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THE SHAPE OF LUTHERAN ECCLESIOLOGY

International Lutheran Conference, Prague, Czech Republic, October 6, 2011

by Charles J. Evanson

Ecclesiology and Ecclesia

The subject is the shape of Lutheran ecclesiology, that is, an ecclesiology which is faithful to the word of God and the confessional writings of the Lutheran church. The term “ecclesiology” derives from the Greek ἐκκλησία, via the Latin *ecclesia*, the doctrine of the church. If ecclesiology is thought of as a circle, then the church, the creature of the gospel, stands second only to the gospel itself at its center. What stands in close proximity to the center derives its significance from what is central, and derives its importance from it. What stands farther out from the center, on the periphery, is of lesser importance. Though itself nonessential, it still derives significance in relation to what is more central. However, if the connection between it and the center, the gospel, becomes obscured or lost, then what stands on the periphery may be regarded as undesirable or even detrimental.

We begin with the center, with the church herself. The term is one for which Martin Luther shows no fondness whatever. In his opinion it has been thoroughly corrupted and its meaning has become unclear. It puts the people in mind of a building made of stones, he writes, or of the pope and the elaborate ecclesiastical structure with which he is surrounded. Few think properly of the church as a community of people made holy by the work of Christ.

If the words, “I believe that there is a holy Christian people,” had been used in the Children’s Creed, all the misery connected with this meaningless and obscure word [“church”] might easily have been avoided. For the words “Christian holy people” would have brought with them, dearly and powerfully, the proper understanding and judgment of what is, and what is not, church. Whoever would have heard the words “Christian holy people” could have promptly concluded that the pope is no people, much less a holy Christian people. So too the bishops, priests, and monks are not holy, Christian people, for they do not believe in Christ, nor do

they lead a holy life, but are rather the wicked and shameful people of the devil. He who does not truly believe in Christ is not Christian or a Christian. He who does not have the Holy Spirit against sin is not holy. Consequently, they cannot be “a Christian holy people,” that is, *sancta et catholica ecclesia*.

But since we use this meaningless word “church” in the Children’s Creed, the common man thinks of the stone house called a church, as painted by the artists; or, at best, they paint the apostles, disciples, and the mother of God, as on Pentecost, with the Holy Spirit hovering over them. This is still bearable; but they are the holy Christian people of a specific time, in this case, the beginning. *Ecclesia*, however, should mean the holy Christian people, not only of the days of the apostles, who are long since dead, but to the end of the world, so that there is always a holy Christian people on earth, in whom Christ lives, works, and rules, per redemption, “through grace and the remission of sin,” and the Holy Spirit, per vivificationem et sanctificationem, “through daily purging of sin and renewal of life,” so that we do not remain in sin but are enabled and obliged to lead a new life, abounding in all kinds of good works, as the Ten Commandments or the two tables of Moses’ law command, and not in old, evil works. That is St. Paul’s teaching. But the pope, with his followers, has applied both the name and the image of the church to himself and to his vile, accursed mob, under the meaningless word *ecclesia*, “church,” etc.¹

The word “church” has such a wide variety of

In a derivative and supportive sense, ministry and ordination are marks of the church, for they have been given to the church by the church’s Lord for the sake of the gospel, its proclamation, and its administration in the sacraments.

¹ Martin Luther, *Luther’s Works*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan, Helmut T. Lehmann, and Christopher B. Brown, 75 vols. (Philadelphia: Fortress and St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1955–1986), 41:144–45. Hereafter *LW*.

meanings² that it is necessary to make clear that Lutheran ecclesiology has to do with the community of Christians, the body of Christ. The classical expression of it is found in Article VII of the Augsburg Confession:

Also they teach that one holy Church is to continue forever. The Church is the congregation of saints, in which the gospel is rightly taught and the Sacraments are rightly administered.

And to the true unity of the Church it is enough to agree concerning the doctrine of the gospel and the administration of the Sacraments. Nor is it necessary that human traditions, that is, rites or ceremonies, instituted by men, should be everywhere alike. As Paul says: One faith, one Baptism, one God and Father of all, etc. Eph. 4, 5. 6. (AC VII, 1–4)

Because it is the purpose of Augustana VII to indicate where the holy Christian people are to be found, its “located-ness” is necessarily described in terms of sensory phenomena; the church may be known primarily in terms of what is heard in the congregation, and only secondarily by what is seen. The teaching of the gospel enters the ear, not the eye or the nose, and with reference to Holy Baptism, Holy Absolution, and the sacrament of body and blood of Christ, it is Christ’s spoken word which makes them what they are and gives them to do what they do. The sheep hear the voice of their shepherd through the voice of him who has been sent in order in and by the church to speak with the voice of the shepherd. “For, thank God, a seven year old child now knows what the Church is, namely, the holy believers and lambs who hear the voice of their Shepherd. For the children pray thus: I believe in one holy Christian Church,” writes Luther in the Smalcald Articles (SA III, XII, 2). What is seen may give the appearance of sanctity, but the eye is more easily misled than the ear: “holiness does not consist in albs, tonsures, long gowns, and other of their ceremonies devised by them outside the Sacred

² *Oxford English Dictionary* lists no less than eighteen definitions under the heading “Church.”

Scriptures, but in the Word of God and true faith” (SA, III, XII, 3).

