

Called to Unity by Faith Alone

Introduction

For many American Lutherans who desired a fuller communion with the Episcopal Church at the beginning of the new millennium, but had reservations about adopting a so called “historic episcopate,” *Called to Common Mission (CCM)* offered them a comforting reassurance. The Apology of the Lutheran Confessions, it strongly suggested, endorses a return to historical episcopacy which was the “deep desire” of the Lutheran Reformers, and that they were only prevented from doing so by the cruelty of the bishops. Therefore, *CCM* proponents reasoned, the time is long overdue for us to fulfill the original wishes of Luther, Melancthon, and the Wittenberg Reformers. However, as this paper will clarify, the Reformers rejected any notion of episcopal succession or “historic episcopate.”

Definition

CCM's # 11 defines "historical episcopacy," also known as "historic," "apostolic," or "episcopal succession," as "a tradition which goes back to the ancient church, in which bishops already in the succession install newly elected bishops with prayer and the laying on of hands. The Chicago-Lambeth Quadrilateral of 1886/1888, the ecumenical policy of The Episcopal Church, refers to this tradition as 'the historic episcopate.'" CCM then adds this claim, "*In the Lutheran Confessions, Article 14 of the Apology refers to this episcopal pattern by the phrase, 'the ecclesiastical and canonical polity which it is our deep desire to maintain.'*" A brief review of the following Reformation facts, however, makes clear that the Apology is not referring to episcopal succession of any kind.

The term "historical episcopacy" did not exist at the time of the presentation of the Augsburg Confession. It does not appear in any Lutheran or Catholic documents prior to 1542, when the term was first coined by the Catholic negotiator Johannes Groper, and thus postdates Augsburg by at least a dozen years. The concept was invented to counter so-called "irregular" Lutheran ordinations, (ordinations performed without a bishop).¹ The early Lutheran ordinations were deemed illegal and regarded as a threat that could usher chaos into the Church, since improperly ordained priests could not be the proper ontological conduits of sacramental grace. At the Augsburg Interim of 1548, the Catholics reaffirmed bishops *iure divino* (by divine right) in *Art. XIII*, in opposition to Apology 14's claim that bishops rule *iure humano* (by human arrangement). It placed them in "perpetual succession of the church" in *Art. XX*, whereby "the bishops place their hands, consecrating them to their orders, to them they give the power of discharging their office." So-called "apostolic succession" was also affirmed in the Council of Trent (1545 - 1563). Lutheranism, on the other hand, has used the term "apostolic succession" to mean ONLY the "succession of faith" of which all believers are a part equally.

Episcopal succession was never discussed in Augsburg. The Augsburg Confession, the Apology, and the Confutation make no mention of it. The topic was never on the table, nor was it ever the subject of any negotiations. It does not appear anywhere in the Book of Concord, nor was it an issue for the Lutherans in the Reformation up to and through 1580.

¹ Unlike the Lutherans, the Catholics believed that ordination is a sacrament, requiring a sacerdotal priest to transubstantiate the elements of the Lord's Supper in order for them to be effective.

Apology 14 refers to the princely estates and secular powers of bishops, not to any ecclesiastical "succession." In his *Exhortation to All Clergy Assembled at Augsburg*, 1530, written four months prior to the presentation of the Augsburg Confession, Luther specifically identifies the bishops of Apology 14 as "endowment bishops," wielders of secular power whom he also refers to as "prince bishops" or "castle bishops." Emperor Charles V arrived in Augsburg demanding the Lutherans return immediately to the Catholic fold (*status quo ante*), including all Catholic properties, from real estate, to entire towns, to ecclesiastical offices -- or face war. For the sake of peace, the reformers professed their "deep desire" for peace through the preservation of the state, i.e., to "conserve" (*conservare*) the princely bishops' estates (*canonicam politiā/Bischofsregiment*), and allow them their worldly powers, including political, military, judicial, and taxation (*potestas gladii*). (To pledge anything less in Augsburg, where the Reformers were held captive by military force, would have been a blatant declaration of war.) Luther: "We wish to let you remain what you are and teach (as we have done in the past) that you should be allowed to be princes and lords, for the sake of peace, and that your properties should be left alone." ² No mention of episcopal "succession" is ever made by either side in the conflict.

