



## Lutheran Ecclesiology

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*The following paper was presented at a seminar at the School of Religion, University of Iowa. It was the wish of Russian Orthodox theologian Nicolas Zernov, head of the seminar, that the participants present the positions of the other churches as the churches themselves might have given them. The approach of this article was therefore vigorously Lutheran. It is not on this account intended as a disavowal of what is Catholic. On the contrary, by considering the Lutheran emphases and discerning truths which we may have de-emphasized in our insistence on doctrine which was distinctively and exclusively Catholic, we should gain a richer appreciation of the fullness and breadth of the reality which is the Church.*

Protestant ecclesiology is a vast spectrum of varied theological positions. It would be folly to attempt to synthesize all of it into a few handy, easy-to-manage propositions. Anglicans and Unitarians, Lutherans and Baptists are very different in their conceptions of the Church. What is said here barely scratches the surface of the realities represented but some attempt is necessary. Consequently, some notions of Protestant ecclesiology are treated here as they may be found in the writings and belief of the great reformer Martin Luther. The

strains of later ages may be heard in his works. Aware of this, the subject of Protestant ecclesiology is approached primarily from an understanding of Luther's thought.

It is necessary to appreciate the historical setting in which this doctrine was formulated. Luther was an Augustinian monk whose monastic life of discipline and fasting nearly led him to despair. The stress and rigors of such life emphasized the role of the individual and his personal efforts to gain salvation. Luther believed that such an emphasis warped man's notion of God, turning man toward the wrath rather than the love of God. Surely the Christian life was intended to be much more than a matter of how many days one could go on bread and water or how many weeks in a hair shirt. Yet, if one only considered the redeeming death of God's Son, then one could take confidence in the God of love. Faith in what God did for man could justify man because it was the great, gratuitous gift of salvation. This spirit of divine forgiveness extended itself by giving men the Church, the gift of God, for in this act God gave men Christ who is the life of the new community.

### **Luther's Realization of the Pure Gospel**

The terrible trial was over for Luther. Through the movement of the Holy Spirit, he had come to understand the meaning of the pure Gospel, namely, justification by faith alone, through grace alone. A man so led by the Spirit cannot keep the Gospel to himself because there is always the necessity to preach it to every creature. This knowledge of justification became what we might call 'Luther's razor'. With it he could distinguish what in the Church had remained faithful to the Word of God and consequently he could judge the Church. He said:

We should not allow the Spirit of liberty, as Paul calls him, to be frightened off by all the fabrications of the Popes, but we ought to go boldly forward to test all that they do or leave undone, according to our interpretation of the Scripture, which rests on faith, and compel them to follow not their own interpretation, but the one that is better.<sup>1</sup>

This gaze which was enriched by Luther's personal experience of the Holy Spirit now focused on the Church of the Renaissance.

<sup>1</sup> *Letter to the Nobility*, Vol. II, p. 76, as cited by George Tavard, *Holy Writ or Holy Church* (New York, Harper, 1959), p. 87.

There was much to protest against here. Moral corruption is always a gross sin for the Church but this sin flows from man's lowest appetites, and so it is easier to understand. Had this been all, perhaps Luther would not have totally rejected the Church as he encountered it. But the greater sin is pride and this sin had found its way into the Church at Rome. Luther saw the Renaissance Church following the sin of the first parents, trying to make itself like God. Rome tried to exalt and deify the Church, her laws and her teachings as if the human ways of man could limit the sovereign and transcendent God. This is precisely what happens when men assume absolute power over the Gospel so that it is compressed into a dogmatic formula which presumes to finalize the teaching of the Gospel. This appears tantamount to bestowing the richness of the eschatological realization of the Church on the present, ever-changing Christian body. Absolutism of this sort, the infallibility of Pope and Council, seems to constitute a deification of the historical and finite. In germ this frame of mind attacks the sovereignty of God, and thus Luther knew that Rome had forfeited its claim to be the Church of God and the bearer of the true Gospel of Christ.

If the Church as he knew it had forfeited its claim to be the Body of Christ, was there really a visible society to which one could turn to find the true Church? Would Luther have to relinquish the idea of the Church entirely? The solution was not an easy one. To profess belief in one visible Church would run the risk that men would adhere to the traditional Church of the West. But to remain in the Roman Church was impossible for one declared excommunicated. One final factor had to be considered, namely, that Christ had made his Church apostolic and therefore there must be a connection with the Church of the Apostles. Since this could not be found in the visible sphere of the Church's life, Luther taught that it was to be found in the inner life of the Church and in a unity of the doctrine as taught by the Twelve.

