

REFORMATION TODAY

An Argument for Lutheran Episcopacy

An LCMS pastor makes his case for the advantages of episcopal polity

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I would like to make an argument for episcopal polity in the Lutheran Church. Episcopal polity is not the only option that is open to Lutherans, but I would suggest that it is the best option. It is an important component in the well being (*bene esse*) of the church. For me, this admittedly "choppy" paper was a chance for me to learn about the issue, and also an exercise in imagining an ideal. In the current situation, a change in polity is not possible, but I hope at least to help someone think in a broader way, a way that is different than the reality he or she knows. And if it is not to much to hope for, perhaps I will see, and be a part of, a Lutheran episcopacy in my lifetime.

THE SCRIPTURES AND POLITY

Lutherans clearly teach that there is only one office in the church, the office of the ministry. There are not two or three different divinely established offices in the new testament church. A higher level of clergy (bishops), are simply by human arrangement. While it is clear that in the new testament the terms for bishop and presbyter/elder are interchangeable, there does seem to be a precedent for bishop-like oversight among some members of the office of the ministry. James, the brother of our Lord, seems to have a bishop-like position in the Jerusalem church. James also certainly seems to have a prominent position at the council of Jerusalem in Acts 15. Further, he seems to have a prominent position with regard to the other "elders" in Acts 21:18. Was James a "bishop" as we think of them? Probably not with all the ideas that we bring to the term, but an office of oversight does seem to be implied.

There are others besides James who have this episcopal function. Both Timothy and Titus seem to function, at times, like bishops in the new testament. Firstly, Timothy is charged by the Apostle Paul, "stay there in Ephesus so that you may command certain men not to teach false doctrines any longer..." (1 Tim. 1:3). Timothy is to "command" those who teach God's people. This is doctrinal discipline, and Timothy is carrying it out with regard to what seems to be clergy. Secondly, Timothy also seems to be put in the position of judge when questions of impropriety surface. St. Paul instructs Timothy, "Do not entertain an accusation against an elder unless it is brought by two or three witnesses." (1 Tim. 5:19). Timothy is in a position of judging over other "elders," which in the new testament refers to clergy. Thirdly, Timothy also seems to be responsible for appointing other clergy in the church. "And the things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable men who will also be qualified to teach others." (2 Tim. 2:2). Titus, also seems to perform episcopal functions. St. Paul tells him, "The reason I left you in Crete was that you might straighten out what was left unfinished and appoint elders in every town, as I directed you." (Titus 1:5). Now, these passages are not commands by our Lord for episcopal polity, they are simply instructions from the Apostle Paul to his apprentices, or descriptions of life in the earliest church.

A description of how the church was arranged in the Greek world is found in Acts. Paul and Barnabas appointed clergy. "Paul and Barnabas appointed elders for them in each church and, with prayer and fasting, committed them to the Lord, in whom they had put their trust." (Acts 14:23). Many Christians argue over the significance of these, and other passages. Christians come to different conclusions over the

witness of the biblical record, usually finding in that record, more to back their particular position than is warranted. But, it can be said, that while there is no command to adopt episcopal polity in the new testament, there is precedent for a type of episcopacy in the new testament. To interpret these passages as depicting a type of episcopacy is, probably, the best interpretation of them. They demonstrate primitive episcopacy in action. This argument, that they depict a primitive episcopacy, is strengthened by the fact that episcopal polity is found to be nearly universal very shortly after the apostolic era. And so, while episcopacy is simply a human arrangement in the church, it seems to have been the normal arrangement since the new testament itself.