The Background of Augustana VII

Behind the definition of Augustana VII lies more than a decade and a half of Luther’s careful consideration of the nature of the church. As early as his lectures on the Psalms of 1513–1515, Luther speaks of the church as indiscernible to human sight, but known only to faith.³ In the context of the controversies of the 1520s he further developed his arguments. The church consists of believers, he declares, but it is not believers who form the substance of the church. Faith depends upon the word which calls it to life and forever nourishes and sustains it. In his 1521 response to Ambrosius Catharini Luther writes:

Compared to the bread and Baptism, the gospel

is the noblest and most certain symbol of the Church, since it is only through the gospel that the Church is conceived, formed, nourished, brought to life, brought up, fed, clothed, provided with, strengthened, and armed, to put in briefly. The substance of the whole life of the Church is the Word of God, as Christ says, “Man lives by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.”⁴

Here gospel and Christ stand together most closely, for the Christ upon whom the church is built is the Christ who is proclaimed and presents himself to man in the gospel, the

Every assembly of believers among whom the gospel is preached without corrupting additions or omissions and among whom the sacraments are in like manner administered as the Lord has given them is the church full and whole. Each is full and whole, and all such assemblies are altogether one church, full and whole.

³ Ernest Gordon Rupp, *The Righteousness of God*, Luther Studies (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1953), 317, credits Karl Holl with the insight that Luther’s visible/invisible terminology is not the fruit of controversy with Rome, but is already evident in the early Psalms lectures: e.g., “For Christ is concealed in the Church which is hidden from men but manifest to God”; “For the Church is invisible and is recognizable by faith alone.”

⁴ “Ad librum eximii magistri nostri ambrosii catharini, defensoris Silbestri Prieratis acerrimi Evangelium enim prae pane et Baptismo unicum, certissimum et nobilissimum Ecclesiae symbolum est, cum per solum Evangelium concipiatur, formetur, alatur, generetur, educetur, pascatur, vestiatur, ornatur, roboretur, armetur, servetur, breviter, tota vita et substantia Ecclesiae est in verbo dei, sicut Christus dicit ‘In omni verbo quod procedit de ore dei vivit homo.’” Martin Luther, *Luthers Werke*, Weimarer Ausgabe, 7, 721. Hereafter WA.

Christ who is born of the Virgin Mary, suffers under Pontius Pilate, is crucified, dies, is buried, and rises from the dead on the third day, triumphant over sin, death, and the power of the devil. Werner Elert notes that in this 1521 disputation Luther employs terminology remarkably close to that which would be used by Melancthon nine years later in Augustana VII:

The Gospel is the real organizing principle of the church. It begets the believers, gathers them, and combines them into a supra-individual unity. On the basis of this fundamental thought Luther, in his defense against Ambrosius Catherinus, develops a conception of the church which must be regarded as an exact anticipation of the seventh article of the Augsburg Confession. The church is built on the Rock Christ alone, With Him it will remain in the Spirit. "It will remain perpetually" (perpetuo mansura), says the Augsburg Confession. It is the "communion of saints" (communio sanctorum)—"congregation of saints" (congregatio sanctorum) says the confession. Or the "holy congregation of the believers" (sancta fidelium congregatio)—the "assembly of believers" (Versammlung aller Glaubigen). How can it be recognized? "For some visible sign must be given by which are to be gathered into one body for the purpose of hearing the Word of God" (oportet enim aliquod visibile signum dari, quo congregemur in unum ad audiendum verbum dei). Such signs are Baptism, the bread, and, above all the Gospel. "These are the three symbols, tokens, and marks of Christians ... For in these Christ wants us to be in agreement" (Triae hanc sunt Christianorum symbola, tessare et caracteres ... In his enim vult nos Christus concordare).⁵

Immediately behind Augustana VII (and VIII) stands Article XII of the Schwabach Articles, drawn up in 1529 by Luther to concentrate and articulate Lutheran doctrine.

There may be no doubt that there is and abides on earth until the end of the world a holy Christian Church, as Christ says, Matthew, the last chapter: "Lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world." This church is no other than the believers in Christ, who keep, believe and teach the articles and parts named above, and for this suffer persecution

and martyrdom in the world; for where the Gospel is preached and the Sacraments used aright, is the holy Christian church, and it is not bound by laws and outward splendor, to place and time, to persons and ceremonies.⁶

This definition is itself drawn from Luther's more extended confession of the church in his *Confession Concerning Christ's Supper*, 1528.

I believe that there is one holy Christian Church on earth, i.e., the community or number or assembly of all Christians in all the world, the one bride of Christ, and his spiritual body of which he is the only head. The bishops or priests are not her heads or lords or bridegrooms, but servants, friends, and—as the word "bishop" implies—superintendents, guardians, or stewards.

The Christian Church exists not only in the realm of the Roman Church or power, but in all the world, as the prophets foretold that the gospel of Christ would spread throughout the world, Psalm 2, Psalm 19. Thus this Christian Church is physically dispersed among pope, Turks, Persians, Tartars, but spiritually gathered in one gospel and faith, under one head, i.e., Jesus Christ. From the papacy is assuredly the true realm of Anti-Christ, the real anti-Christian tyrant, who sits in the temple of God and rules with human commandments, as Christ in Matthew 24 and Paul in II Thessalonians 2 declare; although the Turk and all heresies, wherever they may be, are also included in this abomination which according to prophecy will stand in the holy place, but are not to be compared to the papacy.

In this Christian Church, wherever it exists, is to be found the forgiveness of sins, i.e., a kingdom of grace and of true pardon. For in it are found the gospel, baptism, and the sacrament of the altar, in which the forgiveness of sins is offered, obtained,

⁵ Werner Elert, *The Structure of Lutheranism*, trans. Walter A. Hansen (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2000), 259–60.

