

The Word on Quotas

by GERHARD O. FORDE

NOW THAT THE smoke has cleared somewhat from the coming together of three Lutheran bodies to form a “new” Lutheran church, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, it is time to begin subjecting some of its innovations to more careful theological scrutiny than was possible in the euphoria of its beginnings. The idea of representation by quotas on boards, commissions and assemblies is one place to start. As a member of the commission responsible for the formation of the new church (the CNLC), I was always uneasy with the quota system and did not vote for it. But the mood and elan of the CNLC was such, of course, that one could not resist the tide without being accused of opposition to social justice. In retrospect, it is apparent that what impelled the CNLC on such matters was perhaps as much what would now be called political correctness as it was a concern for theological correctness. And political correctness is particularly pernicious when it assumes moral and theological superiority as well.

So it might be salutary for the church to reopen discussion on some of the theological questions the CNLC was unable or unwilling to resolve. I want to stress the fact that for this article the theological questions are the focus of concern. It is not my intention, that is, to attempt to assess the relative successes or failures of the system on the level of practice. Such assessment is, of course, a matter of immense importance and needs doing before it is too late—even though it will provoke endless debate. Has the ELCA become “Operation Abandon?”—a church which gives the impression of wanting to abandon its constituency for one which is more attractive? Such a church could not last long. Serious as it is, that is not my question. Nor is it my intention to raise questions about whether the ELCA should reach out to people of every race, color, and gender in its mission, or whether more of such people should be involved in the leadership of the church. My question is simply about the *theological* propriety of the quota system, not whether such a system is politically correct, but whether it is theologically correct,

whether it adequately or properly reflects in the institutional life of the church the faith which the church confesses.

How shall we begin? We had best sail right into the maelstrom—the eschatological maelstrom brought on by the dawning of the new age in Christ. The decisive passage for a theological consideration of our problem is St. Paul's letter to the Galatians 3:23–29:

Now before faith came, we were confined under the law, kept under constraint until faith should be revealed. So that the law was our custodian until Christ came, that we might be justified by faith. But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a custodian; for in Christ Jesus you are all children of God, through faith. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

How shall we cope with this crucial and radical text in the light of our questions about quotas? We could, I suppose, try to marginalize the text, claim it to be just Pauline extremism and look for texts more amenable to our enterprises. But that won't do. Theological reflection has always to be able to stand in the light of the most radical texts lest it find itself marginalized. We must look at ourselves in the light of the text—however radical—not vice versa. For only as we find ourselves exegeted by the most radical texts do we get an inkling as to what the New Testament is about. So, into the maelstrom.

In an article entitled "Galatians 3:28, Faculty Appointments and the Overcoming of Christological Amnesia,"¹ J. Louis Martyn of Union Seminary in New York City lays out the issues for us in an incisive and helpful manner. I shall lean rather heavily on his argument in what follows, though, of course, I take sole responsibility for the use I make of it and the conclusions I draw. As the title indicates, the situation Martyn addressed was similar to that in which we in the ELCA now find ourselves. For Martyn and his colleagues the question was what the New Testament has to say about equity and justice in faculty appointments. For us, the question is what the Word has to say about quotas for participation in church institutional life—and perhaps even church membership and mission. Is there support in such texts for the quota system?

First of all, it is important to see that the text cuts both ways. It simply announces that all are one in Christ, that the old age

under the law and all the distinctions governed thereby is simply over. Thus, on the one hand, it attacks all our divisive prejudices, racial/social/religious (Jew/Greek), political/economic (slave/free), and even natural (male/female). It attacks, that is, the basic distinctions of this age, the prejudgments which tempt, divide, and destroy the body. All that, it insists, is now over. Now that faith has come we are no longer under a custodian. As many as have been baptized into Christ have a new identity. They have "put on Christ," and so are no longer to be regarded as they appear in the "clothing" of this age. But by that very fact, on the other hand, such claims also undercut any attempt to use the text as a platform for launching campaigns for justice—in this case, justification for quotas. For to justify quotas in that fashion would be to assume that the distinctions obtain also for the new age; they are still in effect and therefore determinative for the church's message and practice.

Let us look at this a bit more closely. The text cuts both ways because it is a proclamation, an announcement of the breaking in of the new age. Paul simply declares all the distinctions—Jew/Greek, slave/free, male/female—which determine the life of the old age to be over. It is not a program to be undertaken, a project to be completed. It is done. So the new determination of life is simply announced to us as what is now ultimately true and real. As such announcement and proclamation, the text is an apocalyptic explosion that fractures our way of looking at things. As Martyn put it, it "comes from somewhere else" (42). To us it seems eminently foolish, unrealistic, and impractical. At most it will be taken as just a dream or vision of strictly future hopes and possibilities, perhaps a slice of the much maligned "pie in the sky, by and by." As such—so the old argument goes—it would afford protection for the status quo. The complaint against it would then simply be another instance of those made against justification by faith alone. Why do anything about it if it is just a gift?

