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Luther As Practical Churchman

FRED KRAMER

IN OPPOSITION to the juridical concept of the church, which prevailed in official Roman Catholic circles at his time, Luther defines his concept of the church in harmony with the Gospel and with its chief article, justification by grace, for Christ's sake, through faith, in His great systematic treatise, *Of Councils and the Church*. This sets forth the essence of the church and the marks by which it may be known so clearly, that Luther could say: "Thank God, a seven-year-old-child knows what the church is, namely, holy believers and sheep who hear the voice of their Shepherd."¹

But while it had become perfectly clear what the church is, the church itself was in serious difficulty throughout the areas which had accepted the Reformation. For the church, though spiritual in nature, is in the world. Its members are weak, sinful, and quite often ignorant human beings. It had to have pastors and teachers. These had to be educated and instructed in their work. They had to be called to parishes in an orderly fashion. Moreover, because many of them were married men with families they needed houses and salaries to live and do their work. All this called for much intelligent and sustained practical churchmanship.

Luther imbued as he was with the Gospel, trusted the transforming power of the Gospel to bring about the necessary changes in the worship, organization, and life of the church. He could be patient and let the Gospel have its course. Others were not so patient. While Luther was still at the Wartburg, in 1522, "Schwaermer" had reformed the divine service at Wittenberg, and were reforming it in a radical sense elsewhere.

This caused Luther to take a firm hand in the external reforms in the church. First he caused the worship in the church at Wittenberg to be reformed in an evangelical sense, and then, in the year 1523, he wrote an order for worship for the church at Leisnig, which appears to have become the model for other congregations.

In this order of worship Luther specifies among other things that "the Christian congregation shall not assemble unless there is preaching of the Word of God, and prayer, even though this be very brief."²

He proceeds to tell how this may be done. It is interesting to note that he says it should be done daily at four or five o'clock in the morning. He recommended reading and interpretation of a portion of the Old Testament for half an hour or so, followed by a few brief antiphons. This could be repeated in the evening. On Sunday the whole congregation was to assemble, with preaching mornings and evenings, and the sacrament for those who desired it. But "the daily masses shall be done away with entirely, because it is the Word, not masses, that is necessary."³

He directs that all saints' days are to be abolished, or be observed on Sunday, but he would keep the feasts of the annunciation and purification of Mary, and allow the feast of her assumption and nativity to remain for a time. The feast of John the Baptist and that of St. Paul he considers pure, while none of the legends concerning the other apostles are pure.

Anything else that must be ordered Luther felt at that time, would come gradually. Meanwhile "one thing is needful, that Mary should sit at Jesus' feet and hear His Word daily . . . It is an eternal Word; everything else must perish, no matter how much labor Martha bestows on it."⁴

Luther's Order of Worship for the congregation at Leisnig was only the first of many writings on his part in the area of practical churchmanship. In 1523 he published a Latin *Formula missae et communionis pro ecclesia Wittenbergensi*, which was quickly translated into German, but his most famous and best known work of this kind is his *Deutsche Messe* of 1526.

In this work he reveals many of his thoughts about the form the empirical church should take under the Gospel. He urges that his suggestions be used in Christian liberty, not as a matter of law. Many in evangelical circles had undertaken to reform the mass, and many had caused offense by the changes they had made. Luther asked for good order, but insisted that "it is not my thought that all Germany must immediately adopt our Wittenberg Order."⁵

In this brief but tremendously influential work Luther distinguishes three kinds of services or masses: first, the Latin, which he did not wish to abrogate so long as there was call and occasion for it; the second, the German mass, which he wanted introduced for the simple laymen. Then he discusses a third kind of service, which reveals how he thought the church should really be, though he well knew that it was not. He writes:

The third kind of service which a truly Evangelical Church Order should have would not be held in a public place for all sorts of people, but for those who mean to be real Christians and profess the Gospel with hand and mouth. They would record their names on a list and meet by themselves in some house in order to pray, read, baptize, receive the Sacrament and do other Christian works. In this manner those who do not lead Christian lives could be known, reproved, reclaimed, cast out or excommunicated, according to the rule of Christ in Matthew XVIII. Here one could also establish a common benevolent fund among the Christians, which should be willingly given and distributed among the poor . . . The many and elaborate chants would be unnecessary. There could be a short, appropriate Order for Baptism and the Sacrament and everything centered on the Word and Prayer and Love. There would be need of a good brief catechism on the Creed, the Ten Commandments and the Our Father. In short, if one had the

people and persons who wanted to be Christians in fact, the rules and regulations could easily be supplied."

But, he continues:

As yet I neither can nor desire to begin, or to make rules for such a congregation or assembly.⁶

Far from having the ideal congregations envisioned in the above the Reformer had to deal with great masses of people whom he describes in the following terms in his Preface to his Small Catechism a few years later:

The common people, especially those who live in the country, have no knowledge whatever of Christian teaching, and unfortunately many pastors are quite incompetent and unfitted for teaching. Although the people are supposed to be Christian, are baptized, and receive the holy sacrament, they do not know the Lord's Prayer, the Creed, or the Ten Commandments. They live as if they were pigs and irrational beasts, and now that the Gospel has been restored they have mastered the fine art of abusing liberty.⁷

In the first flush of enthusiasm over the successes of the restored Gospel Luther had strongly felt that there should be no legislation with respect to form and order in the church. He had expected that the Gospel would soon take care of all that. He had failed to take into consideration the hard facts about conditions in the church, the perverseness of human nature.