THE LUTHERAN CONFESSIONS AND POLITY

Since episcopal polity is a thing that is neither commanded nor forbidden in the bible, Lutherans can have other arrangements. But, what is even a more compelling than the biblical argument with regard to episcopacy, is the position taken by the Lutheran Confessions themselves. While church structure, or polity, is free for Lutherans, it is by no means something that is unimportant. As a matter of fact, Philip Melancthon (with Luther's approval) expressed a very definite opinion with regard to episcopacy in the Apology of the Augsburg Confession. He said, "On this matter [church order] we have given frequent testimony in the assembly to our deep desire to maintain the church polity and various ranks of the ecclesiastical hierarchy, although they were created by human authority.....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....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 future, against the charge that we have undermined the authority of the bishops." (Apology XIV). When Melancthon says that the Lutherans desire to keep the polity and hierarchy of the church, he is referring, of course, to the only polity and hierarchy which existed at that time, the Roman Catholic polity and hierarchy. It might come as a shock to many Missouri Synod Lutherans to learn that it was Luther's and Melancthon's "deep desire," and "earnest desire," to quote the Apology, to keep the hierarchy and polity of episcopacy. And this desire of the Lutheran confessors was not something that was limited or conditioned to the sixteenth century. Melancthon says that this "deep desire," this "willingness" would be their defense against charges of an anti-episcopal attitude for both the "present and future." In the light of the very strong language employed by Melancthon in article XIV of the Apology, it is amazing that the strongly confessional churches of the old Synodical Conference have not formed themselves as episcopacies, nor have they ever seriously considered becoming episcopally ordered.

Article XIV is not the only place episcopacy is addressed. Even beyond the above quotation of article XIV of the Apology, the Lutheran Confessions simply assume episcopacy to be the norm in the church. Article XXVIII of both the Augsburg Confession and the Apology, and part of the Treatise, talk about the proper role of bishops. This sort of discussion is only appropriate if one assumes an episcopal structure.

THE WITNESS OF THE CHURCH'S LIFE AND HISTORY TO POLITY

Episcopacy also has the weight of history behind it. One of the most important arguments for episcopacy is its early and nearly universal appearance in the life of the Christian church. This would lead one to believe that it was not some movement of a particular group in the church, but, in fact, it was the normal development of the structure of the apostolic church. By the time of St. Ignatius (circa A.D. 110), there is a clear three-fold ministry in existence in Asia minor (present day Turkey). By the end of the second century, episcopacy is attested to by Irenaeus and Tertullian in Gaul (France) and Africa. There was an episcopacy in Rome by the middle of the second century.⁽¹⁾ St. Irenaeus in defending the concept of apostolic succession in Rome says, "The blessed apostles, then, having founded and built up the church, committed into the hands of Linus the office of the episcopate."⁽²⁾ One does not have to accept Irenaeus' arguments about apostolic succession nor the primacy of the pope to acknowledge the fact of the existence of the office of bishop in the church well before A.D. 180, when Irenaeus wrote this. The dates here are significant. Ignatius, Irenaeus, Tertullian, and other's are writing in the 100's. The Apostle John

very possibly lived to around the year 100. These men are in very close proximity to the apostles themselves. It would be very hard to believe that all of them would have gone so far wrong. "Nowhere is there evidence of a violent struggle such as would be natural if a divinely ordained congregationalism or presbyterianism were overthrown. The same [episcopal] threefold ministry is seen as universal throughout the early church as soon as there is sufficient evidence to show us the nature of the ministry. The conclusion is drawn that episcopacy is the primitive and rightful form of church government."⁽³⁾ Now, while we, as Lutherans, would not say that episcopal polity is commanded in the new testament, episcopacy's very early and nearly universal appearance in the life of the church lends weight to a reading of the new testament through episcopal lenses. Perhaps not an episcopacy in its fully developed form, but the new testament certainly can be seen to display for us a primitive episcopacy.

From the earliest times, all the way up to the Reformation, episcopacy is practically the only church polity known in east or west. It has a fifteen-hundred-year, universal precedent. That, in and of itself, should cause us to seriously think about why we would reject such a massive historical witness and tradition? Not that we need to adopt many of the false notions about the office of bishop that developed early in the church's life, for example, apostolic succession, but the simple structure of an episcopacy, the office of bishop by human right, has overwhelming support since the very beginning of the church.