Apology 14 (1531 Latin) makes clear this "desire" is past, not present. In their versions of the Book of Concord, both Tappert and Kolb/Wengert have mistranslated the key passage -- *quam nos magnopere cupiebamus conservare* ³ -- into the present tense, i.e., "Thus the cruelty of the bishops is the reason for the abolition of canonical government in some places, despite our earnest desire to keep it." In fact, *cupiebamus* is 1st person plural, and therefore must be translated "we were desiring," meaning at this time last year, in 1530, at the time of the Diet of Augsburg, as is clear from Jonas' use of the word *Reichstag* (Diet) for *conventus* (assembly) in the Latin. The Reichstag was of limited duration, nine sessions lasting from June 20 - September 22, 1530. But thirteen months later, by October 1531, the desire to conserve canonical government had come and gone. A year after Augsburg, the reformers were no longer expressing a "deep desire" to conserve the bishops' worldly powers. What had previously been expressed in the Latin as a "maximum desire" (November 1530), and a "deep desire" (April 1531), had now become in the German (October 1531) the "highest inclination (*geneigt*) to help maintain (*helfen zu erhalten*)" the princely bishops' estates. But the offer is strictly conditional, namely that Lutheran pastors be received as "equals" to their Catholic counterparts, (*aequi* means "equality," not "justice" as Tappert and Kolb/Wengert have rendered it). Since "equality" could not be achieved in 1530, (and hasn't been to the present day), Apology 14 now declares it to be the reason for the "abolition of canonical government" in evangelical territories in 1531.

The German Apology omits any willingness to keep the ecclesiastical and canonical polity. CCM used the Tappert translation of the 1531 Latin text of Apology 14. The German Apology, however, is very different from the Latin. Melancthon hailed it as "beyond improvement," and beginning in April 1540, all evangelical pastors in Luther's Electoral Saxony were required by law to purchase (*vornemlich keuffen sollen*), learn and teach from the German Apology as a matter of "top priority." The 1580 Book of Concord was published in German, with the Latin version not appearing for another four years. While nearly all articles in the Latin and German texts were edited to varying degrees over time, the one article that was never altered is the German Apology 14. Gone from it are the following lines from the Latin. # 1: We know that the Fathers had good and useful reasons for instituting ecclesiastical discipline in the manner described by the ancient canons. Also gone is all of # 5, the basis for CCM's claim: Furthermore, we want at this point to declare our willingness to keep the ecclesiastical and canonical polity, provided that the bishops stop raging against our churches. This willingness will be our defense, both before God and among all nations, present and

² LW Vol. 34 p. 50, Helmut T. Lehmann, Ed., Fortress Press, Philadelphia, 1960

³ BSLK, 8. Auflage, Göttingen, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1979, p. 297

future, against the charge that we have undermined the authority of the bishops. Thus men may read that, despite our protest against the unjust cruelty of the bishops, we could not obtain equality.⁴

The only "succession" of interest to the Reformers is faith. For Luther and the Reformers there was no such thing as "historical," "episcopal" or even "apostolic succession," a term Luther didn't use. Rejecting the Roman definition of the church as the *corpus Christi mysticum*, based upon "the mysterious presence of Christ in the sacrament and on the unity in the hierarchy,"⁵ the Reformers stressed instead, and the Confessions affirm, the church as the hidden, uninterrupted continuity of believers (*successio fidelium*), over and against any kind of ecclesiastical succession (*successio episcoporum*).⁶ Luther never wavered from this position, and used the term "body of Christ" (for example in Baptism) to mean the hidden mystical body of Christ and NEVER to mean any structural or institutional church or any expression thereof.