⁶ "Daß kein Zweifel sei, es sei und bleibe auf Erden ein heilige christliche Kirch bis an der Welt Ende, wie Christus spricht Matth. am letzten: Siehe, ich bin bei euch bis an der Welt Ende. Solche Kirch ist nit ander dann die Glaubigen an Christo, welche obgenannte Artikel und Stuck halten, glauben und lehren und daruber vergolgt und gemartert werden in der Welt. Denn wo das Evangelion gepredigt wird und die Sakrament recht gebraucht, do is die heilige christenliche Kirche, und sie is nit Gesetzen und äußerlicher Pracht an Stätte und Zeit, an Person und Gebärde gebunden." *Die Bekenntnisschriften der evangelisch-lutherischen Kirche*, 10th ed. (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1986), 61–62. Hereafter BSLK.

and received. Moreover, Christ and his Spirit and God are there. Outside this Christian Church there is no salvation or forgiveness of sins, but everlasting death and damnation; even though there may be a magnificent appearance of holiness and many good works, it is all in vain. But this forgiveness of sins is not to be expected only at one time, as in baptism, as the Novatians teach, but frequently, as often as one needs it, till death.⁷

Christ and the Church

Ubi Christus, ibi ecclesia. Where Christ is, there is the church. A proper ecclesiology flows forth from a proper Christology. The definition of the church begins with Christ, the Word of God made flesh to dwell among fallen children of men, to suffer and die for them and for their salvation, and to rise again for their justification. The definition of the church begins with Christ, because it is his saving work which brings her into being and gives her life, and according to his promise he is always in the midst of his believers, always giving freely and fully what he alone has earned and is able to give by virtue of his cross and passion. He is “the head of the body of the church” (ἡ κεφαλὴ τοῦ σώματος τῆς ἐκκλησίας); only where he is confessed and trusted as “the head” (ἡ κεφαλὴ) is she truly “one body in Christ” (ἐν σώμα ἔσμεν ἐν Χριστῷ) (ROM 12:5) and “of Christ” (τοῦ Χριστοῦ) (1 COR 12:27). He is the husband who freely “submits” himself (ὑποτάσσω) (EPH 5:20–21) to the will of his Father, to seek out and win his bride, giving himself for her, sanctifying and cleansing her through water and the word, that she might be made glorious in him and glorify him (EPH 5:21–27). In answer to his love, she lives in submission to him (EPH 5:22) and he pledges to furnish her with all good things. This submission defines the nature of a relationship entered into freely, not by compulsion. She is a faithful bride in response to his love, love freely given, born of his free submission to the Father. A bride who declares her emancipation and refuses her submission would be bride no longer.

It is in the midst of his church, his congregation, that Christ offers what he has obtained for sinners by his passion, cross, resurrection, and ascension. There he offers what he has obtained by means of the preaching of the gospel, by baptism, by absolution, and by giving his body and blood in his supper. Without such offering and giving

in the church, there would be no hope for those who are unable to appropriate Christ’s merit by the strength of their own spiritual efforts, their ardent passion, and the strength of their heartfelt devotion. Forgiveness and salvation can depend on no such unreliable foundations. What Christ has obtained at such great price on the cross, he offers freely in preaching and in the sacrament. It is there alone that it is to be sought and found. So Luther writes in *Against the Heavenly Prophets*, 1524:

We treat of the forgiveness of sins in two ways. First, how it is achieved and won. Second, how it is distributed and given to us. Christ has achieved it on the cross, it is true. But he has not distributed or given it on the cross. He has not won it in the supper or sacrament. There he has distributed and given it through the Word, as also in the gospel, where it is preached. He has won it once for all on the cross. But the distribution takes place continuously, before and after, from the beginning to the end of the world. For inasmuch as he had determined once to achieve it, it made no difference to him whether he distributed it before or after, through his Word, as can easily be proved from Scripture.

... I will find in the sacrament or gospel the word which distributes, presents, offers, and gives to me that forgiveness which was won on the cross.⁸

The Center of the Doctrine of the Church

At the heart of the doctrine of the church is the teaching concerning the person and work of Christ. Articles III through VIII of the Augsburg Confession progress from the person of Christ (Article III) to his saving work (Justification—Article IV), sacramental ministry (Article V), the fruits of faith (Article VI), and the holy church and her constitution (Articles VII and VIII). That order is not unexpected, for the church is the fruit of the application of Christ’s saving benefits, the *Corpus Christi mysticum*, of which he is the ever-living head. The mystical body is manifested where Christ is present in the *Corpus Christi verum*.

Here no strong distinction is to be introduced between church, gathered congregation, diocese, and national or territorial church body. Where Christ is present by the work of the Holy Spirit in the preaching of the gospel and the administration of the sacraments, he is altogether

⁷ LW 37: 367.

⁸ LW 40: 212–13.

present to bless and save. The local gathering around the pulpit and altar is the church, the body of Christ, wholly and completely. There is no place here for a *pars-et-tota* ecclesiology, whereby the local, diocesan, or even national gathering is only partially or derivatively church, needing the authentication of association within the larger whole. Nor, on the other hand, is any or every gathering of individuals made to be church by the voluntary decision of the individual members to become a congregation or church. Nor may a particular parish communion, diocese, synod, or other jurisdictional unit define itself as “a member of the Body of Christ” or as “holding membership in the Body of Christ,” according to the so-called branch theory which turns churches into “churchettes” or “ecclesial bodies” which are incomplete in themselves and in essential need of outward association with the larger church, its form of ecclesiastical organization, and its spiritual leaders. It is the word, written and orally proclaimed and sacramentally ministered, that renders present the church which will endure forever. Size, shape, polity, and scope aside, this church is the bride of Christ which he came to seek and call to himself, and cleanse in preparation for final presentation, as the apostle announces in the letter to the church at Ephesus (EPH 5:25–27). Here Christology, eschatology, and ecclesiology all stand in closest connection.

