

LOGIA Forum

SHORT STUDIES AND COMMENTARY

TWENTIETH-CENTURY INDULGENCES

Indulgence is no substitute for forgiveness. That the two are not synonymous was becoming apparent by 1517. While it had not become altogether clear in his expression at that early date, Luther complained about sins being “indulged” rather than being borne. He came later to make even more explicit the distinction between indulgence and forgiveness.

By the time of the Apology of the Augsburg Confession, a clarification about indulgences was made, “But that eternal punishments are not remitted except on account of the compensation rendered by certain traditions or by purgatory, Scripture does not teach. Indulgences were formerly remission of these public observances, so that men should not be excessively burdened. But if, by human authority, satisfactions and punishments can be remitted, this compensation, therefore, is not necessary by divine Law; for a divine Law is not annulled by human authority. Furthermore, since the custom has now of itself become obsolete, and the bishops have passed by it in silence, there is no necessity for these remissions. And yet the name *indulgences* remained. And just as satisfactions were understood not with reference to the compensation of punishment, so indulgences were incorrectly understood to free souls from purgatory” (Ap VI, 78).

Unsatisfactory, perhaps—but indulgences have not altogether disappeared nearly five hundred years later. Shades of Johann Tetzel echoing his jingles still cause coins to ring in coffers with the promise of indulgence. People who imagine their sins are not so weighty as to condemn them are prone to

believe the preachments of those who claim to relieve them from a temporal purgatory, albeit in this life. They resonate with those who create services weekly for them whenever they prefer to indulge themselves rather than to seek forgiveness. There are so many consumers with cash gifts in hand to pay for these twentieth-century indulgences that the Sistine chapel could be recreated and furnished several times over.

In the matter of indulgences, the Reformation presses on. It will continue to do so as long as the sinful nature, turned inward on itself, seeks indulgence rather than forgiveness.

JAB

ECUMENICAL COUNCIL FOR PRACTICAL CHRISTIANITY

A sermon by Hermann Sasse originally printed in Law and Gospel (December 1936), translated by David Scaer.

The question of the law and the gospel was one of those important issues which disrupted the unity of the western church in the sixteenth century. Luther had again and again claimed that the inability to distinguish the law from the gospel was at that time the real and most serious problem of the Roman Church and its theology. How the law and the gospel were to be divided was not only decisive in bringing about the eventual separation of the Church of the Reformation from the papacy, but more significantly, how this question was to be resolved has, since the Reformation, prevented Protestant churches from attaining organizational unity among themselves.

Certainly the important differences on social ethics as they surfaced at the World Conference of Churches in Stockholm cannot be merely be understood as theoretical differences among scholars on how the Reformation period should be interpreted. With so many different interpretations afloat of what is meant by the word *gospel*, it becomes clear that the old controversy on how the law and gospel should be defined is still an unresolved problem.

No real progress has been made since the 1500s. Matters at the Stockholm conference came to a head in responses made by two clerics to two sermons which had been preached there.

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An American theologian did not mince words in saying in public that the sermon delivered by Bishop Ihmels was the most unchristian one he had ever heard. A German theologian responded in like kind to a sermon delivered by Bishop of Winchester. Lurking behind this locking of horns was the old controversy of what is meant by the law and the gospel. Any attempted consensus in resolving the conflict would not only have to serve as a formal basis for a working unity among the churches, but would have to affect the public posture of the churches individually. A formal doctrinal agreement among the churches would require an agreement in church practice.

From the very beginning I want to be up front in what my intentions are. The following propositions make no claim to lay down that kind of a basis for the consensus which is needed to resolve this problem. It does not lay down the foundation for unity. Quite to the contrary, I am calling for an examination of what issues are really at stake. By focusing on foundational questions, I propose to set forth a basis of examining the old question of the relationship between the law and the gospel in proper perspective. My purpose will be achieved if this whole matter is publicly discussed and leads to a productive exchange of ideas.

