fire, you might say, seems to be going out. Now we all know what happens when pietism loses its fire, when it loses its enthusiasm for and is cut loose from its moorings in the "objective" salvific deed. It loses its substance and runs off into culture Protestantism. If I read the situation rightly today this is what worries and angers so many about the public face of the ELCA. The church gets its identity more and more from the quality of its own faith and life. It concerns itself not with its relation to God, but with its own internal and external relationships. It worries not about communion with God in Christ's body, but about communion with one another. God has become a theological cipher, easily replaceable by the general concept of love and thus no longer to be worried about. God or his wrath no longer enters significantly into our field of concern. One is not concerned, first and foremost, as in the old pietism, with "getting right with God" but rather with getting right with oneself (the only God left?), and subsequently not with living a "godly" life, but rather learning to affirm others in their chosen lifestyle. The church's energies are consumed by concern about "lived-out unity," inclusivity, togetherness, social issues, quotas, and just about any cause that comes down the mass media pike. The

causes, to be sure, are often worthy enough in themselves. But the point is that when faith in the *iustitia aliena* is lost or deemed irrelevant, the *iustitia propria* is no longer its spontaneous and natural fruit, but a task and a demand. Erstwhile pietists feeling guilty because the fire has gone out are easily consumed by such demands and programs. Indeed, there seems to be quite a number, even among those teaching theology, afflicted with what might be called a theological Oedipus complex—harboring a kind of *ressentiment* for having been burned by their pietist fathers—so that the mere mention of the Lutheran tradition (even though they know very little of it!) awakens a kind of knee-jerk antipathy. They are beguiled just by the thought of something “new.”

But now the question is, where does all this leave us today? If our Melancthonian-based free-choice pietism has lost its substance, and if we are appalled or at least worried by the drift of the church towards culture Protestantism, where do we turn? Here is where the hermeneutic will tend powerfully to influence the choice. If the kind of interpretation suggested by [George] Lindbeck is right, there would seem basically to be two possibilities. The first and most obvious is to turn back towards Rome. If we are a confessing movement in the church catholic, and if, in Tillichian terms, we have pushed our Protestant principle to the degree of losing our catholic substance, then the only real way to find our substance again is to go back to Rome, that preeminent custodian of such catholic substance. Rome has had long experience with this sort of thing. Rome knows how to grant free choice with one hand and take it back with the other!

The other possibility would be the old Protestant move: back to the Bible, to move, perhaps, in the direction of so-called evangelical or fundamentalist Protestantism, lately dubbed fundagelicalism. If we are denominational Lutherans, basically critical of or anti-Rome, and yet fear the loss of substance, we would likely be attracted by the so-called evangelical or maybe even neo-pentecostal movements in contemporary Protestantism. They too, you might say, have a certain ability to grant freedom of choice with one hand and take it back with the other. You are free to choose Jesus, but once you do you better toe the mark! And one cannot overlook the fact that around the globe these days such movements manifest considerable vitality!

Disenchanted Lutherans today are attracted by both possibilities. Witness the talk of “evangelical catholicism” on the one hand—sometimes to the point of schism—and the actual Fundagelical splinter group, the AALC, on the other. When free-choice pietism has lost its moorings in the external Word, the only way to get it back in line is by turning to authority structures with the clout to do it. One can find that either in Roman-type hierarchicalism or in Biblicism. In either case, *satis est non satis est*. The gospel and the sacraments are not enough. They never are when they don’t bring the eschatological end and new beginning. An authority structure above and beyond the gospel must be added—a kind of substitute eschatology to assuage our impatience!

Do these hermeneutical alternatives define the parameters of our fate today? Are these the only possibilities available to us? I believe not. But I do think that if there is any fire left now, it will have to come more from Luther than our Melanchthonian-tinged pietism. Of course, many Lutherans seem to get glassy-eyed or nervous at the mention of such a prospect. But that is due, I think, to our theological Oedipus complex. We think it simply a re-pristination, perhaps, of what we already know and have reacted against.



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