The Church and the Churches

The individual or local assembly does not live in isolation. Every assembly of believers among whom the gospel is preached without corrupting additions or omissions and among whom the sacraments are in like manner administered as the Lord has given them is the church full and whole. Each is full and whole, and all such assemblies are altogether one church, full and whole. Unrepentant heresy requires separation, and baseless schisms are to be deplored; they are by nature and definition divisive. But the church is not divided. She is one. Between communities in which the gospel is rightly taught and the sacraments rightly given there should be fraternal recognition of community and mutual submission out of reverence for Christ. That the “churches” (ἐκκλησίαι) are also “church” (ἐκκλησία) is not a human achievement brought about as the result of skillful negotiations and administrative manipulations, or mutual recognition of common notions concerning apostolic or historic church government, episcopal, conciliar, or congregational.

In his high-priestly prayer in the garden before his

crucifixion Christ intercedes for his church. Here the unity of believers in a single church (ἐκκλησία) and the oneness of the churches (ἐκκλησίαι) are found in the reconciling work which he has accomplished by his saving death and resurrection, offered in the proclamation of the one gospel of Christ. The right preaching of that gospel communicates this praying, suffering, dying, and rising Lord and Christ with all that he gives by word and sacrament; consequently those who hear and harken to that gospel are one church, regardless of the limitations of time and space.

The Essential Marks of the Church

In Augustana VII, the church is taught, confessed, and defined, its duration is stated, and its outward marks are noted, although nowhere in the text are these described as outward marks or *notae*. The church is an assembly or convocation of believers which exists at the present time and will continue to exist for all time. This assembly is outwardly identifiable on the basis of what is heard in the assembly (i.e., the teaching or proclamation of the gospel of and about Jesus) and what is observable on the basis of the sacramental activity that goes on within the assembly (i.e., baptism and the sacrament of Christ’s body and blood offered to communicants for forgiveness of sins, oneness with himself and the Father, and the foretaste of heaven). Baptism, the Holy Supper, and confession and Holy Absolution will be more thoroughly described in Articles IX–XII.

Where these marks are found, there the church is to be found, because there the person of Christ and the fruit of his saving work are made present by the Holy Spirit, working faith and gathering a faithful, believing people. The manifestation of the church is not prior to or independent of preaching and sacraments, as though they could be listed among a number of activities with which the church appropriately occupies herself. Nor can we posit that the church as institution authenticates and validates preaching and the sacrament. The presence of the church is tied to the marks of preaching and the sacraments by virtue of their dominical designation as the means of Christ’s saving presence. The proclamation of Christ gathers the church, just as during his earthly ministry Christ gathers the people to himself by opening his mouth and speaking. *Ubi Christus, ibi ecclesia*. Christ does not go about without his church; where the head is, there too are the members of the body.

The pure teaching of the gospel and the right

administration of the sacraments are essential to the true oneness of the church, for they are constituent to that oneness. As there is only one Lord, proclaimed in the gospel as both Son of God and Son of Man, so too there can be only one baptism, baptism into his death, and there can be only one sacramental banquet which is his very body and blood for forgiveness, life, and salvation. There cannot exist alongside this a second gospel which proclaims a different Christ, some other baptism for some other purpose, and a supper which is something other than his body and blood or is given for some purpose other than eating and drinking. That these are described as “enough” (*genug*) and “sufficient” (*satis*) does not mean that together their proper outward observance represents a minimum standard beyond which everything is permitted. The terms are rather to be understood as a confession that the preaching of the gospel and the right use of the sacraments do fully what God has given them to do—to bear witness to the church’s oneness. Man adds nothing to them—no mark or quality—to authenticate, validate, or legitimize them. What men have instituted may be described as ceremonies (“*Ceremonien, von den Menschen eingesetzt, “ritus aut ceremonias ab hominibus institutas”*) which serve to exalt and extol what God does and gives. They have no power to authenticate, validate, or legitimize, and it is not necessary that they be kept uniformly in every place.

Included among human ceremonies and traditions are matters concerning which there is no clear dominical institution. Thus, human traditions may be said to include pious and commendable practices that have been handed down from one generation to another, even from the apostles themselves, which the church may continue to use. However, these ceremonies and traditions do not bear witness to the true unity of the body of Christ in quite the sense that the *notae ecclesiae* do, nor are they meant to do so. Thus, their uniform use in all places cannot be made an absolute necessity. And, on the other hand, neither can their abandonment and disuse be uniformly required. The marks of the church stand at the center; human traditions stand outside the circle that marks that periphery. They gain significance from their association with the church, but they are by no means essential.

The Needs of the Church

The ministry of the church (*Predigtamt, Ministerium Ecclesiasticum*) stands within the circle as essential to the church. In *That a Christian Gathering or Community Has*

the Right and Authority to Judge All Doctrine and to Call, Install, and Depose a Teacher on the Basis of the Scripture (1523),⁹ Luther notes first what a Christian congregation is and where it can be found. It is recognized by the presence of a sure mark, the preaching of the pure gospel. For this reason, and since the soul of man requires it, when bishops and others refuse to provide for the ordination of preachers, the right to do so must be taken from them and given to the community of Christians.