And if that is not enough, most Lutheran churches in the sixteenth century maintained and continued the episcopal polity they inherited from the catholic church. All of the Scandinavian countries; Sweden, Denmark, Norway, along with Finland and Iceland maintained and continued episcopal polity, and do so to this day. This was not a compromise with heresy by those countries, but the normal unfolding of the "conservative Reformation" in those countries. Even the German lands within the Holy Roman Empire had a few bishops who came over from the old catholic church.⁽⁴⁾ In those cases, they did not give up their positions, but simply became Lutheran bishops. The "Superintendents" that replaced the Roman Catholic bishops in the German lands carried out the duties of a bishop in many aspects, that is, an evangelical bishop after the precepts laid out in the confessions. If one looks past the unfortunate disaster of "emergency bishops" in Germany, that is, secular rulers functioning as bishops, and the congregationalist-like experiments of America, most of the rest of the Lutheran world has been episcopal in polity since the beginning. And the existence of episcopal polity for Lutherans around the world is even more true today than it was at the time of the Reformation. In Germany today, the Lutheran Churches in most of the various states are headed by bishops. They had always in the past, been headed by superintendents who were functionally bishops, and now they are called bishops once again. "The superintendents, while in many cases not holding the title of bishop until after World War II, certainly carried out the function of this office, although usually on a more limited geographical scale."⁽⁵⁾ And the problem of "emergency bishops" in Germany is gone now. The idea of the secular ruler being the head of the church came to an end with the end of the monarchy in 1918. And the various German states adopted the title "bishop" for their ecclesiastical leaders after the world wars, some after the first, the rest after the second. The title "bishop" or "archbishop" is now used once more in all the Scandinavian lands as well.

Even in America today, most Lutherans have a type of episcopal polity. Of course, by saying that, one means that the ELCA has a type of episcopal polity. I'm not saying that the ELCA's episcopacy, or even that of the German church should be a model for us in all aspects. "Real episcopal authority was diluted by the ELCA's giving quotas confessional standing in choosing its bureaucracy."⁽⁶⁾ But it should be remembered that the title bishop was used long before the ELCA was formed. The ALC began using the term in 1970. The LCA and the AELC started using the term in 1980.⁽⁷⁾ The ELCA was founded in 1988 with episcopal polity and the term "bishop." Though there may be aspects of the ELCA's episcopacy that are not appealing, the simple concept of episcopacy, and the term "bishop" are not discredited.

THE CATHOLICITY OF LUTHERANISM AND POLITY

The monk, Vincent of Lérins, in arguing against Augustine's teachings on grace and predestination said, "in the catholic church itself, all possible care should be taken that we hold that which has been believed

everywhere, always, and by all (*quod ubique, quod semper, quod ab omnibus*)"⁽⁸⁾ Now we, perhaps, would not want to apply this principle the way Vincent did against Augustine, and Rome certainly would like to make much out of this position by Vincent, but as a general "rule of thumb," it is not a bad definition of the term "catholic." The Lutheran reformers upheld this notion of catholicity when they concluded the Augsburg Confession with these words, "...we have related only matters which we have considered it necessary to adduce and mention in order that it may be made very clear that we have introduced nothing, either in doctrine or in ceremonies, that is contrary to Holy Scripture or the universal Christian church."⁽⁹⁾ The English of the Triglotta and Jacobs both follow the Latin and use "Catholic" rather than "universal" here. Nevertheless, the meaning is the same. The Lutheran Church is by definition a catholic church. Again the Augsburg Confession says, "Inasmuch as our churches dissent from the church catholic in no article of faith but only omit some few abuses which are new and have been adopted by the fault of the times..."⁽¹⁰⁾ All three creeds proclaim us to be catholics in spite of modern prejudice against the term, and the obsolete and thoroughly confusing use of a fifteenth century German idiom in our modern English hymnals, that is, the word "Christian" substituted for the original "catholic" (TLH and LW). For as misleading as the term "Christian" in the creeds is, in our modern context, we ought to go back to doing the mass in Latin.