### **Luther's Definition**

The separation of the visible and invisible spheres is clear enough in his writings. It first appears in his *Treatise on the Papacy* of 1520. He says: "The primary reality which is essentially, fundamentally, truly the Church we call the spiritual, inner Christendom. The other

which is a human creation, we call the bodily, exterior Christendom." One must not take offense at this distinction; it is not meant to disparage that which is called the exterior, visible Church. Luther's point is that this aspect of the Church is accidental to the true nature of the Body of Christ. External structure may vary with the various historical settings in which the word of God confronts the needs of men in a particular age. It is precisely this element of flexibility that makes possible the positive nature of Protestantism—the spirit of renewal. Such a notion of the Church is not the clearest description of the total reality of the Church and so we must seek a more exact definition. Luther's mature thought is reflected in the *Augsburg Confession*: "The Church is the congregation of the saints in which the pure Gospel is taught and the sacraments are properly administered." This is equivalent to saying that where the Word of God is preached and the sacraments are given, there is the Church. An accurate knowledge of these elements—the congregation of the saints, the Word of God, and the sacraments—will help to make clear Luther's belief on the nature of the Church.

### ***The Church Is the Communion of Saints***

For Luther the communion of saints refers to those who respond with faith to the external manifestations of the Church, the preaching of the Word, and the Sacraments. In perceiving all the ramifications of the congregation of the saints it is well to return to the question of the visible and invisible Church. Luther made this distinction to separate the historical structure of the Church from the faithful persons belonging to it. The saints responding to the movements of the Spirit would always be necessary to the Church. The contingencies of ecclesiastical management would be accidental and this included the idea of an organized and ordained hierarchy. On this point Luther's doctrine clashed with that of John Calvin. Calvin accepted both Luther's definition of the Church and the distinction between the visible and invisible Church, but to the latter he gave new meaning: the visible Church was the body of those who profess Christ and the invisible was the body of the elect. Whereas Luther saw that the structure of the visible Church was man made, Calvin required an organization or order for the Church which, from reading the Scriptures, he saw as instituted by God. There are echoes of

both conceptions today. Reformed theology presently describes the communion of saints whom God has chosen as forming one body, invisible because it contains all who have been or will be saved. This is distinct from the empirical group of Christians gathered for worship. C. C. Morrison reflects the tradition of Luther when he says:

They [the Reformers] set up a conception of the Church as a spiritual body, in contrast to the objective historical body. Their purified Church was held to be continuous with the invisible Church which had maintained a spiritual existence since apostolic days.<sup>2</sup>

Modern ecclesiologists interpose a consideration at this point which was not a concern for the early Reformers, namely, the question of who are the members of the Church. Bonhoffer has remarked that the Reformation only asked the question what is the Church; it is only in light of the answer to this that one can approach the problem of who belongs to the Church. But in the end this further inquiry only leads to a legalized concept which is foreign to the spirit of the Reformation. Paul S. Minear, reflecting the spirit of Bonhoffer, has remarked:

The boundary is never closed, never frozen, never within the providence of man to determine. . . . an individual enters the Church, not when he accepts certain abstract ideas of eternal truth, nor when he promises to contribute certain values to the Ecclesia, but when God, active in Christ, bestows grace as a gift of the Spirit.<sup>3</sup>

This admonition against a certain legalism has not been entirely avoided; man searches for the security of the objective, visible norm. Often the practical affairs of the visible Church are given as requiring just such a norm. That to which most agree is the reception of the sacrament of baptism.

### ***The Church Is Where the Word of God Is Preached***

When we begin to speak of baptism and the sacraments, it becomes evident that we have left the treatment of the communion of saints which has its direct relation to that inner realm where man in faith encounters the Holy Spirit. God works upon man from the outside also. He does this through two means, the word of God and the sacraments. It is from these two treasures that the gift of the Church

<sup>2</sup> C. C. Morrison, "The Church, Catholic and Protestant," *Christendom*, II . 2 (1937), pp. 279-280.

<sup>3</sup> Paul S. Minear, *Eyes of Faith* (Philadelphia, Presbyterian, 1946), pp. 92-4.

is given. In the act of preaching the word, in the act of partaking in the Lord's Supper, there is the implicit grouping of men for these communal activities. From this natural setting the visible Church is constituted, in the light of the exigencies and needs of the local congregation. Preaching the word demands hearers; eating a meal bespeaks participants. Where these two activities are present, there the Church necessarily is.

Thus the Church is where the word of God is preached. But what is this word of God? It has many meanings. Basically a word is a form of communication between persons. It may be either written or spoken, but in either case it is a revelation of the one who uses it. For the Christian these are the secondary meanings for the idea of word. The Word is not so much a thing as a Person, a divine Person who has revealed himself to us. The experience of this divine Person must be given to men of each generation. This is done by the word of God, both written and spoken. Such is the two-fold mediacy of which Barth speaks, preaching and the Scriptures. Still, it must not be thought that reference is being made to the literal words of Mark or the content of a given pastor's sermon. These are not by themselves the true word of God, for even the secular historian could interpret and catalogue all the events and sayings of a man named Jesus. Only when the Incarnation and the whole of Christ's life are viewed and apprehended with the knowledge of faith does this good news become the Gospel of the Word of God. It is not the message which is important but to comprehend the message in the divine Messenger. *The* authority in the Church must therefore be the Word of God as understood in its divine signification.