Thus we conclude that where there is a Christian congregation which has the Gospel, not only does it have the right and power, but it is obligated by its responsibility for the salvation of the souls brought to Christ in Baptism, to shun, flee, dismiss, and withdraw from the authority now exercised by the bishops, abbots, cloisters, foundations, and all such, since one sees clearly that they teach and lead contrary to God and His Word. Therefore it is certain and sure and well-founded and one can depend on it that it is a divine right and necessary to the salvation of souls that such bishops, abbots, cloisters and whatever pertains to their rule be deposed or shunned.¹⁰

The *Ministerium Ecclesiasticum* arises out of the commission given to the apostles by Christ after his resurrection. They are to “make disciples” (μαθητεύσατε) of all nations by “baptizing” (βαπτίζοντες) and “teaching” (διδάσκοντες) (MAT 28:19–20). What is to be taught is the gospel of Jesus Christ, including what he mandates to be kept and done (τηρεῖν πάντα ὅσα ἐνετειλάμην ὑμῖν). What is to be kept and done includes the baptismal commandment, absolution for the penitent, and the eating and drinking of Christ’s very body and blood in anamnesis (“This do in remembrance of me” τοῦτο ποιεῖτε, ὁσάκις ἔαν πίνητε, εἰς τὴν ἑμὴν ἀνάμνησιν) in his supper (LUKE 22:19; 1 COR 11:24–25). Thus, the *Ministerium Ecclesiasticum* is *Ministerium Divini Verbi*—teaching the gospel and ministering the sacraments, and the church herself is the qehal (קהל) or “gathered congregation” (ἐκκλησία) gathered by and around the word and receiving the teaching and administration.

The congregation cannot continue without preachers/teachers. When and if ordained priests cannot otherwise

⁹ “Das eyn Christliche versamlung odder gemeine recht und macht habe, alle lere tzu urteylen und lerer zu beruffen, eyn und abzusetzen, Grund und ursach aus der schrift.” WA 11: 401–16.

¹⁰ See LW 39: 308.

be gotten, the church must itself call into the holy ministry capable men whom God has equipped and gifted for the office of teaching the gospel and administering the gospel sacraments. According to the usual order, the minister of ordination is ordinarily a bishop. Otherwise, the minister of ordination is to be one who already possesses the office of the ministry or who has been designated by the church or other properly constituted authority as the minister of ordination. The newly ordained then takes up the responsibility of ordaining, i.e., ordering of others into the *Ministerium Ecclesiasticum*. A preacher so ordained may not only preach, but also baptize, celebrate mass, and assume the cure of souls.

The evangelical and scriptural justification for such a course of action is clear to Luther. John 6:45–46: “It is written in the prophets: ‘And they shall be all taught of God.’ Everyone who has heard from the Father and has learned, comes unto me”; Psalm 45:7: “You have loved righteousness, and hated iniquity: therefore God, your God, has anointed you with the oil of gladness above your fellows”; 2 Corinthians 4:13: “You have received the same spirit of faith, as it is written: ‘I believed, therefore have I spoken,’ we also believe and therefore speak ...”; and Psalm 116:10: “I believed, therefore have I spoken: but I am brought very low.”¹¹ Where a Christian finds himself isolated and without Christian companions, he must take the work of preaching and teaching the gospel upon himself. However, if other Christians are present, he should not arrogate to himself the office of preacher, but let the office be filled by those called and selected to serve.¹² Although this course of action gives the appearance of not heeding the existing spiritual authorities, the breach is only apparent. Bishops and abbots who do not fulfill their duty do not truly represent the apostles.

In *De Instituendis Ministris Ecclesiae...* (1523),¹³ Luther is prepared to press his case further. Papal ordination is not to be desired even if available, since the Roman bishops act as though the priesthood were their own creation and subject in every respect to their regulation. Those

whom they ordain are not ordained according to the purpose of Christ, for they are not ministers of gospel and sacrament but mere mass-priests. Ordination was first instituted on the authority of the Scriptures, and it is to be held in honor as the highest of all church offices, since the whole church depends upon the preaching of the gospel. In addition, the papal ordination is to the office of offering Christ’s body and blood as a sacrifice before God.

The particular church (ἐκκλησία) lacks no gift or power which a larger or more complete body must offer her, or exercise with her or on her behalf. To each church it is given both to proclaim and live by this gospel and to exercise the “power of the keys” (*potestas clavium*) in conformity to the divine word. Each assembly has the authority to call its own pastor. That it does not also ordain him but leaves that to neighboring pastors and ecclesiastical overseers (bishops, visitors, provosts, et al.) bears witness that the ministry of the church into this pastor being ordained is more than a matter locally constructed and arranged. The ministry which Christ has ordained and established for the church (ἐκκλησία) and the churches (ἐκκλησίαι) and the act of ordination into it both stand as tokens of the unity of the church.