But such moves are always a result of failure to be caught by the power of the new itself, a failure to be caught by the Spirit. As Martyn put it, "it is to be trapped in one form of Christological amnesia. It is to forget that the God who has taken hold of us in Christ is the God who calls The New into existence" (41). One who is grasped by "The New" in Christ would hardly be interested in preserving the status quo as such. Anyone who has been grasped

by this message should certainly be opposed to perpetuating the distinctions and prejudices that dominate the old age.

But now, of course, "The New" is always at a tremendous disadvantage in this "evil and adulterous generation," especially in matters religious. That, no doubt, is not only because the old age and we with it do not want to change, but also simply because it is new and unheard of. And so we stare at it, as Luther liked to say, like a cow staring at a new gate. We don't know what to do about something so free and so new. So we fall back on the status quo. But what is to be done about that? When that question is raised, we come to the crossroads. Here the spirits divide. If I understand Paul aright, and those caught by his intent, the answer would be that there is nothing to be done but to preach it, announce it, declare it as God's accomplishment in Christ. Paul's solution, that is, to the problem of the distinctions in the old age is simply to declare that in Christ they are wiped out. Paul's solution is the writing of the Galatians text itself. His solution to the problem of the old age and with it the old Adam and Eve is simply to declare them dead, buried with Christ in baptism to be raised to the new in Christ. And there is really no other way to go if we have to do with what is actually new, with the apocalyptic/eschatological reality. To fall back on some other apologetic or device is to retreat into the strategies and prejudices of the old. Either one is caught by the power and freedom of "The New" and will have to rearrange one's life to fit that or one is not. And if one is not no amount of ethics will remedy the matter.

The world, however, or the old age, is too much with us. And so it is also in the church. What shall be done about the fact that the flat-out announcement of the end of all distinctions seems highly impractical if not indeed irrelevant and so reinforces the status quo? After all, the distinctions do persist. There is still Jew versus Greek, slave versus free, male versus female. And the modern world has learned to add to the list almost interminably. What is the church to do about it? Here the ELCA has taken, apparently, the other road. Understanding quite rightly that the text does not support the status quo, it nevertheless has taken it not as an apocalyptic or eschatological announcement of what breaks in upon us in Christ, but rather, to use Martyn's words again, "as a summons to efforts in behalf of what the world calls justice" (41). Instead of

taking the text as an indicative declaration, it takes it as an imperative, a program to be carried out.

At this point memories of the agonizing debates in the CNLC come cascading back. Over and over again we were regaled with speeches to the effect that the church needs to become more "intentional" about its commitment to justice; that unless we were prepared to move towards concrete quotas we were just dwelling in the dreamland of abstractions. We were told that our opposition to sin was not real or practical unless we took concrete institutional steps to oppose it. I remember musing to myself at the time how odd it was that the sins such speakers seemed most worried about were those of others! There was, no doubt, enough truth in the fine speeches to give some credence. But were quotas the answer? Are quotas a concrete form of intentionality, or a remedy for sin?

In terms of our analysis, to resort to quotas is to indulge in yet another form of "christological amnesia." It is actually to build one's case and the church's practice on the persistence of the distinctions which Christ has declared *passee*. Now the really devastating thing about such a move is that to the degree that one succeeds in such practice one actually succeeds in locking out the really new. One builds church practice on the assumption of the persistence of the distinctions rather than on the declaration that in Christ they are outmoded, dead, over with, gone. One looks not to the proclamation of the truly good news as the solution to the problem, but to a program promising to make the church over in terms of what the world calls justice. Martyn has a delightful passage in which he satirizes our prompting of Paul in this regard.

... We might ... imagine that several of us had been asked to stand at Paul's elbow, as he dictated his letter to the Galatians, in order to help him speak in a fashion truly "relevant" and "realistic." As he dictated Galatians 3:28, we might then have suggested a re-wording: "Slow down, Paul! And above all wake up to the fact that the claims of everyday life require us to be both inclusive and political in a down-to-earth fashion. Say, 'In Christ there are both Jew and Greek, etc.' Once you have said that, we will see to it that there is an effective appointments-caucus for Jews, another for Gentiles, and so forth. (42)

Perhaps the satire helps to point out how the move towards quotas as a supposed solution actually locks out the fundamental claims of the gospel. The distinctions are left standing so one can assign them

their "due," or even allow the church to congratulate itself on its inclusivity.