Man first comes to a knowledge of Christ through the preaching of the Gospel or kerygma. We hear the pastor proclaim the word of God, but the necessary condition for this to be true proclamation is that the Person of the Word speak through and in the human word so that man may be led by the deepest authority who is the Truth. The case is similar with the Scriptures. They remain for us a legible testimony of the revelation of God in Jesus Christ. As with preaching, so with Scripture, the book and its teaching are not sanctified in their own right but only as they are the revelation of the Word of God. He speaks through and in the Scriptures to men. This is an experience by which man makes contact with Christ, not a searching for texts to prove that something is revealed therein. All revela-

tion is the Word of God who is a Person; no book, no word of man can contain him; nor can any man know him unless he first reveals himself in the Spirit. Again, it is important to realize that this is what makes the Church to be: Jesus Christ, the Word of God, the Revelation of all Truth, speaking himself to man. It is this which commands our assent, because it is nothing less than God Himself.

There is much discussion in the Roman Church regarding authority in the Church. It is the teaching of Rome that there exists a need to interpret the word of God because it cannot bear witness to itself. For Protestants the objection misses the point because it objectivizes revelation in the written word isolated from the Person revealed and his action on the Christian to whom the revelation is made. Dependence on councils or papal interpretations seems to deny that the Spirit can direct whom he will and as he wills; it appears to misunderstand the close connection between the ideas of the Church as the Body of Christ and the Word of God as the authority of the Church. The Body is the Church; the Word is Christ. Both are present in the experience of the Christian. In this regard Barth had observed:

Christ is actually the Word of God contemporary in prophecy and in the apostolate and contemporary in the proclamation of His Church. If He is contemporary here, if He makes the step, we are necessarily here faced with the Word of God in the Church.<sup>4</sup>

The question of authority and interpretation of the Gospel throws some light upon the nature of the Church as Luther conceived of it. In this regard a lesson is to be found in the Incarnation. God took human flesh in a mystery of divine condescension. He embraced the form of a slave, becoming the suffering servant foretold in Isaia. He spoke to men in human words and endured all that the human condition entailed. Luther insisted that as Christ's humanity was not divine but rather the humanity of the suffering servant, so also the humanity of the Church was never elevated to a divine level. Therefore, it is only when the Church permits Christ to do all that she is fulfilling her role as servant. According to Luther, Christ could not do all where the authority of those ruling was absolute and where the physical elements of the sacraments were deified.

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<sup>4</sup> Karl Barth, *The Doctrine of the Word of God* (Edinburgh, T. and T. Clark, 1936), p. 171.

## **The Sacraments and the Holy Spirit Constitute the Church**

That the elements of the sacraments were not deified by Luther is not surprising. Nor should it be surprising that the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper were incorporated into the Church. Rather, it is better to say that these sacraments constitute the visible Church. The sacraments are visible and tangible forms of the Word of God. Like Scripture itself, they are subsumed to the action of the Word of God. Still, the sacraments make real and actual the visible Church, but they must never be viewed outside their relationship to Christ as if they could be objectivized. Even the devil could administer the sacraments rightly, Luther giped. Such a remark bears witness to the basic notion that the sacraments have meaning only insofar as Christ acts in them and man responds in faith to this sign of the reality of the Church.

Up to this point our consideration has been focused on the visible nature of the Church. But these outward manifestations of the proclamation of the Gospel, the reception of the sacraments, the congregating together for worship, would be all vain and empty efforts by sinful man to reach the sovereign God were it not for the invisible life of the Church, the Holy Spirit. It is his presence in man by faith which causes these elements of the visible Church to have significance for the true believer. It is the primary task of the Spirit to enable men to recognize the presence of Jesus Christ. All proclamation, reception of the Eucharist, reading of the Scriptures are void without the faith which the Spirit gives to man. He calls man to be a member of Christ's body. He gives them the fruits of his action and gives them fellowship in a communion with Christ and with the *ecclesia*.

### **Summary**

It has not been out intention to make Luther profess belief in two Churches, although, to facilitate study, a sharp distinction between the visible and invisible Churches had to be drawn. Actually there are not two Churches but rather two manifestations of the one Church. Primary place must belong to the invisible Church, the realm of faith by which the Holy Spirit gives meaning to that which is performed in the visible Church.



For Luther, the action and experience of the Holy Spirit in faith was the basis of the Christian's knowledge of God. The Spirit had revealed to him the essence of the Gospel—justification by faith alone. This experience had liberated his tortured soul. After this he remarked:

No one can rightly understand God or his Word who has not received such an understanding directly from the Holy Spirit. But no one can receive it from the Holy Spirit without experiencing, proving, and feeling it. In such experience the Holy Spirit instructs us as in his own school, outside of which naught is learned save empty words and idle fables. . . .<sup>5</sup>

The relationship of the visible and invisible Church is clear. Physical, exterior Christendom is comprised of the Gospel and the sacraments. Spiritual Christendom is constituted by faith. The harmony of these two is through the Holy Spirit. The World of God acts on man from without by baptism, the Gospel, and the Holy Supper. From within, the Holy Spirit breathes the life of faith. The interaction of these forces makes the Church to be.

<sup>5</sup> *Magnificat*, vol. III, p. 127, as cited by Tavad, *op. cit.*, p. 84.

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