

Thank You

To all who have expressed condolences for my father's passing, Thank you. My family and I appreciate your prayers

One of the sad things about moving my blog from coldfusion to WordPress was losing the dozens and dozens of comments that people left. Some of them were theological in nature, but many were personal. I especially missed the kind words that people left after my father died. So to the many who expressed your condolences, thanks once again. Two years later (I post this on February 4, 2009), it still means a lot.

Bill Witt

Some Basic Theological Principles

- 1) The starting point of theology is faith seeking understanding, not understanding seeking faith.
- 2) Current theological disagreements must be addressed theologically, not in terms of alien criteria, whether those criteria be philosophical, political or sociological.
- 3) In the current theological crisis, the fundamental theological division has to do with the doctrine of the atonement. Specifically, is the person and work of Jesus Christ constitutive of a salvation that can be found nowhere else, and, accordingly, are the Scriptures as the authoritative witness to that salvation constitutive for our understanding of that salvation, or, conversely, are the

person and work of Jesus Christ illustrative of a salvation that can be found elsewhere (or perhaps everywhere) as well, and the Scriptures accordingly illustrative of such a generally available salvation, and thus correctable in the light of it?<more/>

4) Reality is prior to the word, not the word to reality (Hilary of Poitiers). Put differently, the extra nos precedes the pro me.

5) Scripture is inherently referential, and points beyond itself to its inherently intelligible subject matter. The principle of Christological subversion means that the meaning of the metaphors and narratives of Scripture must be interpreted in light of the subject matter to which they refer, and not in light of the normal common sense meaning of the terms. So, for example, the word "Father" as applied to God is not to be understood in terms of a general meaning of the term "Father" as it might have been used in ancient Near Eastern patriarchal culture, or in light of its contemporary usage, but in light of how Jesus used Father to refer to God in his relation as Son. Similarly, the notion of God as judge is to be understood in the light of the cross of Jesus, rather than in terms of broad forensic categories. In the person of Jesus, God takes on our judgment in the cross.

6) God is in Himself Who He is in His revelation. Accordingly, if God has revealed himself as Father, Son and Holy Spirit in the history of Israel, Jesus Christ and the apostolic Church, then God must be Triune in himself.

7) Theology derives its intelligibility from the inherent intelligibility of its subject matter, which is witnessed to in the canonical Scriptures. Accordingly, the Scriptures are not merely materially but formally sufficient for salvation.

8) On the question of doctrinal development, the fundamental choice is between Newman's and Barth's understanding of the

doctrine of the Trinity. The issue of continuity between (1) God's revelation in the history of Israel, Christ, the apostolic Church; (2) the canonical Scriptures; and (3) the post-apostolic Church, must be decided theologically, in terms of the inherent intelligibility of the subject matter of revelation, not by alien philosophical criteria rooted in such historical conundrums as the relation between the one and the many, or problems of epistemological scepticism.

9) The question of the authority of Scripture is that of the relationship between the second century Church and that of the apostles. In recognizing a canon of Scripture, the second century Church placed itself under that authority. It did not create it. In the words of Kierkegaard, an apostle is not a genius.

10) The Church has a historic hermeneutic for deciding which biblical admonitions are authoritative for today, and which have only historical relevance. This hermeneutic is found in the distinctions between doctrinal, moral, ritual, civil, and ecclesial law, developed in the Patristic Church by theologians like Irenaeus and Augustine, formulated definitively by Thomas Aquinas, and re-affirmed in Reformation writings such as Richard Hooker's Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity, The 39 Articles, and the Lutheran Confessions. This hermeneutic is not an imposition on Scripture, but a consistent development of decisions made by the apostolic Church, and witnessed to in the New Testament.

11) The *ordo essendi* (order of being) is the opposite of the *ordo cognoscendi* (order of knowing). In terms of our understanding of revelation, there are three levels of knowledge: 1) The symbols and narratives of Scripture point beyond themselves to actual historical events; 2) The actual historical events to which the narratives refer point beyond themselves to intelligible realities; 3) The intelligible ontological realities that lie behind the narratives.

In terms of knowledge, the economic Trinity precedes the immanent Trinity; in terms of ontology, the ontological precedes the historical.

12) The doctrine of creation (the relation and distinction between God and the world) provides the crucial background for other theological distinctions as well. It is fundamental for understanding not only Christology (the Son is Creator, not creature), but soteriology (redemption is not only pardon, but re-creation), grace (grace perfects nature; it does not destroy it) , the sacraments (created means of uniting humanity and divinity), and eschatology (God's final goal for creation) as well.

