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### **ESCHATOLOGICAL PROLEPSIS: "The Truth is Out There"**

A More than twenty years ago I posted the following Essay on this website. I re-visited it recently, and I still think it's pertinent. See if you agree.

B So. I'll post below my Essay 30, of July 1999, for a second time, almost word for word. I have made some minor editorial adjustments to address the circumstances of our present day more specifically.

C And I will impose my current paragraph numbering system this time in my re-posting. Those numbers come in handy for me as writer, if not for you as reader.

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1 In the dead of winter each year --where I live, about the second or third week in February-- I make it a point to wear what I call my "Eschatological Prolepsis" Necktie.

2 It's a floral print with a kind of watercolour rendering of a riot of blooming flowers. It reminds me – and those I can stop in the street to catechize – that Spring is on the way, even though the cruelest, coldest weeks of winter may still be ahead: the snows and storms and ice of February and March and even early April. My necktie is, you might say, a preview of coming attractions, discernable only to the eyes of faith.

3 Now that is at least part of the meaning of prolepsis, as I understand the word: Something that arrives ahead of time, before it's supposed to come. And an Eschatological Prolepsis would relate that splendid notion to the coming of the Dominion of God, that "Kingdom" which "comes indeed of itself, without our prayer; but we pray...that it may come also to us..." ; Luther's *Small Catechism*, Evangelical Lutheran Worship (ELW) page 1163.

4 In Essay in this space (Essay 29: Quod Ubique...) I took pains to point out the importance of the weight of Christian Tradition down through the ages.

5 My point there was this: The Tradition judges you, your pieties, your practices, before you have the competence to judge it. I also took pains to protect my flanks, in this matter, by a rather

smart-mouthed footnote about the fallibility of simple democracy. ("Ten thousand Frenchmen can't be wrong...")

6 I'll stand by everything I argued, in that Essay.

7 But that's not the only word we need to hear on the subject. There are times when the Tradition simply offers no help, no guidance, no principles we can apply, in our current situation.

8 And there are times when we must flatly reject, in our present context, what the Tradition had maintained, in earlier contexts. I'd be willing to argue that Christian faithfulness is always contextual, situational -- in liturgy, as in theology, as in ethics, as in church order.

9 In such circumstances are we totally without a wise and compassionate Counselor? No, thanks to the principle of Eschatological Prolepsis.

10 Here we take refuge, yet once again, in the simple Good News of the Gospel, and search for its incipient implications -- for whatever promises it contains that remain still-unfulfilled. We abandon the Tradition, if need be, and claim our Christ-given authority, in our new, unprecedented context, to anticipate the Dominion of God in Eschatological Prolepsis.

11 When we construct a new reality, for our new historical context, under the principles of Eschatological Prolepsis, are we then still "catholic"? Well, maybe not, if you simply count the votes on hand, as I advised in Essay 29.

12 Yet the Psalmist urges us to "sing a new song to the Lord." That does not mean we must stop singing the old songs. It does mean that we, in our unique situation, are under obligation to build a new model, to construct a new reality, to offer our own distinctive gifts -- or we are simply not faithful, to our times, nor to our God. Grandma and Grandpa did as much in their day. We have the Counselor, the Advocate, the Spirit, no less than they did.

13 The Truth is Back There, in the Tradition, sure. But the Truth is also Out There. Ahead of us, waiting for us to catch up.

14 It's worth remembering that not so long ago -- less than two hundred years ago -- most Christians saw nothing wrong in owning other human beings, like cattle. We're still tasting the terrible fruit of the shame of slavery. And not so long before that, we were watching the hanging of other human beings in our public squares -- as a type of entertainment! And not so long before THAT, participating in public beheadings, or in public burnings at the stake.

15 So God's Spirit is making us new, enlarging our sympathies, refining our consciences, day by day, year by year. Sure, the "old Adam" is still lurking there, in every human breast, even in the best of us. But I'd be willing to argue that the Spirit continues to shape us, to improve us. At its best, our world today IS better than the world of our forebears.

16 With these principles in mind, let's look at some more controverted expressions of ecclesial and liturgical faithfulness, in our current context.

17 I'm aware that many of the propositions listed below do not have the weight of Tradition (the "votes") that could identify them as fully "catholic." Still, I am personally willing to endorse each of the propositions below, seeing, as I do, in each of them, an extension, an enlarging of the eschatological vision of Christ our Head, and claiming his proleptic authority.

18 For the sake of appearing less dogmatic ("Any stigma will do to beat a dogma."), I'll pose each of my propositions as a question.

19 Is the Spirit calling the church in our day to offer communion to all the baptised, infants included? My answer: yes. I know this represents a departure from Lutheran tradition. But I see communion-of-all-the-baptised as a corrective to our own history, and to my own personal witness, in which the Rite of Confirmation was experienced, phenomenologically, as more important than Baptism...

20 Is the Spirit calling the church in our day to ordain women? My answer: yes. The battle against women's ordination was lost the moment the infant church began to baptize rather than circumcise. It's taken us twenty centuries to get the point. Women in Lutheran North America have been ordained since 1970. Better late than never!

21 Is the Spirit calling the church in our day to become more intentionally pacifist, like the historic "Peace" Churches (Quaker and Mennonite)? My answer, especially since USA's indiscriminate, disproportionate drone bombing in the Middle East: yes. I pray for the day when aerial bombing, like land-mining, is internationally outlawed.

22 Is the Spirit calling the church in our day to recognize homosexuality as a God-given variant within a spectrum of sexual possibilities? My view, certainly not supported by Tradition: Yes. The church has a major piece of homework to do today, studying homosexuality within the broader context of human sexuality generally. Big changes are on the way, for heterosexuals no less than homosexuals. (See Matthew 22:30: Eschatological prolepsis, indeed!

23 So, yes, I support same-sex marriage. See Essays 222 and 223 above...

24 Is the Spirit calling the church in our day to oppose the death penalty? Yes; the death penalty is a barbarous relic of an earlier barbarous age. It's already outlawed in every civilized nation except the USA...

25 Is the Spirit calling the church in our day to allow abortions, under certain circumstances? Yes. I'm willing to agree with the "pro-life" position that abortion represents a kind of murder. But I agree also with the "pro-choice" position that it's sometimes the lesser of two evils. "Sin boldly. And trust in Christ more boldly still...": Luther.

26 Is the Spirit calling the church in our day to endorse a universalist view of salvation? Yes. Preaching a fear of the fires of hell is a medieval barbarism. There are surely better ways to motivate people to lead lives of faith and good works...

27 Well, I've strayed into social ethics from my self-assigned mandate of focusing on things liturgical. And I've probably raised your blood pressure. But let's talk...

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