Since the time when the church entered the stream of history, it has appeared to the world as a complicated enigma, a riddle without a solution. Here are some of the questions. What is the distinct character of the church of Jesus Christ? What place does it occupy in history? How can the church's claims be rationalized and what are proper responses to them? At what point can the question of what the church is be broached? Government officials in every country and state where the church is found have to face the question of what the church is. We are not the first ones to ask these questions. Since the time of Justin and Clement, of Celsus and Porphyry, philosophers have had to face them. Various modern scholarly disciplines, including historical research, psychology, sociology, and the scientific study of religion [*Religionswissenschaft*], have examined the phenomena associated with the church in an attempt to provide a definition.

So far no government has found an answer to the question of what the church is, and it seems unlikely that any scientific discipline will have more success. "Their conclusions in defining the church conflict with each other." What is the reason for their failing to come up with an answer? The answer obviously lies in the simple fact that there are no real analogous organizations which can serve as a standard or norm by which the church can be compared. Since comparisons are necessary in making definitions, it is impossible to define the church. The discipline of comparative religions, as the name indicates, compares the church with other religions. Its claims for revelation can be placed alongside the beliefs and teachings of the other great world religions. The methods used in the history of religions and sociology can be used in placing the earliest forms of Christianity alongside Hellenistic gnostic cults.

This can be expanded to make other comparisons. A catholic church in its development can be compared with the "people" of Islam. The same can be done between the social

culture of the Christian history of religion [*Sozialbildungen der christlichen Religionsgeschichte*] with the corresponding Asiatic world religions which appeared at that time. Recognizable parallels are easy to come by. It takes a bit of daring to take standards of the school of the history of religions, which are so obviously human conceptions, and then to use them in examining the phenomena associated with the church.

At first glance such a scholarly approach holds out the promise of providing a definition of the church and what its essence is. This approach promises to deliver more than it actually does and soon proves to be deceptive. While for some phenomena connected with Christianity, some parallels can be found, for others there is neither an explanation nor a comparison. In what is beyond explanation, where there are no parallels in the history of religion (comparative religions) or in how religious associations are structured, the mystery of the church's essence is hidden. One way out of the dilemma of explaining why the unique phenomena of the church are beyond explanation is to take refuge in the Latin axiom "*Individuum est ineffabile*" ("What is distinctive or unique is beyond definition").

Unique individuality is not uncommon to history. This still leaves the problem by finding an answer for an historical definition, since the unique individuality of something living—like the church—cannot be so easily explained. Florenski once said that the inability to come to a definition of what the church is demonstrates its living character. Looking for the answer of what makes the church the church simply goes beyond the limits of the scientific study of the history of religions and examining the structure of other human organizations. It must be conceded from the start that if the church is constituted by what its members believe, its rituals, and its organizational structure, then the church should be studied along with other religious organizations who also have statements of what they believe and rituals.

This approach leads to only one conclusion: the church's essence is then not really distinctive. In this case the Christian church is only a peculiar or idiosyncratic historical phenomenon, as defined by the history of religions. But another such phenomenon resembling the church simply does not exist. The church has no parallels. There are no Jewish, Parsees (followers of Soroaster), Manichean, Mohammedan, or Buddhist churches. There is no church of Mithra. For the church is the body of Christ. She is not only called, but really is the body of Christ; she is the people of God in the same way that she is temple of the Holy Spirit. There is no such thing as the body of Mohammed or of Buddha, or a body of Serpis or Mithra. Only under the presupposition that Jesus Christ is really the Son of God, who for the sake of us men and for our salvation came down from heaven and was really made man, can the church be the church. The church is church only because what the ancient creed says about the person of Jesus Christ, his birth, his death, his resurrection, and his ascension, is really true. If all these things were not true, or to drag up an old saying, these things are no more or less significant than any other good story.

In this case the church, as we understand it, simply does not exist. The church has no other response for explaining the rea-

son for the world's failure to understand what she really is than by pointing out that the world does not believe in Christ. What the church believes about herself is dependent on what she believes about Jesus. If non-Christians know nothing of the reality of the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, how could they possibly recognize his actual and personal presence in the world through the church? Does the church have a way of proclaiming the mystery of her existence in the world other than by proclaiming the presence of her exalted Lord? What the church is can only be done by confessing Christ. Woe to the church that seeks a way other than confessing Christ to gain the world's attention.

THE NEW SEGREGATION

Didn't our parents raised us to understand that all races are equal? Those delegates who hold this conviction voted against the resolution at the 1995 Synodical Convention to restructure the Commission for Black Ministry into a separate standing Board for Black Ministry (which has an altogether different agenda from the Board for Colored Missions once known in our church).