Requiem Aeternam dona ei, Domine, et lux perpetua luceat ei

Please pray for the repose of the soul of my father, Leon Dwight Witt, who passed away this evening after an unexpected heart attack last night. He was a man of faith, and a beacon of Christ's love to all he met.

He suffered a debilitating stroke Thanksgiving a year ago, and I spent much of the last year in Arizona with my mother as we brought him home from a nursing facility, and watched him struggle mightily to recover. My wife Jennie and I fly to Arizona tomorrow to be with my mother and sisters.

Is the Episcopal Church Heretical?

A gentleman associated with an Episcopal Church advocacy group calling itself The Episcopal Majority recently chided me for using the word "heresy" to refer to recent stances taken by TEC.

"What you, from your peculiar point of view, term as heresy is just that—your peculiar judgment."

The accusation that orthodox Anglicanism is nothing more than "private judgment" is one of my particular irritations. It is often used by followers of John Henry Newman, but seems now to have been adopted by the revisionists. Here was my reply.

Well, no. It's not. Say, for example, that a Presiding Bishop of TEC were to claim that Jesus was only one way of salvation among others, and claimed that to say that no one came to the Father except through Jesus would "put God in a small box." That would constitute a heresy that has been repudiated repeatedly throughout church history and is condemned in the 39 Articles (xviii). Or suppose that said Presiding Bishop gave a Christmas sermon in which he or she first seemed to be affirming the doctrine of the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ, but then went on to speak of incarnation in a manner that made it clear that incarnation was simply a way of speaking of God's general presence in creation, and that what was true of Jesus was equally true of other people as well, including, in his or her own words, Santa Claus. That would, of course, be a repudiation of the Nicene Creed. Or suppose that such a Presiding Bishop were to say in a recent interview that he or she did not believe that Jesus was terribly

concerned about the afterlife. That would either indicate that she was not familiar with the gospels, or believed that they were entirely untrustworthy. That would, of course, be contrary to the Anglican affirmation of the "sufficiency of Scripture." Or suppose such a General Convention were to approve as bishop a man whose lifestyle were explicitly condemned in Scripture, on the grounds that Scripture says we are supposed to love one another. That would be to violate the statement in the 39 Articles that the Church "cannot ordain anything contrary to God's Word written" and that it may not interpret Scripture so as to make one part repugnant to another (xx). Or suppose that such a church tried to justify its actions by pointing out that Christians eat shellfish. That would be to violate the historic principle of biblical interpretation that distinguishes between moral, ritual, civil, and ecclesiastical law, and would be to pit the OT against the NT (vii). Or suppose that such a church tried to impose ordained female clergy on a diocese. That would place the church in violation of the article that nothing that cannot be read in Scripture or proved from it may be required as an article of faith (vi). Or suppose that prominent members (including bishops of said church) made statements or wrote best selling books suggesting that if the bones of Jesus were found in a grave somewhere in Palestine, this would make no difference to Christian faith. That would violate article iv, which states that Jesus rose bodily from the grave, including his flesh, bones, and everything pertaining to the perfection of human nature.

Of course, no Presiding Bishop would ever actually say such things, nor would a General Convention approve such things. To take such actions would place such a church so far beyond the bounds of historic Christianity that it could no longer be called a church, but merely a heretical sect, something like Mormonism or the Jehovah's Witnesses or Christian Science. But to recognize that such actions or beliefs would be heretical would not be engaging in mere private judgment, merely

affirming what Scripture clearly teaches, and what Christians have always affirmed and have repeated numerous times in Creeds and Confessions.

But, of course, we're talking about hypotheticals. As I said, no even remotely Christian church would ever do or affirm such things or elect as its chief officers those who did. And, as you've pointed out, the Episcopal Majority was formed merely to preserve the church's historic heritage and tradition. So no one in Episcopal Majority would endorse or approve such actions or beliefs either.

But if they did, hypothetically speaking, I think we could call that heresy.

My Suggested Slogan for the Episcopal Church's New Evangelism Campaign

For those asking questions . . .

**The Episcopal Church has no
answers!**

This in response to Presiding Bishop KJS's recent interview in which she explained why she thought TEC might be attractive to young people:

[M]any of those young people are asking spiritual questions.

“Why am I here? What am I supposed to be about as a human being? How am I supposed to live in relationship with other people?” Those are questions that the Episcopal Church is well poised and well experienced in helping people to find answers. Not provide answers, but help people wrestle with the questions. . . . [W]e don’t come with a prescribed set of answers. We really do encourage people to wrestle with the question.