The Place of the Ministry

The church is known only by her marks, and she cannot be discerned on the basis of supposed evidences of antiquity or sanctity, or a traditional or even biblically sanctioned form of ecclesiastical order and polity. Here the primary organ of discernment is the ear of man into which the word of God is spoken, for it is the spoken word of the preacher which gathers the church around itself, and it is the word which makes baptism and the sacrament of Christ’s body and blood and speaks the word of absolution. God’s word is never apart from God’s Spirit; both together do what God intends. The preacher or celebrant whose mouth God employs speaks a word and administers a sacrament to which he personally adds nothing, but he stands in the closest possible connection with the Lord who makes use of him. “Every minister should glory in this, that he is an instrument of God through which God teaches, and he ought not to doubt that he is teaching the Word of God.”¹⁴ What Melancthon says in Apology VII/VIII with specific reference to the ministry of unworthy men surely applies also to those who are not unworthy: “For they do not represent their own persons, but the

¹¹ “Est scriptum in Prophetis: ‘Et erunt omnes docibiles Dei.’ Omnis, qui audavit a Patre et didicit, venit ad me.”; Ps 45:7 (44:8 (LXX): “Dilexisti iustitiam, et odisti iniquitatem: propterea unxit te Deus, Deus tuus oleo laetitiae prae consortibus tuis”); 2 Cor 4:13: “Habentes autem eundem spiritum fidei, sicut scriptum est: ‘Credidi, propter quod locutus sum’, et nos credimus propter quod et loquimur...”; and Ps 116:10 (115:10 (LXX)): “Credidi, propter quod locutus sum: ego autem humiliatus sum nimis.”

¹² LW 39: 311.

¹³ LW 40: 3–44.

¹⁴ LW 29: 4.

person of Christ, because of the church's call, as Christ testifies (LUKE 10:16), 'He who hears you hears me.' When they offer the Word of God or the sacraments, they do so in Christ's place and stead" (Ap VII/VIII, 28).¹⁵ So too, Luther's description of the true, evangelical mass in *On the Private Mass and the Consecration of Priests*, 1532:

Here everything is done, first of all, according to the ordinance and command of Christ, so that it is offered and given to the church under both kinds on the basis of the words of Christ: "Take, eat, this is my body," etc., and "Do this in remembrance of me." The pastor does not receive it only for himself, as the pope's sacrilege does. He also does not sacrifice it to God for our sins and all kinds of needs, as the pope's sacrilege does. He does not give it to us and he also does not sell it to us as a good work to reconcile God, as the pope's sacrilege does, having made such a blasphemous commercial affair of it; rather, he administers it to us for the comfort and strengthening of our faith. In this way Christ is made known and preached. Here there can be no avarice or idolatry. Here we surely have the intention of Christ and of the church. Here we do not have to be concerned whether the pastor is speaking the words secretly or whether he also is effecting conversion or whether he, too, believes, for we hear the words of institution publicly and say them along with him in our hearts. And the institution of Christ (not our action or the chrism) effects a change or gives us the body and blood of Christ. If the pastor does not believe or doubts, we do believe. If he blunders in speaking the words or becomes confused and forgets whether he has spoken the words, we indeed are there, listen to them, cling to them, and are sure that they have been spoken. For this reason we cannot be deceived, and because the ordinance and true faith are present, it must be certain that we are receiving the true body and blood of Christ. God be praised and thanked, that I have lived to see the true Christian mass and the pure Christian usage of the holy sacrament.¹⁶

The Holy Ministry and Ordination

¹⁵ "... quia repraesentant Christi personam propter vocationem ecclesiae, non repraesentant proprias personas, ut testatur Christus: Qui vos audit, me audit. Cum verbum Christi, cum sacramenta porrigunt, Christi vice et loco porrigunt." BSLK, 240.

¹⁶ LW 38: 209.

The holy ministry teaches the gospel and the administration of the sacraments. It derives its status from its close connection with them. And men must in a fitting manner be set in place in this holy ministry. According to Apology XII, 11–12, if ordination is interpreted correctly, i.e., in relation to this ministry of the word, there will be no objection to calling the rite of laying on of hands a sacrament. The church has the mandate to institute ministers, knowing that God approves and is present in it. Further, according to Augustana XIV, "Concerning Church Order they teach that no one should publicly teach in the Church or administer the Sacraments unless he be regularly called."

Questions may remain concerning the precise meaning of such terms as *offentlich lehren*, *publice docere*, *ordentlich beruf*, and *rite vocatus*. The authors of the Pontifical Confutation understand that the terms are used to refer to traditional ordination practices as set down in the ecclesiastical ordinances.¹⁷

Nothing is mentioned in Augustana XIV about the manner by which those to be set in order are called to the ministry, but ordination/confirmation is identified as the specific act or acts by which this is to be done. By virtue of its connection with the ministry, this rite stands within the periphery. Further, were the bishops willing to faithfully discharge their office and act for the benefit of the church and the gospel, then the usual canonical form of ordination too would stand within the circle. However, they neglect the office conferred upon them and are not only unwilling to ordain those who wish to proclaim the gospel and administer the sacraments properly, they also cast them out and persecute them. Under these circumstances, ordination can and should be conferred without the bishops. Ordination stands within the periphery so long as it is a proper ordering to the ministerial office which Christ has given to his church, and episcopal ordination according to the ancient pattern and the canons also stands within the periphery when and if it retains its connection with the center.

In the Smalcald Articles Luther provides an example:

If the bishops would be true bishops, and would devote themselves to the Church and the Gospel, it might be granted to them for the sake of love and unity, but not from necessity, to ordain and confirm

¹⁷ J. M. Reu, ed., "The Confutatio Pontificia..." in *The Augsburg Confession, A Collection of Sources* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1930).

us and our preachers; omitting, however, all comedies and spectacular display of unchristian parade and pomp. But because they neither are, nor wish to be, true bishops, but worldly lords and princes, who will neither preach, nor teach, nor baptize, nor administer the Lord's Supper, nor perform any work or office of the Church, and, moreover, persecute and condemn those who discharge these functions, having been called to do so, the Church ought not on their account to be deprived of ministers.

