

Wengert errs “publicly” in The Book of Concord

Tim Wengert inserted a word in Article 14 that should not be there. The added word puts a spin on Article 14 that should not be there.¹

See the wrongly inserted word “[public]” and its inaccurate footnote below:

“Concerning church government it is taught that no one should publicly teach, preach, or administer the sacraments without a proper **[public]** call.”⁷⁸

⁷⁸“*On ordenlichen Beruf. Beruf* means both “call” and “vocation.” **The 1531 *editio princeps* and the 1580 Book of Concord add the word in brackets.**”²

In a 2004 lecture for the ELCA Conference of Bishops, Wengert claimed that the bracketed “[public]” is “the important word” in Article 14:

Third, **the important word in CA XIV is “public.”** This is the eschatological purpose of church government and order: to see to it that what has been whispered in secret is shouted from the rooftops (Matthew 10:27). **In fact, the point is so important that both the official German printing of the CA in 1531 and the version printed in 1580 in The Book of Concord repeated the word “public” in the final phrase** (shown in brackets above). This emphasis contrasted directly to self-appointed, so-called radical preachers who based their authority solely on themselves and their personal or private, “congregational” calls. Although the Roman authorities often accused Luther and the evangelicals of such usurpation of authority, in fact all the leaders of the evangelical movement were duly called pastors and preachers of the existing church. “The call,” Luther once said at table, “hurts the devil very much.”³

But: “[T]he important word” is not there and should not be there.

It would seem that Wengert’s own agenda, proving that for Melancthon “proper call” means *Amt* (“the authority of the office rests **in the office itself** and in the word of God”⁴) has overwhelmed his critical faculties.

But: Neither the official German printing of the CA in 1531 nor the version printed in 1580 have the bracketed word “public.” How could a professional historian make such an error?

The error corrected, but problems remain. ELCA pastor Kris Baudler caught the error, realized its significance, and wrote to Professor Wengert, who initially defended his insertion of “[public]” into the German text of Article 14.⁵

¹ *The Book of Concord*, eds. Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000), hereafter *BC 2000*.

² [1st printing](#), emphasis added. Wengert is the editor for the section on the Augsburg Confession.

³ Timothy J. Wengert, “The End of the Public Office of Ministry in the Lutheran Confessions,” Resource paper, p.3. Text revised and reprinted in Timothy J. Wengert, *Priesthood, Pastors, Bishops*. Public Ministry for the Reformation and Today. (Philadelphia: Fortress, 2008) 33-53, here 42; emphasis added.

⁴ Wengert, *Priesthood, Pastors, Bishops*, 12; emphasis added.

⁵ See Mark Menacher’s review of Wengert, *Priesthood, Pastors, Bishops*, in *Logia: A Journal of Lutheran Theology*, 19:4 (Reformation 2010) 48-51; here 51: “The German text of AC XIV in the *BSLK* plainly reads *ohn ordentlichen Beruf* with no reference to or insertion of “[public]” in any form. Only if one rummages around in the notes to AC XIV in *BSLK* (69) can one find a variant reference to “public call” (*offentlichen Beruf*), which is probably a misreading

After some back and forth, Wengert admitted his error. Consequently, in the [second printing](#), the word “[public]” and the incorrect sentence in the footnote to Article 14 about the 1531 and 1580 editions of the Book of Concord are omitted.

But problems remain:

1. The first printing of *BC 2000* was large enough that most libraries own only the first printing. For example, Luther Seminary has four copies of *BC 2000* – all from the first printing! Who would even know there is a second printing? Most non-Lutheran libraries would have only one copy, the first printing, of *BC 2000* and would have no idea of errors in it. Moreover, the second printing of *BC 2000* contains no notice – nothing in the Preface, Forward, or text of Article 14 – that a serious error was made in the first printing. This error is not a typo.
2. Wengert has failed to properly correct the error. In a footnote in his 2008 book he writes: “I am grateful to Pastor Kris Baudler for pointing out an error in CA 14, in *BC 2000*, 46, which has been rectified in subsequent printings.”⁶ The specific error, however, is not described. The bland wording suggests the error was like a typo. In this way Wengert obscures rather than deals with the error.
3. Wengert continues in his book to make incorrect statements about Article 14 and Reformation history. He continues to claim incorrectly that the word “public” is in the text: “Third, one very important word in Article 14 is *public*.”⁷ To the contrary, the word “public” is still not in the text!