This resolution for the empowerment of a board was defeated in the first round, but was brought up a second time with the appeal and intimation that some injustice had been committed—in particular, that Robert Clancy had not had the chance to speak in favor of the resolution. In the discussion that ensued, the concern was raised time and again that we did not want the synod splintered into so many special interest groups, each with its own sectarian style of worship, separate hymnal, and distinct beliefs. We would rather see commissions and groups working together so that we could come to a common agreement, united in heart, mind, and voice. Nevertheless, a second vote overturned the first, and now the trouble that we feared is coming to pass.

There is a Black Lutheranism being promoted in the LCMS that does as much injustice to African Americans as it does to Lutheranism. Proponents of this movement in St. Louis, Fort Wayne, and elsewhere are promoting a hymnal, a style of worship, and revivals that only further divide us, obscuring law and gospel.

Can there really be such a thing as "Black Lutheranism"? The Christianity that many enslaved African nobles came to know here in the land of their abuse was that of the Methodists and Baptists. Mixed with the views of the holiness movements that had their roots in these reformed theologies, these persecuted people from another continent became enslaved twice over. Not only were they stolen from their homeland and cruelly subjugated to harsh treatment; they were also exposed to the kind of religion that does a greater violence to one's soul, enslaving it under the obedience of the law.

There were, however, committed confessional African American Lutherans like Rosa J. Young. In her autobiography, *Light in the Dark Belt*, she wrote about difficult times for the school she had begun and the help she found: "In the fall of 1914, when the time came to open our school, things looked

very dark. Business was dull, and World War I had broken out. The enrollment in the school fell, and we were obliged to dismiss one of our teachers. The people had very little cash. We were obliged to accept farm products in payment of tuition. These I had hauled to Camden and sold for what I could get in order to secure money with which to pay our teachers in part. We fell so far behind in paying salaries that our music teacher was compelled to resign at Christmas."

Rosa had been turned down time and again for assistance. Things looked very bleak. She thought she would have to close the school, but wanted to give it one more try: "That night when I returned home, I prayed and prayed and prayed. Then I decided that I would write one more letter and if no relief came then, I would close the school. Now that letter was to go to Dr. Booker T. Washington, our great leader. I wrote Dr. Washington that I felt that he had as much as he could look after in the operation of the Tuskegee Institute; all, therefore, that I asked of him was to give me the names of some individual or association in the North that he thought would help me keep my school alive. The next day I mailed my letter, and then I prayed and waited for an answer.

"At last, one day a letter came from Tuskegee Institute signed by Booker T. Washington himself. In this letter he told me he was unable to help me in the least; but he would advise me to write to the Board of Colored Missions of the Lutheran Church. He said they were doing more for the colored race than any other denomination he knew of. He liked them because of the religious training which they were giving the colored people. He gave me the address of Rev. Christopher F. Drewes."

Rosa expressed her love for Lutheran hymnody and Luther's Catechism. She abandoned the kind of worship for which black boards and convocations are now clamoring, even when it meant that she had a hard time getting something to eat or finding a place to sleep. Rosa was ostracized for being Lutheran, but she never tried to make Lutheran revivals so that African Americans would feel more comfortable with worship. What would she have said to promoting a Black Lutheran hymnal and a non-geographical black district that took on the forms and styles of those who persecuted her?

What a disservice "Black" Lutheranism renders the gospel! It promotes a rift between the members of our synod, instigating devilish tricks of setting one race against another with innuendoes and inflammatory language, parading words like "power" and "rights." Spin doctors twist the historical liturgy into a semblance of white Aryan oppression, rather than consider its true roots, parts of which actually have their origin in North Africa. It is a fallacy of the worst order to advance the idea that a particular race has a monolithic view or style of worship and that certain styles of worship are oppressive on the basis of their ethnic origin.

Those who tout the Black hymnal and a Black non-geographical district are not speaking gospel words that build people together, live in forgiveness, and soothe the troubled soul. Rather, they are the words of exclusivistic separatism. Are we not indeed seeing the political advancement of a "Black Lutheranism" that is simply a repackaging of the kind of self-actualization theological aggrandizement of feminism, libera-