CCM rejects Articles 4 & 7 of the Augsburg Confession. Article 4, the article by which the church stands or falls, says justifying faith alone in Jesus Christ alone, who is also the Word alone, is the sole basis for full communion among Christians. Article 7 states that the *communio sanctorum* is fully the church where the Word is preached in all of its purity and the sacraments are rightly administered. Both articles are therefore *satis est*, meaning it is "enough" for unity and full communion.

Historical episcopacy, however, claims this is not enough, *non satis est*, by further requiring "properly ordained" clergy by bishops ordained in historical succession in order for there to be full communion. In so doing, CCM rejects Articles 4 & 7 by adding a human construct to the sufficiency of faith alone, by grace alone, in the cross alone, through the Word alone. CCM makes this human construct of the historical episcopacy into an essential, or core belief, of the Gospel as instituted by Christ. This is idolatry. Far from this being a mere matter of church governance and therefore an *adiaphoron* (a matter of indifference), it is a rejection of the sole criterion for all Christian fellowship: faith in Christ alone. Historical episcopacy harkens back to the misguided dictum of Ignatius in 110 A.D.: "Wheresoever the bishop shall appear... there is the universal (*katholike*) Church." Luther and the Reformers, however, proclaimed, "Christ alone is our bishop!"

Apology 14 is about call, not ordination. Apology 14 is the evangelical rejection of the Confutation's insistence that the Latin and German terms for "rightly called" *rite vocatus/ordentlichen Beruf* of the Augsburg Confession, be understood in strict accordance with canonical ordination by bishops of the *Corpus iuris canonici*. It is an expansion of AC 5 (*De ministerio ecclesiastico*), in Tappert: "The Office of Ministry." The later German title is "*Das Predigtamt*," the "office of preaching," and it is this office to which Apology 14 is referring, one which "the Reformers thought of in other than clerical terms,"⁷ since the Holy Spirit calls whomever he wishes, *wo und wenn er will*, thus making it the highest calling in Christendom. Its legitimacy depends on a proper call,⁸ stemming from the Holy Spirit, -- not from a so-called "wider expression

⁴ Theodore G. Tappert, trans. & ed., *The Book of Concord*, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959, p. 214-215

⁵ See *Luther's World of Thought*, Heinrich Bornkamm, Concordia Publishing House, St. Louis, Missouri, 1958, p. 143

⁶ LW Vol. 40, *Concerning the Ministry*, p. 24, Luther writes: "There is something ridiculous about this conferring of orders. For the episcopal dignity is not a sacrament nor has it a 'character.' Yet it gives a priestly dignity and power supposedly above all others."

⁷ This critical notation is footnoted in the BSLK, p. 58. Tappert records it on p. 31, but the Kolb/Wengert *Book of Concord* ignores it.

⁸ The Kolb/Wengert *Book of Concord* inserted the bracketed word [*public*] in front of *call* in AC 14, p. 46. It created a footnote for it, saying in n. 78 "The 1531 *editio princeps* and the 1580 Book of Concord add the word in brackets." Timothy Wengert then expounded upon it as the centerpiece for his 2004 teaching paper to the ELCA Conference of Bishops, entitled "The End of the Public Office of Ministry in the Lutheran Confessions." Attempting to prove a Confessional

of the church,” (as the ELCA has it and of which the Confessions know nothing), but from the congregation, (or even the Elector), *die Gemeinde*, the *ecclesia particularis* being fully the church in the unity of the *successio fidelium*.

Luther and the Reformers never adopted "episcopal succession." Apology 14 is about the importance of a proper call (*rite vocatus*).⁹ CCM postulates a notion that the reformers actually possessed a desire, even a “deep desire,” to be part of a hierarchical clerical structure (later known as the “historical episcopacy.” How untrue that is, is easily demonstrated in Luther’s Electoral Saxony. The importance of call over ordination and canonical grades, stressed in Apology 14, played itself out in rather dramatic fashion in many places, two examples of which follow:

The diocese of Merseburg was one of three governed by the Wettin princes. Centered in Leipzig and founded in 955, it dissolved in 1561 after a history of 43 bishops. Throughout the centuries and until 1544, there are endless lists of the ordained under the “grades” of “Tonsured, Acolytes, Subdeacons, and Presbyters.” None are listed in terms of a call (*Berufung*), but rather as ordained (*ordinaciones clericorum*). But in 1544 the bishop’s seat went to a Lutheran, Superattendant Anton Musa, in office from 1545 – 1548. During this period under the Lutherans, ordinations and installations were suddenly changed to *vocatus ad*, – called to -- , e.g., *vocatus ad Parochiam*, *vocatus ad Diaconatum*, etc. With Duke George dead, Luther was now free to preach in Merseburg Cathedral, and on August 2, 1545, performed several ordinations *vocatus ad*. Had “ecclesiastical discipline in the manner described in the ancient canons,” or “canonical polity” so as not to “undermine the authority of the bishops,” been a “deep desire” of the Reformers after Augsburg, Musa, not Luther, would have done the ordinations. (The same goes for Luther’s ordinations of von Amsdorf, von Anhalt, etc.) Instead of affirming a Lutheran hierarchical structure, it shows precisely the opposite, and places the emphasis squarely on *rite vocatus*. After the defeat of the Protestants in 1547, the Catholic Michael Heding, who would be the last Bishop of Merseburg, immediately reversed the Lutheran form of ordination, and returned the diocese to the old Roman ordination rite.

The Reformers outlawed canonical episcopal hierarchy. The lack of desire for anything resembling a so-called “historical episcopacy” is perhaps best seen in the home of the Reformation itself. If one consults the registry of the *Wittenberger Ordiniertenbuch*, between 1537, (the time of the adoption of the Augsburg Confession and Apology as confessional writings), and Luther’s death in 1546, one finds that an astonishing total of 738 Lutheran pastors were ordained. Every single one of them is registered as *vocatus ad*. Not one is *ordinaciones clericorum*. And not a single one was ordained by a bishop, though no fewer than four regional bishops were available. This was in keeping with the express wishes of Elector John the Steadfast, who had ruled Saxony at the time of the presentation of the Augsburg Confession and had also signed it. In a document in the *Urkundenbuch der Universität Wittenberg*, dated May 5, 1536, his son and successor, John Frederick the Magnanimous, in fulfillment of his father’s last will and testament declared an end to canonical episcopal government and its attendant hierarchy. Holdovers from the system, namely all ecclesiastical “dignitaries,” would be allowed to live out their remaining days, after which time

requirement of bishops for ordination, he states, “In fact, the point is so important that both the official German printing of the CA in 1531 and the version in 1580 in the Book of Concord repeated the word ‘public’ in the final phrase (shown in brackets above). This emphasis is contrasted directly to self-appointed, so-called radical preachers who based their authority solely on themselves and their personal or private ‘congregational’ calls.” In fact the word “public” does not exist in any of the documents cited, but is strictly a creation of Kolb/Wengert.

⁹ Also, in the Kolb/Wengert *BoC*, n. 81, p. 47 states: “*Rite vocatus* means called in a regular manner by a proper public authority. This is not a matter of ‘ritual.’” In fact, *rite vocatus* simply means “rightly called.” The footnote is actually the Catholic argument of *Confutatio XIV*, rejected by *Apology XIV*, which claimed Lutheran calls were illegitimate because they did not emanate from “a proper public authority,” namely the canonical bishops, but rather from the congregations, which the Lutherans claimed as their proper authority.

episcopal government, with all of its titles and names, was to be completely “wiped out and extinguished!”¹⁰ Luther himself, had declared after reading the *Reichstagsabschied* of September 22, 1530, that the “Ecclesiastical Order” (Tappert) or “Church Order” (Kolb/Wengert), also known as the *Kirchenregiment*, was never to be reestablished or reintroduced among the Lutherans.¹¹

For the next 400 years Lutheranism never felt itself lacking anything for want of an episcopal succession, and bishops did not arrive on the scene again until the constitutionality of 1918. Episcopal succession did actually make a brief appearance in 1933, when Adolf Hitler introduced historical episcopacy to Germany as part of the “Führerprinzip,” ushering in by force what the Lutheran Church had rejected since the earliest days of the Reformation. Bishoprics were created in the states of Hannover, Bavaria and Württemberg. In 1945, after WW II, two of these bishops (Wurm and Meiser) were retained because they were regarded as excellent leaders, though they have come in for criticism in recent years for suspected anti-Semitism.