The concept of catholicity is indispensable to Lutheran theology. It is necessary to believe that the Holy Spirit works in and through the creation. That He has been working through the church in the history of the world. Sometimes in larger, and sometimes in smaller streams, the true church of Christ has remained and continues to live. Sometimes there has only been a small remnant, but the true church has always existed in history. This is a particular view of salvation history, one of continuity. If this continuity is not true, then one must wonder whether Christ's words about the gates of hell not prevailing over the church are true? If there is no living continuity in the church, how shall we know where the true church is? Shall we begin to look for miraculous signs to identify the church, to see where it has popped up in this generation? If the Holy Spirit abandons creation for certain periods of time, that is, the world is without the true church, then can we be sure that He is working for our salvation today? Can we be sure He works in the water of baptism, or the elements of the Eucharist. Has the Holy Spirit tied Himself to this world, and to the tangible elements of this world or not? Or can we never be sure if the church exists, or where grace can be found? Perhaps the Jehovah's Witness's are right, or the Gnostics, or the Arians. No, God does inhabit His church. There is a living tradition in the church that does not contradict the gospel. We should remain in the broad stream of the church catholic as much as is possible.

Even if the church is but a remnant, the church must continue the teaching of Christ and the apostles until Christ's return. Continuity with all ages of the church is vital to the stability of the faith and to the strengthening of the doctrines of the incarnation, the sacraments, the church, and office of the ministry. If Lutherans are just a bunch of discontented, drunken Germans and Swedes turned into a denomination, then there is no valid reason for its existence. If we can't claim continuity with the apostles, then are we teaching new doctrines, practicing new ceremonies? The Book of Concord answers the question clearly. It proclaims the Lutheran Church to be the continuing catholic church in its purity, and Rome a distorted and error ridden caricature of catholicism. But Lutherans have long since forgotten this perspective. While Rome fatally diverged from apostolic and catholic teaching in many ways (especially regarding justification), it has maintained much that is catholic in its worship and piety and polity. Lutherans, meanwhile, have used the idea of adiaphora (things neither commanded nor forbidden in scripture) to avoid all things catholic. In popular thinking, being Lutheran is to be anti-catholic. I would argue that if one does not see one's self as a catholic, consciously, then one is not a Lutheran. One may be a generic Protestant, an anti-Roman Catholic, but not a Lutheran. Our creeds and our confessions demand that we be conscious catholics. And by that standard, how many Lutherans are there in the world?

AN EVANGELICAL BISHOP

In Germany, "The chief function of the superintendent was the supervision of the doctrine and life of the pastors, their education and examination, and the overall care of the congregations."⁽¹¹⁾ Luther himself

gives guidance in his 1528 *Instructions for the Visitors of Parish Pastors in Electoral Saxony*. He says, "This pastor (Pfarrherr) shall be superintendent of all the other priests who have their parish or benefice in the region, whether they live in monasteries or foundations of nobles or of others. He shall make sure that in these parishes there is correct Christian teaching, that the Word of God and the holy gospel are truly and purely proclaimed, and that the holy sacraments according to the institution of Christ are provided to the blessing of the people. The preachers are to exemplify a good life so that the people take no offence but better their own lives. They are not to teach or preach anything that is contrary to the Word of God or that contributes to rebellion against the government. If one or more of the pastors or preachers is guilty of error in this or that respect, the superintendent shall call to himself those concerned and have them abstain from it, but also carefully instruct them wherein they are guilty and have erred either in commission or omission, either in doctrine or in life."⁽¹²⁾