Therefore, as the ancient examples of the Church and the Fathers teach us, we ourselves will and ought to ordain suitable persons to this office; and, even according to their own laws, they have not the right to forbid or prevent us. For their laws say that those ordained even by heretics should be regarded as ordained and remain so, as St. Jerome writes of the Church at Alexandria, that at first it was governed in common by priests and preachers, without bishops. (SA III, X, 1–3)

Under the terms of the situation described above, the connection between the episcopal office and the center has been severed, and an alternative to it is found by making priests the ministers of ordination. The ministry is important for the sake of the gospel and the sacraments; ordination is important for the sake of this ministry; whatever importance may be assigned to episcopal ordination has derivative significance. The later dogmatists equate bishops and superintendents as church officials charged with the responsibility of ordination. At the same time, they recognize no essential distinction between them and others in the public ministry.¹⁸ Thus, the special office of bishops is peripheral to the office of the ministry itself. It is derived from it and represents a particular instance of

¹⁸ Johannes Gerhard, *Loci Theologici*, XII, 159: "we commit ordination to the bishops or superintendents alone, who are called bishops, not only with respect to the flock intrusted to them, or their hearers, but also with respect to other preachers, viz., presbyters and deacons, the oversight of whom has been intrusted to them; yet meanwhile, we do not recognize any such distinction between bishops and presbyters, as though the former alone, according to a divine right and the appointment of the Lord, have a right to ordain preachers, from which the rest of the presbyters have been excluded in such a manner that they cannot administer the rite of ordination even when necessity demands, as when bishops are not present or are neglecting their duty; but we say that, according to an ecclesiastical custom, introduced for the sake of good order, the power of ordaining has been left to the bishops, although from their presbyters have not been purely or absolutely excluded." Heinrich Schmid, *Doctrinal Theology of the Lutheran Church* (Miami: HardPress, 2014), 610.

it.¹⁹ Ordination itself is not to be omitted except in most exceptional circumstances; both order in the church and the example of the ancient church require it. It is not to be denied that in it "the gifts of the Holy Spirit which are necessary for the discharge of the duties of the ministry of the church are conferred and increased."²⁰ No provision is made for the temporary conferral of the ministry upon men who are called to be "lay ministers" or to serve in specially conceived ad hoc ministries or of deacons and vicars authorized to preach and administer the sacraments in one or more places for a specified period of time, but without the requisite period of theological and spiritual formation, and the regular call of the church and ordination.

Lutheran departure from the usual form of law, ecclesiastical ordinances, and decrees in the matter of ordination did not come early. It was not until May 14, 1525, that candidate Georg Roerer of Wittenberg was ordained in the first ordering into diaconal ministry of an evangelical candidate not previously ordained according to the traditional pattern by a Roman bishop. This ordination was by no means a precipitous act. Luther had laid his groundwork slowly and carefully. In his treatise *Against Emser* (1521),²¹ he had inquired into the nature—real and hypothesized—of episcopal authority and jurisdiction and the relation of the sacramental priesthood to the universal priesthood of believers. The priest who celebrates the mass and consecrates the bread is the messenger and servant of the whole church, the common priesthood which all in the church possess.²² Such a priest ministers and serves on the basis of his call, and no one is to undertake the office without a call, except under extraordinary, emergency conditions.²³ In *Wider den falsch genantten geystlichen stand des Babst und her bischoffen* (1522),²⁴ Luther had reacted against his condemnation and excommunication by calling the ministry of the pope and his bishops into question. He contended that they do not hold and exercise their office according

¹⁹ Bernhard Lohse, *Martin Luther's Theology: Its Historical and Systematic Development* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1999), 296.

²⁰ In Gerhard, *Loci Theologici*, XII, 168, the grace of ordination is separate from the grace of reconciliation. The conferral is ascribed to the prayers of the church and presbytery.

²¹ "Auff das ubirchristlich, ubirgeystlich und ubirkunstlich buch Bocks Emszers zu Leypczick Antwortt D.M.L. Darunn auch Murnarrs geselln gedacht wird." See English LW 39: 137–224.

²² LW 39: 156–63.

²³ LW 39: 175.

²⁴ LW 39: 239–300.

to the requirements or example of the New Testament episcopacy.²⁵ The consideration of the action by which men are rightly set in order in the holy ministry occupied Luther throughout his life, and it a continuing subject of discussion among Lutherans down to the present day.

Already in the sub-apostolic era, the presence of factionalism in congregations, along with the increased presence of gnosticism, montanism, and a variety of heretical movements, made clear the need for regularity and proper order in the apostolic ministry. Irenaeus of Lyons writes that those bishops should be heard to whom the care of the churches had been committed—those who hold to the same doctrine of salvation.²⁶ He had earlier stated that the apostles themselves had instituted these bishops to succeed them (3:3). No heretic could rightly present any apostolic credentials, Tertullian notes; only in apostolic churches would the voice of the apostles truly be heard.²⁷

When this approach was not able to carry the weight laid on it, Augustine of Hippo, in his anti-Donatist writings, provided a formulation of the doctrinal intention and a distinction between valid and invalid ministries, with valid or invalid sacraments issuing from them.

If ordination and ministry are run straight from Augustine's anthropocentric definitions, problems are not solved; they multiply. The unity of calling—ordaining—sending is broken, and the unity of the act of ordination dissolves, so that questions that admit to no conclusive solutions now appear concerning what constitutes a valid ordination, a valid ministry, valid sacraments, and at what point in the rite the conditions for validity are satisfied. Without prior theological agreement between the opposing parties' assertions about the validity or invalidity of ordinations in which the minister of ordination is a minister to whom the right has simply been delegated, to say nothing of the status of so-called lay ministries and the ordination of women, the assertions will be ignored.

