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Theological Observer

NEO-DONATISM OR NEO-DOCETISM?

Church history is replete with well-intentioned responses to theological issues. On occasion, however, such responses appear to assume (before argument) that contemporary issues are mere reappearances of old issues and that therefore a simple repetition of old formulae suffices to answer the demands of the present. The genius of an Athanasius, an Augustine, and a Luther was that they did not evaluate the demands of their times on the basis of the menu of past history, but analyzed clearly the challenge to orthodoxy in its own terms and were able to forge fresh yet necessary elaborations to the church's confession precisely to defend and to maintain that confession. Athanasius' insistence on the *homoousios*, although held by many to be a dangerous novelty, was in time recognized to be necessary for the church's doctrine of God. Augustine's doctrine of original sin, again although held by many to be a dangerous novelty, came to be recognized as required for the church's doctrine of grace. Similarly, Luther would have proved ineffectual had he in the face of Zwingli's spiritualization of the Lord's Supper and Rome's depreciation of justifying faith merely restated the christology of Chalcedon. Rather, he appropriated scriptural truth afresh and in doing so was recipient of all sorts of nasty appellations. He was to Rome a "boar in God's vineyard"; to Zwingli he was a monophysite.

With this in mind it was disappointing to find TM ("Theological Observer," *Concordia Journal*, January 1990, pp. 2-3) raising the specter of "Neo-Donatism" in the light of incipient inquiry concerning the reality or validity of sacraments dispensed by women "pastors." TM writes that "some of the Synod's theologians" are using a "fallacious Roman Catholic argument" against the ordination of women, that argument being that the sacraments performed [sic] by a woman pastor are not valid sacraments. Now what, according to TM, is Roman Catholic about this argumentation is this, that it "makes the validity of a Sacrament or absolution depend on the administrator's status of being ordained" or that it ties validity to "the moral character of the administrator or the recipient, or to the office of the administrator." This, we are told, is Donatism, and TM directs us to a number of Luther texts which clearly reject Donatism. We might add the explicit rejection of Donatism in Augustana VIII.

Now if there are some theologians in the synod who are maintaining that the validity of sacraments depends upon the holiness of any person (even a female “pastor”) or upon the ordination of any person (what TM agrees to call “cultic holiness”), then we shall certainly join him in his plea for such theologians to think again. However, among those who are beginning to inquire about the validity-reality of sacraments administered by women “pastors” we know of *no one* who, in fact, holds to such Donatistic notions. Here we must simply ask whether TM has taken the necessary effort to analyze fully the implications of the theological understandings which motivate the urge toward the ordination of women and whether TM has reflected about the implications for the doctrines of the church and the sacraments when a church body advocates and regularizes a practice which is contrary to the apostolic word. Is it really sufficient to say, as true as it is, that church bodies that have established female “pastorates” are “living in the midst of dangers involved in disobedience to God’s Word and have decisions to make about testifying to the truth?”

TM adduces Luther texts which reject the Roman *ex opere operato* because it rests upon a false view of the power of priestly consecration. Yet the emphasis of TM on the “power of the Word” can also move in the direction of *ex opere operato* if that word is shorn of all ecclesial and confessional content. Does TM wish to suggest that the mere form of a rite, spoken by anyone, spoken in any context, effects a sacrament? Does the word, disembodied of time and space, effect a sacrament? Do, for instance, the Mormons have the sacrament even though they may correctly mouth the instituting words? Do we really wish to imply that church bodies, ashamed of the trinitarian names, who modalistically substitute actions (creator, redeemer, sanctifier) for the personal designations, possess valid baptisms merely because of the “power of the Word”? Is not this something more than sin? Is it not the absence of *the* faith and therefore the absence of faith? Is not to abstract the word’s power and efficacy from the institutions of Christ and from the church which in creed and worship speaks of God as He has spoken to us to begin to press toward a magical understanding of the divine word? To provide an analogous point, would we wish to assert that because of the word’s power two homosexuals or two lesbians in fact and truth are married before God

(what God has joined together!)? Is it not rather that homosexual or lesbian marriage is uneffected *because* the institution of God has been overthrown? Here not a mere disobedience to a divine command nor a failure rightly to testify to the truth, but an actual thwarting of God's effecting word results from the failure to hold upright the institution of God and the reality to which that institution gives voice. The mere use of the (correct) sacramental formulae does not absolutely guarantee that Christ's institution is present.

It is disappointing, then, that TM does not take some note of the repetitiveness with which Luther, within the very texts to which TM refers, speaks of the sacraments as "caused by Christ's ordinance, command, and institution" (e.g., *LW*, 38, pp. 199ff.). Hence, the sacraments belong not to us but to Christ, "for He has ordained all this and left it behind as a legacy in the church to be exercised and used to the end of the world." And then comes this statement: "however, if we alter it or improve on it, then it is invalid and Christ is no longer present, nor is His ordinance." And it is in this very context that Luther uses the hypothetical case of the devil assuming the form of a man and by stealth having himself called to the office of the ministry and then publicly preaching and administering according to the command of Christ. Are such acts valid? Yes! But they are valid because all this was done according to the command of Christ. But what if all this had not been done according to the command of Christ? What if the devil had taken the form of a woman and had baptised in the name of the Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier? Would then those sacramental acts of the devil have been valid, that is, sacraments at all? We do not have on this a word of Luther to answer such a question, since he did not face the question in this form. But this is indeed the very point raised by our own contemporary ecclesiological situation. It is *not* a question of a person's holiness or of intrinsic powers of the consecrated priest. It is, however, a question of Christ's command and ordinance and, today, whether that command and ordinance implies and connotes the apostolic prohibition of female ministers. Now this question does not simply go away by raising the specter of "Neo-Donatism." To apply that bit of church history is, we suggest, simply to misread the actual question of the day and has the unfortunate effect of suppressing meaningful discussion by casting (unwarranted)

aspersions upon the doctrinal rectitude of those who are attempting to come to serious terms with our day.

But we wish also to raise the question of whether the Bible does not itself give an indication that the maleness of the officiant at the altar is to be understood as implied and connoted in the command and ordinance of Christ. Despite cultural contexts in which priestesses were a commonplace (Canaan, for example), Israel displayed exclusively a male priesthood. So too the maleness of Christ is prophetically envisioned already in the great messianic promises (from the very beginning; see Genesis 3:15): in the priest after the order of Melchizedek (Psalm 110), in the prophet like Moses (Deuteronomy 18:15-18), and in the son of David (2 Samuel 7). This biblical pattern was followed by Christ Himself in the choosing of the twelve apostles (and Paul) and has been faithfully followed also by the church for two millennia as men only were called into the office of bishop and pastor. Is it not required in the present situation to inquire whether this consistent practice, witnessed throughout the Scriptures, has some natural and organic connection to the thoroughgoing use of masculine names and images for God (which, of course, are themselves up "for grabs" in some circles)? Are masculine words of a wholly distinct order of representation from that of persons who publicly and on behalf of all represent God's Word, Jesus Christ, who was incarnated in, yes, male humanity? If the specific language of God's revelation and if the concrete and particular forms by which the Word of God has taken representation are regarded as merely incidental rather than central to our knowledge of who God is and what He is like for us, then there may well be a greater danger of neo-docetism than of neo-donatism.

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