The Lutheran Confessions, however, don't say a great deal about episcopal polity because its existence was not a matter of dispute. The office of oversight was a normal part of the church. What is addressed in the confessions, are the abuses that the contemporary Roman bishops were engaged in. From certain responses to abuses found in the confessions, we can get some ideas as to what an Evangelical Lutheran bishop looks like. Augsburg Confession, article 28 clearly teaches that ecclesiastical authority and civil authority ought to be clearly distinguished. It also teaches that bishops, like all clergy, have the power of the keys, that is, the power "to preach the Gospel, to forgive and retain sins, and to administer and distribute the sacraments."⁽¹³⁾ And once again article 28 says, "According to divine right, therefore, it is the office of the bishop to preach the Gospel, forgive sins, judge doctrine and condemn doctrine that is contrary to the Gospel, and exclude from the Christian community the ungodly whose wicked conduct is manifest."⁽¹⁴⁾ Once again, this is no different than parish pastors, bishops are part of the one office of the ministry, but by human arrangement they supervise other clergy. However, note the power that is given to all clergy, parish pastors or bishops in article 28, the authority to excommunicate. Contrary to some popular opinion, it is not a power given to the voter's assembly. The Apology says, "We like the old division of power into the power of the order and the power of jurisdiction. Therefore a bishop has the power of the order, namely, the ministry of Word and sacraments. He also has the power of jurisdiction, namely, the authority to excommunicate those who are guilty of public offenses or to absolve them if they are converted and ask for absolution."⁽¹⁵⁾ And the Augustana acknowledges that that power is by divine right, "On this account parish ministers [Pfarrleute] and churches are bound to be obedient to the bishops according to the saying of Christ in Luke 10:16, "He who hears you hears me."⁽¹⁶⁾ Those who would oppose this sort of clerical authority might cite Matthew 18:17 as giving power of excommunication to the voters, "If he [your brother] refuses to listen to them [one or two other brothers], tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector." Anti-clerical Lutherans assume that the congregation, presumably in a voter's assembly, retains the authority to exercise the keys. But the passage does not teach any such thing. The pastor still exercises the keys for the congregation. And as Lutherans, we acknowledge that it is only those who are regularly called who exercise the keys as officers of the church.

I am not advocating for an all powerful clergy. An Evangelical bishop does not have arbitrary power. Over and over again in the Confessions it is stated that a bishop is to be disobeyed if he institutes or commands anything that is "contrary" to the gospel. This supreme loyalty to the word of God prevents an Evangelical bishop from having as much power as a Roman bishop, but also prevents corrupting power to a certain extent. The institutional church can never be the ultimate loyalty for an Evangelical bishop.

The word "contrary" in the confessions is important, in that warnings in the confessions against unscriptural bishops do not mean that bishops must be bound only to specific commands in scripture, the warnings are against bishops who teach "contrary" to the scriptures. Bishops still have authority in adiaphora. Article 28 of the Augustana says, "What are we to say, then, about Sunday and other similar church ordinances and ceremonies? To this our teachers reply that bishops or pastors may make regulations so that everything in the churches is done in good order,...It is proper for the Christian assembly to keep such ordinances for the sake of love and peace, to be obedient to the bishops and parish

ministers [Pfarrherren] in such matters,"⁽¹⁷⁾ As we can see, the Confessions don't give any specific powers by divine right to bishops. Bishops and parish pastors have by divine right the same office. A church simply agrees to give a supervisory role to some pastors. The Smalcald Articles concede ordination and confirmation to bishops out of tradition, but not of necessity.⁽¹⁸⁾