Luther and the Lutherans frequently state their preference for the continuation of the office of the bishop as a matter of traditional practice as long as it is recognized as *jus humanum* and is exercised in accordance with its central purposes of teaching, directing, and serving. Although in certain cases selected individuals from the community were invited to participate, ordination did not

become a strictly congregational act carried out without the laying on of hands and prayer by one or more ministers of the church. In place of bishops, the Germans and their spiritual descendants overseas got superintendents and church presidents, who served as administrators and inspectors. The Scandinavians kept the title. Johannes Bugenhagen was at least partially successful in fulfilling the purpose for which he was sent to Copenhagen in that traditional episcopal order was maintained, although those who succeeded the papal bishops had not previously been consecrated as bishops.

In any case, the new bishops stood in apostolic succession in that sense which was important to the Lutherans: apostolic doctrine, faith, and practice were maintained through the ministry of those set in order to proclaim the gospel and administer the sacraments in the churches. In this case, episcopal ministry stands within the periphery because of its connection with the center. The reintroduction of episcopal titles does not appear to have brought with it any deep reappraisal of the office. This is especially the case where this reintroduction has run in line with the notion that an historical episcopacy is absolutely essential to a valid ministry and a valid church. Questions concerning this notion only increase where those from whom this episcopacy is supposed to have been gotten or from whom it is understood to be born do not share a common and properly catholic understanding of evangelical and christological ecclesiology.

Final Observations

Order and polity are by no means matters of indifference. For Lutheran ecclesiology, Christ stands at the center, as always he must. He is the word made flesh. Where Christ is, there is his word and Spirit, as always—always together. By means of the word of and about the Christ, the Spirit gathers the church, the *הַקְּהִלָּה*, the *ἐκκλησία*, the *σῶμα Χριστοῦ*, which he is never without, the *communio sanctorum*, the communion of those made holy by preaching and the sacraments.

Christ, Spirit, church go together, and therefore stand together at the center. Everything else is peripheral to these: holy ministry and the ordination by which men are set in order within that ministry. In a derivative and supportive sense, ministry and ordination are marks of the church, for they have been given to the church by the church's Lord for the sake of the gospel, its proclamation, and its administration in the sacraments. The giving of it is described in Matthew 28 and its parallels. It is given

²⁵ LW 39: 178–80.

²⁶ Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses*, Book V, chap. 20,

²⁷ Tertullian, *De Praescriptione Haereticorum*, chap. 32, 36.

first to the apostles, Christ's designated πᾶσι²⁸ who, in addition to the ministry of making disciples of all nations by baptizing and teaching, are given this special office by which they are enabled to do works normally predicated only to God, so that they not only heal the sick and cast out demons, but also raise the dead and speak words to which God has uniquely bound himself, as described in the Acts of the Apostles. This special endowment is not passed on to succeeding generations in the apostolic ministry. In terms of Lutheran ecclesiology "apostolic succession" must be understood in terms of apostolic mandate given to the church to make disciples of all nations by baptizing and teaching ("μαθητεύσατε πάντα τὰ ἔθνη" [Matt 28:19]).

Christ's mandate is given to the community which the pure prophetic and apostolic word, proclaimed by those called and set in order in the apostolic ministry, gathers around him. Those called to ordain ministers act on behalf of the community of believers. They are themselves ministers of the word (*Divini Verbi Ministri*) called by a variety of titles to serve episcopal functions in the churches. Articles XIV and XXVIII of the Augsburg Confession show preference for both the episcopal title and the provisions for oversight that the canons envision; however continuity of episcopal consecrations are not seen as integral to this. In any case, Rome would not consider complete any form of episcopate which does not include submission to its "Apostolic See." The form of election and succession is a subsidiary matter which must remain on the outer periphery of ecclesiology. What is uncertain cannot serve as a solid basis for certainty.

Admission to the public ministry of teaching the gospel and administering the sacraments comes through the call of God, mediated by the church, and the solemn rite of ordination.²⁹ As the ministry must stand in the

service of the word for the sake of the church's life and growth, so ordination must stand in the service of this ministry. It exists for the sake of the ministry in the church, that the church, the body of Christ, and his body mystical might be known among men on the basis of the *notae ecclesiae*. Luther has noted the outward signs of it. They are signs of those who are gathered together by, in, and under one word and Lord, to bear him witness before all the world, and show mercy on those in need.

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²⁸ Karl Heinrich Rengstorf, "Apostle," in *The Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, 1, ed. Gerhard Kittle (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964), 407–47.

²⁹ It is apparently the derivative status of the holy ministry that some dogmaticians have sought to articulate the distinction between center and periphery by asserting that the holy minister is necessary to the church, but not *absolutely* necessary. Such statements may be used by minimalists to work great mischief, contrary to the intentions of those who formulated the distinction. Luther, with those who subscribe to the Augsburg Confession and the other confessional writings, clearly affirms that the holy ministry is necessary for the church and that admission to it is to be gained in the rite of ordination, in which there is the laying on of hands and prayer by the church's designated representative. Other ordination ceremonies may be employed, so long as they are neither inappropriate nor unduly ostentatious. Under no circumstances should ordination be sought or received from the pope or his bishops, for they are unfaithful to the ecclesiastical

offices which they hold, introduce novelties to the holy catholic faith, make unscriptural and unnatural demands upon the candidates, and proscribe the proper exercise of the office of the public ministry.