It was these hard facts about the condition of the churches in the areas which either had accepted or were in the process of accepting the Reformation that brought about the so-called church visitations. These began in a small way in 1525, were greatly expanded in 1527, and were to be continued until the 1530's and 40's and beyond.

The church visitations were not originally Luther's idea. He was afraid of new laws in the church just as they were getting rid of the canon law of Roman Catholicism. Sehling credits Duke Johann Georg with giving the first impetus to the church visitations in a letter to Luther dated June 24, 1524. He suggested that Luther should travel all through Thuringia, in order to depose unfit clerics. There is no record of an answering letter from Luther.⁸

Luther finally felt constrained to rein in his idealism and not only consent to church visitations, but to request help for the project from his elector. This was in 1526, more than a year after church visitation had been initiated in a small way by Jakob Strauss and Burkhardt Hund. On February 13, 1527 four official visitors were named, Hieronymus Schurff, Melanchthon, Hans Edler von der Planitz, and Asmus von Haubitz.

These men were at first hampered by a lack of sufficiently clear directives for their work. Then, (it is not wholly clear whether by Luther, or by Melanchthon) a set of instructions was worked out

which, regardless of its precise authorship, bears unmistakably the stamp of Luther's ecclesiastical thinking.⁹

In these Instructions the benefit of church visitation is extolled. These, it is said, were formerly the duty of bishops, while the archbishops were the visitors and supervisors of the bishops. Then the bishops had become princes, and visitations had fallen into disuse or been given into the hands of inferiors. All that had mattered after that was not doctrine and life, but money and gluttony.

The visitors were instructed to see to it that the doctrine of the faith was clearly presented, and that the whole counsel of God, repentance and faith, were preached.

There are then instructions to the visitors to see to it that the pastors teach the Ten Commandments, true Christian Prayer, Tribulation, the Sacrament of Baptism, true Christian Penance (which is explained in terms of repentance and faith), true Christian Confession (which is said to be necessary before communing, although the recounting of all sins is condemned as neither commanded nor possible) true Christian Satisfaction for Sin, (which is explained in terms of Christ's satisfaction for our sins, which the Christian accepts by faith).

There follow then some instructions about these things which are not so much points of the Christian faith, but things which concern order in the church.

The first of these is entitled *The Human Order of the Church*. In this section it is said, "The pastors have been admonished to give greater attention to important subjects, such as Christian repentance . . . faith, good works, the fear of God, prayer, the honoring of God, regard for parents, the education of children, respect for government, not to envy," etc. "These subjects," the instructions go on to say, "are of greater importance than the eating of meat on Friday and the like, however correct such may be before God and conscience. But the people are to be taught to speak with restraint about such matters as church order. For some church ordinances have been instituted for the sake of good order and harmony, as St. Paul says in I Cor. 14(:40): 'All things shall be done in order in the churches'."

Among the things that must be observed for the sake of good order and harmony the Instructions list the observance of Sunday and of the major holy days, "For the people must have certain set times to come together to hear the Word of God."

Masses were to be sung in German normally, on account of the common people, but Latin hymns were to be permitted on the great festivals, "for it is in poor taste to sing only one thing."

A longer section is devoted to Christian Freedom. In this section the Instructions state among other things:

Others talk equally improperly about Christian freedom. Consequently some people think they are free in the sense that they need no government and even that they need pay no taxes.

Others interpret Christian freedom to mean that they can eat meat, refrain from confession and fasting, and the like.

Such wild illusions of the people the preachers should condemn and their teaching should lead to improvement and not to wickedness.

In the first place Christian freedom is the forgiveness of sins through Christ by the Holy Spirit without our merit or aid.

If this freedom is properly explained it can be of great comfort to sincere souls and inspire them to the love of God and Christian works. Therefore this subject should be treated often . . .

Christian freedom . . . means that Christ has promised us the Holy Spirit, to rule over us and protect us against such power of the devil.¹⁰

The section on Christian freedom, strange to say, is followed by a section on the Turks. However, the Turks were one of the forces men feared in the western world at the time of Luther, and they seem to have gotten into the sermons of many pastors, only at times in the wrong way. The Instructions say:

Some preachers clamor recklessly about the Turks, saying we should not oppose the Turks since Christians may not avenge themselves. This is seditious talk which should not be permitted or tolerated. For the government is given the power of the sword and commanded to punish all murder and pillage. Therefore it is obligated to wage war against those who start an unjust war and are responsible for pillage and murder. This vengeance is not forbidden. For Paul says in Rom. 13(:4) that government executes the vengeance of God . . .