THE MOTIVATING ISSUES

One might ask why I am so strenuously arguing for episcopacy? What's the real gripe? What's the real problem that brings this issue to the surface? After all, Missouri Synod district presidents already function as bishops in many ways. They do oversee placement of pastors in congregations, they even make the placements themselves for candidates directly out of seminary. They do oversee ordinations, and often ordain candidates themselves. Theoretically, they are supposed to oversee the spiritual life of the congregations in their district, although it is hard to see how that is possible given the size of the current districts. And perhaps many district presidents regret that situation as well. The real issue, the unacceptable situation, is the utter lack of clerical authority in the congregation. Pastors who are honest will admit this is a real problem. Parish pastors are essentially hired employees of the congregation. All the protestation from certain scholars and pastors that this anti-clericalism is not really the Missouri Synod model is useless, it is still the fact in real life. In far too many circumstances the parish pastor cannot be a spiritual father to his flock because he cannot give them medicine they need, but don't want. Congregational autonomy from the district and the synod, even the pay structure for clergy has a devastating impact on the ability of the pastor to do his job effectively. Pastors cannot be helped by district presidents whose positions are advisory, and pastors are too beholden to the sensibilities of the congregation which might cut off his salary at any time. Though many congregations would not do this, there are sadly too many that would. Pastors are constantly told catechesis is the answer. Education is the key to success and happiness, as if the only problem is a lack of knowledge in the church. Once the people know what is correct they will choose it. It seems as if we have abolished the concept of sin. The word "catechesis" is spoken of as if it were an almost magical word. But, if all the pastor has is catechesis, he can always be dismissed as a "flake." "That's just his opinion" is what will be heard from many corners. In the current Missouri Synod system of polity the parish pastor is on his own. The district president is merely advisory. The real issue is pastoral authority, not the ability to tyrannize, but the ability to do what is right even if it is unpopular. Is a local congregation under the authority of their parish pastor and their bishop, or are they an autonomous voter's assembly? Given the current system in the Missouri Synod, a parish pastor far too often must either give the people what they want, or become a master manipulator. Neither are desirable characteristics for a pastor. What virtue is their in a system which forces a pastor to fight for his clerical life because he wants to institute weekly communion? Such a pastor must have an authoritative bishop behind him. I am not arguing here for the ability to tyrannize the laity. I am simply arguing for the ability to be a real shepherd, a real spiritual father. To do the right thing by the sheep even when they don't like it. Any father would do what was best for his children even when they complained about it. Think of the absurdity of it, if a father had to rely on simple catechesis to get his children not to stay up until midnight, or eat candy for breakfast, lunch, and dinner.

Anti-authoritarianism is a particular problem for Americans. Americans are used to voting for, or choosing everything. They've grown up with that world view. It is in the air they breath, and the water they drink. And Americans have an amazingly naive confidence in their own ability to perceive reality clearly and make the right decisions. They are used to being in control, controlling their futures, their finances, the natural world around them, and especially their choices with regard to consumer goods. One might say Americans are consumers. And this consumer mentality unconsciously extends even to God Himself. Many Americans construct their god out of their consumer preferences. They will not accept anything undesirable in their god. They want God to be the way they expect Him to be. They want Him to be in line with their sensibilities. Americans don't want a sovereign God any more than they want a sovereign king. And they don't want a church that makes them conform their consumer preferences to something outside of themselves, an objective standard. But this is precisely what the American

consumer needs. He needs one place that does not bow to his will, one place where the customer isn't always right. One place where he can learn obedience to a higher will, to knock down the self and conform the self to Christ. Episcopacy helps in learning that lesson. It helps to remind us that not everything is in our power, in our control. We cannot choose everything in our lives. Thomas à Kempis wrote beautifully concerning obedience;

It is a very great thing to obey, to live under a superior and not to be one's own master, for it is much safer to be subject than it is to command. Many live in obedience more from necessity than from love. Such become discontented and dejected on the slightest pretext; they will never gain peace of mind unless they subject themselves whole-heartedly for the love of God.

Go where you may, you will find no rest except in humble obedience to the rule of authority. Dreams of happiness expected from change and different places have deceived many.⁽¹⁹⁾

I find obedience and subjection as hard as the next man. I don't claim to have perfected it, but an episcopal polity in the church more readily helps us learn those virtues. They are virtues sorely needed in our church.

THE CULTURE OF PIETY: *BEING CHURCHLY*

And beyond the structure, the nuts and bolts of episcopacy, we should want the traditional trappings, the packaging of episcopacy. Why should we use terms like "bishop" and "archbishop?" Because these are recognized "churchly" terms. Everyone knows that a "bishop" is the head of a church. "President" is not specifically churchly, for example, news paper reporters, when reporting about the Missouri Synod, have to explain to their readers what "president" means. They say things like "president, that is, what other churches would call bishops." The term "bishop" is churchly and recognizable, "presidents" are heads of governments or corporations or civic clubs. If we want to cultivate a churchly or pious environment, then we ought to start talking like churchmen rather than corporate executives. One of the greatest problems we face in the church today is the secularization of the minds and hearts of Christians. When the church looks and sounds and acts more like the secular world, things will go very badly. We need to create and nurture a churchly, an otherworldly environment within the church. We need bishops and archbishops with miters and croziers. We need leaders who look and speak and think in "other-worldly" ways. Bishops who are unashamedly ecclesial, not self conscious about wearing this or that, or fearful that they might look too "stuffy." Being overtly and consciously churchly is not a vice. It is comforting and assuring. Anglican and Roman bishops are not hypocrites because they look and act the part. They are doing their jobs. On one level we are all hypocrites and pretend to be more than we are. Even the Amish can turn plainness into pride. We need bishops who are experts in doctrine, prayer, and worship. Perhaps if we had bishops, we too might look and sound a bit more sacred, a bit more churchly. And perhaps, if we as a church, looked the part and sounded the part, we might start to act the part as well.