So we have another remarkable instance in which the summons to establish what the world calls justice actually subverts God's way of establishing justice. The apocalyptic announcement of what God accomplishes in Christ is "impractical" and "unrealistic." It needs the intentional implementation of quotas and such. Not only does that undercut the apocalyptic announcement of the gospel, but, ironically, it also sows seeds of destruction for itself. When the gospel is turned into a program to realize what this age calls justice, it can itself readily be called to account by such worldly justice. This is readily apparent in considering further the case of the Jews. If we are going to turn the apocalyptic announcement into a program for this worldly justice, one can hardly resist asking why in the ELCA we do not have a quota for Jews! That, certainly, is the greatest racial concern for both Paul and the New Testament in general. But, just at this point other questions intrude—and not the least the question of worldly justice. For worldly justice in our day counsels toleration and respect for other religious traditions. So we tell ourselves that out of such respect we must not make Jews explicit targets for evangelization, let alone embarrass them by including them in a quota. In other words, "justice" decrees that we should not subject them to such an indignity! Thus does worldly justice take out its revenge on those who would adopt it as a religious strategy! But in this regard, just how is the case of the Jews different from other races and religions? Should we not grant similar respect to the religious traditions of others, like those of Native Americans, for instance? Why should they be filed under quotas? And lest we think the question limited to other religions, what of other Christian traditions? Are not Roman Catholic bishops, for instance, at least a little right in being nervous about our proselytizing of Hispanics to fill our quotas? What is the "justice" in that? Just so does the attempt to turn the proclamation into a program for justice fall victim to its own game. Is it not evident in all of this that the proclamation of the startling good news that in Christ all this nonsense is over itself much more powerful? Is not the pure apocalyptic proclamation ultimately a more potent answer to our problems? Must we not, in the church, operate on the belief that it is our calling to preach that message to all? Will the gospel not be served much more effectively and faithfully and people of all races, color,

social status, age, be more attracted by the simple announcement that in Christ the game is over, the jig is up, we are through as old beings and all one in Christ?

Some may think this argument overdrawn or even overly subtle. But perhaps one need only listen to much of the preaching in the church to discover whether proclamation of the gospel is not actually being locked out by concern for what the world calls justice. And the consequences of such lock-out can be dire. As we have already indicated, the world's justice is fickle and sometimes even deadly. We need to be reminded now and then, at least, that when one adopts the world's methods to achieve the apocalyptic aims of the New Testament, disaster and tragedy are not far from the door. Instead of reading the apocalyptic text as a divine deed which attacks us all as old beings in that it simply declares a new reality in Christ, we read them as "us against them" texts, our summons to do "them" in. Instead, that is, of seeing that the apocalyptic pronouncement attacks us all as old beings and makes us new, we take it to mean that it attacks "them," our enemies of the moment, so as to support "us."

To use Luther's terms, we do not read the text as a person who is simultaneously saint and sinner. Rather we tend to set matters up as though "we" are the saints, and "they" are the sinners. The eschatological line, so to speak, does not run through the center of our own being, but rather between us and them. So the texts have been read in some such fashion throughout history in countless subtle and not-so-subtle ways—all the way to current readings, be it a Marxism which sets class against class, or liberationists setting oppressors against oppressed, the powerful against the powerless, men against women, or even clergy against laity! It is surely not entirely out of place to recall that men like Hitler too appropriated the apocalyptic message in this fashion. The world, you might say, has its own way of seeing to it that there shall be no longer Jew nor Greek. After all, much of the rhetoric that brought Nazism to power was no different from current attempts to preempt the apocalyptic proclamation. It always turns out to be us against them.

Against such a background what sort of spirit does the quota system foster in the church? Does it not inevitably take us in the direction of reducing matters of abiding theological and ecclesiological import to power politics? Whatever happened to the belief that people were to serve the body on the basis of their spiritual

gifts rather than the distinctions of this age? Whatever happened to the concern of the church expressed in article fourteen of the Augsburg Confession that no one should preach or teach publicly unless they are rightly called, rather than a host of other considerations? Can a church be responsibly governed where this-worldly distinctions become virtually more determinative than the Spirit?

There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus. That was—and is—the Word on quotas. They should not exist in the church because they call attention to distinctions which Christ has already brought to an end. We all know, of course, that this is not a perfect world and that the distinctions persist for the time being, even in the church. We all know that we must be vigilant so that these distinctions do not overwhelm us, even in the church. We need constantly to develop practical strategies to overcome the bitter fruits of divisiveness. But a quota system that builds on and perpetuates divisiveness is not the way to go. To the degree that it persists it calls the very gospel of the church into question. The preaching of the gospel, the apocalyptic announcement of the end of all distinctions in Christ will do the deed. To be a Christian is to believe that and consequently to live as though the distinctions did not exist. Fundamental questions about the leadership and mission of the church would then have to be answered on quite different grounds. And that, I expect, would be quite an improvement. Who knows, perhaps even the Spirit would have a say!

NOTES

1. *Katallagete*, Summer, 1982: 39–44. The references in parenthesis in my text are to this article.



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