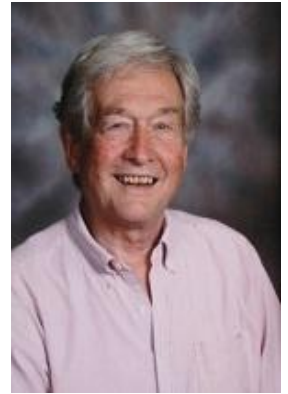


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### ***ESSE, BENE ESSE, AND PLENE ESSE***

1 Here's a neat set of distinctions for you, faithful reader: *Esse*, *Bene Esse*, and *Plene Esse*. That repeated *esse* is a Latin noun, and it is related to the English word *essence*. *Esse* means being, in the sense of essence, of ultimate constitutive necessity. That which defines a thing. That which makes the thing what it is.

2 If you applied those three distinctions to Christian piety and practice – as I intend to do in the paragraphs that follow! – you'd be asking three questions.

3 *Esse*: What is the essential being of this piety or practice? What is the single quality without which it simply would not be what it is?

4 *Bene Esse*: That's *well* being. (See the English *benediction*: “speaking well.”) What are those qualities which make for true *health* and *wholeness* in this or that piety or practice? What pertains to the Church's *well* being? We're not speaking here of essence – without which it ain't what it is – but rather those additional qualities that make for its *well* being.

5 *Plene Esse*: That's *fullness* of being. (See the English word *plenitude*: a bountifulness, an amplitude.) Now we're still another remove from basic *esse* or essence, and speaking instead of those qualities that enrich and ennoble and dignify and enlarge what we're speaking of.

6 A distinguished and beloved mentor of mine invoked these distinctions twenty years ago when Lutherans in Canada (the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada, ELCIC) were debating whether or not to adopt the so-called Historic Episcopacy, in our Spirit-inspired discussions with Canadian Anglicans about the possibilities of “full communion” with that family of faith. (American Lutherans were almost simultaneously discussing the same issues with the Episcopal Church in the USA.)

7 It should be remembered that world wide, in those days, Lutherans had adopted, over the years, all three of the basic models of church order -- congregational, presbyterial, and episcopal – depending on local tradition and circumstance.

8 My mentor and friend maintained that, in our Lutheran Confessional documents, matters of church order – such as the episcopacy – were certainly not of the church's *esse*. And they were probably not even among the church's *bene esse*.

9 But they were certainly to be found among the Church's *plene esse*.

10 That insight was liberating to me at the time. For a Lutheran, that is, whether or not your church retains the Historic Episcopacy is surely not a matter of ultimate necessity. The Historic Episcopacy – having bishops who can trace their lineage presumably back to the Apostle Peter – does not, for a Lutheran, indelibly and of necessity constitute the Christian Church. (Anglicans will likely differ from Lutherans on this point!)

11 But bishops, standing in the Historic Succession of bishops back through untold ages of time, will be a good thing to have. They will add to the church's fullness. Bishops in that Succession will enrich and enlarge our Canadian Lutheran Church.

12 Having bishops who presumably can trace their predecessors back through aeons of ages will provide splendid testimony to the incredible endurance of the Christian faith – even if the precise details of that historic Succession are sometimes dubious. That silent testimony cannot be taken lightly. Not by Anglicans. Not by Lutherans. The Historic Episcopacy is a gift to the whole Christian church on earth. A precious treasure, even to those branches of Jesus' Community who do not yet embrace it.

13 It was this discriminating distinction by my mentor, twenty years ago, that enabled me to cast my vote in favour of the proposal that Canadian Lutherans join with Canadian Anglicans in adopting their system of episcopacy. (It should be noted that Lutherans in Sweden and Finland have always claimed the Historic Episcopacy. Bishops in those countries embraced the Reformation along with their priests and people.)

14 Well then, I hear you asking, What can pertain to the church's *esse*, as a Lutheran? My answer: The Gospel, the Good News of God's favour, proclaimed and enacted in Word and Sacrament. Period.

15 Finally, here's a question for you, faithful reader: Which among the Christian Church's bewildering multitude of pieties and practices would you list as pertaining to the Church's *esse*? To our *bene esse*? Which as *plene esse*?

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