To be sure, the adverb “publicly” is in Article 14 earlier: “Concerning church government it is taught that no one should **publicly** teach, preach, or administer the sacrament without a proper call” (emphasis added). There is a big difference between the adverb “publicly” and the adjective “public.” The adverb “publicly” modifies the **actions** of preaching and administering the sacraments. The adjective “public” (to be sure, not in the text) would modify the noun “call” and might imply establishing an office or *Amt*.

Wengert also misrepresents Reformation history. He claims that for the Reformers “all the leaders of the evangelical movement were duly called pastors and preachers of the existing church,”⁸ implying an ecclesial office from which authority for ministry derives. To the contrary, as Dorothea Wendebourg, among many others, notes: “[I]n the secular territories and cities the

of *ordentlichen*. For those able to access the *BSLK*, Wengert’s editorial formulation is a novum of the Kolb-Wengert edition.” (The variant reference comes from a Würzburg manuscript.)

⁶ Wengert, *Priesthood, Pastors, Bishops*, 125, footnote 27.

⁷ Wengert, 42 (emphasis added):

“Third, **one very important word in Article 14 is *public***. This is the eschatological purpose of church government and order: to see to it that what has been whispered in secret is shouted from the rooftops (Matthew 10:27). This emphasis contrasted directly to self-appointed, so-called radical preachers, who based their authority solely on themselves and their personal calls. Although the Roman authorities often accused Luther and the evangelicals of such usurpation of authority, in fact **all the leaders of the evangelical movement were duly called pastors and preachers of the existing church**. “The call,” Luther once said at table, “hurts the devil very much.” ([Compare the 2004 and the 2008 texts.](#))

⁸ Wengert, 42.

government of the Church lay to a considerable extent in the hands of the secular authorities, i.e., the princes and the city councils. Visitations, ecclesiastical patronage, monastic reforms and many other activities were carried out here to a considerable extent by the secular authorities and not – or only nominally or in the context of initiatives by the secular prince – by the bishop.”⁹

Wengert surely knows all this but chooses instead to present a view of Reformation history that more closely conforms to his biases.¹⁰

Wengert’s error is part of the larger problem of “the Lutheran clerical drift towards episcopalianism in North America,”¹¹ as foreseen by Tappert even in 1956: “Is there the beginning of a tendency today to adopt the theology and the practice of a neo-Romantic remythologization which is currently flowering in our environment?”¹²

In a previous generation a serious error like Wengert’s, which is not merely in a lecture and a book, but in a major public (!) text, would have had professional consequences.

⁹ Dorothea Wendebourg, “The Reformation in Germany,” *Visible Unity and the Ministry of Oversight* (London: Church Publishing House, 1997) 49-78, here 50.

¹⁰At the 450th anniversary celebration of the Augsburg Confession in Augsburg, Germany, George Lindbeck lectured on this issue. See George Lindbeck, “*Rite vocatus: Der theologische Hintergrund zu CA 14,*” in *Confessio Augustana und Confutatio: Der Augsburger Reichstag 1530 und die Einheit der Kirche*, ed. Erwin Iserloh (Münster: Aschendorff, 1980) 454-72. In the discussion following, a number of scholars pointed out the variety of ways in which pastors were called, including the call of a pastor by a city council, among other examples, the call of a pastor by the city council in Augsburg, contrary to Wengert’s claim that “all the leaders of the evangelical movement were duly called pastors and preachers of the existing church” (Wengert, 42).

¹¹ Menacher, *Logia*, 51.

¹² Menacher, *Logia*, 51, citing Theodore Tappert, “Directions in Lutheran Losses to Other Communions, *Lutheran Quarterly* 14:2 (Summer 2000) 206-8, especially 208.