One can always hear the protests from the expected sources whenever anyone advocates episcopacy. "If you establish bishops, they will start acting like bishops." Presumably "acting like a bishop" is a bad thing. There is a great fear of episcopal authority. Could men with episcopal powers eventually corrupt and pervert an orthodox church body? Yes. Is it almost an inevitability? If history is any indicator, yes. It does seem as if every church body in the history of the world has run its course from original purity to organizational corruption. But episcopacy will not do that any faster than any other form of government. It seems as if there is an unspoken assumption within the Missouri Synod, that decentralized polity is the magic formula that will keep any church organization sound and healthy. The assumption is, liberal and unfaithful clergy will lead us down the path to ruin, but highly democratic forms of government will preserve us safe and sound. We seem to have very little confidence in our clergy (rightly or wrongly), and a lot of confidence in democracy. That can't bode well for the church.

CONCLUSION

"More Christians accept episcopacy than any other form of church government."⁽²⁰⁾ Episcopacy is the historic polity of the church, and the most widely accepted polity around the world. It is catholic. And this is perhaps the greatest argument for the adoption of episcopacy. It is the catholic thing to do. And as catholics it should be the thing we want to do. Are we catholics as we confess each Sunday in our creeds? It seems that the decisive factor in the hearts and minds of individual Lutherans is; how seriously they take their confession of being catholic in the creeds. Does one really wish to be catholic? Does one really wish to embrace, as much as is possible, the entire history of the church? Does one really wish to be, as much as is theologically possible, in harmony with the church around the world today? Of course, we must reject the errors of Rome, but since we are catholics, shouldn't we wish to reject only that which we absolutely have to? If one really takes being a catholic seriously, then episcopacy seems to be impossible to reject. Any episcopacy that a Lutheran adopts must be a true, Evangelical episcopacy, but an episcopacy nonetheless. We perhaps need to ask ourselves what our real identity is? What is the principle that forms our identity? Is it being an American, being a "Protestant," or being a catholic? I think this question will ultimately decide whether American Lutherans adopt episcopal polity. There is certainly more than enough reason to adopt episcopacy. Time will tell.

What are the most important reasons for adopting episcopal polity?

- 1) It is the catholic thing to do. If we are truly catholic then we will not ignore or reject something that the church catholic has done practically for its entire existence. Can one even truly be a Lutheran and not a catholic?

- 2) It is the confessional thing to do. The Lutheran Confessions do not demand episcopal polity, but they do assume it, and the confessors express there "earnest desire," and "deep desire to maintain the church polity and various ranks of the ecclesiastical hierarchy." This clear preference of the confessors of Augsburg ought to have the greatest weight upon the issue of episcopal polity.

- 3) The new testament seems to imply a primitive episcopal polity, at least in the Greek world in which St. Paul worked. The new testament commands no particular form of church polity, but it does give legitimacy to the form that soon became the norm in the church.

- 4) There is a great need among Christians to learn the virtues of obedience to authority generally, and clerical authority in particular. In a culture dominated by liberty and independence, submission is not an easy virtue to develop, but it is absolutely essential for a healthy church.

- 5) An episcopacy, with all the trappings that go with it, is a more recognizably sacred arrangement to the world at large, and probably, at least sub-consciously, among Missouri Synod Lutherans. If we are going to be a pious, "churchly" church body, we need to start looking and sounding the part.

END NOTES

1. Ivar Asheim and Victor R. Gold, eds., *Episcopacy in the Lutheran Church: Studies in the Development*

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