The ELCA has reversed itself. In 2004, the fifth anniversary of CCM, the ELCA reversed its position in CCM that Apology 14 is about the succession of bishops in the historical episcopacy (#11). Paragraph 80 in *The Church as Koinonia of Salvation: Its Structures and Ministries* - Common Statement of the 10th Round of the U.S. Lutheran-Roman Catholic Dialogue, now states: “Prior to the late 1530s the theme of succession played little role in the Reformation debates on the role and authority of the bishops. The authority and ministry of the bishops, not any particular concept of succession, were the subject of the debate. The Lutheran Confessions explicitly regret the loss of the ‘order of the church’ (Apol. 14.1) that resulted from the presbyterial [or pastoral] ordinations the Lutherans judged to be necessary for the life of their churches, but neither Article 28 of the Augsburg Confession on the power of bishops nor the response by the imperial Catholic theologians to it in the Confutation refers explicitly to succession.” In fact, Apology 14 and 28 express no regret for presbyterial ordinations, emphasizing them instead as the norm in keeping with the Gospel, and lay the blame squarely at the bishops’ feet for improperly mixing the two kingdoms.

Summary. The body of this document supports the following findings and conclusions: First, CCM contradicts and rejects the clear meaning of Articles 4 & 7 of the Augsburg Confession by interpreting them to mean the opposite of the original intent. Nothing is necessary for unity or full communion except that the Word is preached and taught in its truth and purity and that the (2) sacraments are rightly administered (according to the Word). Second, Apology 14, to which the Lutheran Reformers, electors, aristocracy, and German nation all subscribed, edits out any desire for a canonical hierarchy, the “usefulness” of which, other than for the purposes of ecclesial tyranny, had since come and gone. Contrary to CCM’s claims, neither the Latin nor the German text of Apology 14 advocate a return to it, nor do they support anything even approximating a “historical episcopacy.” For CCM to maintain that they do, as one German theologian put it recently, is the modern equivalent of insisting that the American founding fathers deeply desired a return to the English monarchy in the Declaration of Independence. Obviously this was neither desirable nor the case. Episcopal succession was never the desire of Luther, Melancthon, and the Reformers in Augsburg, nor was it ever in the Augsburg Confession or in any form of American

¹⁰ “So wollen wir auch himit die titel und namen der digniteten, auch canonien, vicarien, caplanen nach beurter personen abgang genzlichen ausgelescht und extinguiert haben!” Walter Friedensburg, *Urkundenbuch der Universität Wittenberg*, Teil I (1502 - 1611), Magdeburg 1926, p. 180. See also Kidd, ed., *Documents of the Continental Reformation*, Oxford: At Clarendon Press, MCMXI, No. 112.

¹¹ “Was die geistliche Gerichtsbarkeit anlangt (oder Kirchenregiment), so scheint wohl die sache eine ungleichheit zu haben, und ...dass die Kirchenregimenten uns und unsere Priester in vielen schweren sachen gezwungen und noch gerne zwängen, manches wider das evangelium und Gewissen zu halten. Darum kann ihnen die Gerichtsbarkeit und Kirchengewalt keineswegs wieder eingeräumt oder gut gesprochen werden.”

Lutheranism. Those who have used power politics and deceptive theologies to bring historic episcopacy into the E.L.C.A. have departed from Lutheranism.

Faith alone (sola fide) is the center of Christian life so that all ecclesiological externals are kept in their proper place. When faith is removed from the center, externals such as structure and ritual will replace it. Thus St. Paul says, "By grace we are saved through faith and not of ourselves – lest anyone should boast." (Ephesians 2:8)

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