After additional instruction about the rights and duties of government to protect people against attacking nations, and a description about the unchristian customs of the Turks this section is concluded with the words:

Therefore the preachers should exhort the people to pray God that he would protect us from this destructive nation, and explain to them what a rightful service it is before God to fight against the Turks when the authorities so command.

There follows in the Instructions a section on daily worship in the church which seeks to preserve the essential parts of the worship services to which they had been accustomed under Roman Catholicism, but adds preaching on Wednesdays and Fridays. There is stress on the need of proclaiming and explaining the catechism truths about the Ten Commandments, the Creed, the Lord's Prayer, and the sacraments.

Of particular interest is the instruction about the Office of Superintendent. This was to take the place of the episcopacy,

which, by reason of the abuses which were connected with it during the Middle Ages and at the time of the Reformation, was not acceptable to Luther and his co-workers. The Office of Superintendent is described in the Instructions as follows:

This pastor (Pfarrherr) shall be superintendent of all the other priests who have their parish or benefice in the region, whether they live in monasteries or foundations of nobles or of others. He shall make sure that in these parishes there is correct Christian teaching, that the Word of God and the holy gospel are truly and purely proclaimed, and that the holy sacraments according to the institution of Christ are provided to the blessing of the people. The preachers are to exemplify a good life so that the people take no offense but better their own lives. They are not to teach or preach anything that is contrary to the Word of God or that contributes to rebellion against the government. If one or more of the pastors or preachers is guilty of error in this or that respect, the superintendent shall call to himself those concerned and have them abstain from it, but also carefully instruct them wherein they are guilty and have erred . . . But if such a one will not then leave off or desist, especially if it leads to false teaching and sedition, then the official who will then bring it to the knowledge of our gracious lord, the Elector. His Electoral grace will then be able in good time to give this proper attention.

The Instruction then proceeds to give the superintendent a hand in the calling of pastors, which at that time many nobles considered to be their own privilege:

We have considered it wise to ordain that in the future when a pastor or preacher either by death or otherwise leaves his benefice and someone is accepted in his place by the patron, such a one shall be presented to the superintendent before he is given the benefice or received as a preacher. The superintendent shall question and examine him as to his life and teaching and whether he will satisfactorily serve the people, so that by God's help we may carefully prevent any ignorant or incompetent person from being accepted and unlearned folk being misled . . .

The Instructions end with a section on schools. This provides that preachers should "exhort the people to send their children to school so that persons are educated for competent service both in church and state."

The idea that it is sufficient for a preacher to be able to read German is pronounced a dangerous delusion. "A bishop must be capable to instruct and to teach others. Thereby he shows that preachers must be better qualified than laymen."

Because it was recognized that existing schools suffered from many faults, the Instructions say:

In the first place the schoolmasters are to be concerned about teaching the children Latin only, not German or Greek or Hebrew as some have done hitherto and troubled the poor children with so many languages. This is not only useless but even injurious. It is evident that these teachers undertake so many languages not because they are thinking of their value to the children but of their own reputation.

Then there are instructions about dividing the children into three groups. In the first division they were to learn the elements of reading and of Latin grammar, and to build up a Latin vocabulary. Music and singing were also to be taught in this division.

In the second division there was to be even greater emphasis on Latin grammar and music, but the children were also to read Latin books, among them the *Colloquies* of Erasmus, and to memorize Latin proverbs. Later they were to advance to the plays of Terence and Plautus. But grammar was still to be king:

The children are to recite these grammatical rules from memory, so that they are compelled and driven to learn grammar well.

Where the schoolmaster shuns this kind of work, as is often the case, he should be dismissed and another teacher found for the children, who will take on this work of holding the children to grammar. For no greater harm can be done to all the arts than where the children are not well trained in grammar.

This is to be done all through the week, and the children are not to be assigned a new book every day.

Provision is to be made for religious instruction along with Latin:

One day a week, for instance Saturday or Wednesday, shall be appointed on which the children are given Christian instruction. For some are taught nothing out of Holy Scripture. Some teach their children nothing but Holy Scripture. We should yield to neither of these practices.

The third division was to receive the abler children from the second group. Besides music these are to be instructed in the more difficult Latin classics, Vergil, Ovid, and Cicero. Drill in grammar is to continue. When they had learned grammar well they are to go on to prosody, wherein they become accustomed to composing verses. For this practice is very useful in learning to understand other writings. Also it gives the pupils a rich vocabulary and makes them apt in many ways.

When they have sufficiently studied grammar they may use these hours for dialectic and rhetoric.

Of the second and third divisions should be required each week a written exercise such as a letter or poem.

The pupils shall also be required to speak Latin. The schoolmaster himself, as far as possible, should speak only Latin with the pupils so that they become accustomed to and are encouraged in this practice.

Armed with these instructions the four appointed visitors carried out their visitations. Unfortunately there are no complete minutes of their meetings with pastors and congregations. But so much is known, that they ran into a great many difficulties with people who did not want to assume the expenses of the visitation, and were otherwise uncooperative, and with noblemen who were seeking to enrich themselves by snatching to themselves land and legacies which had formerly belonged to the church. These properties, the visitors insisted, were now to be used for the salaries of pastors and for the support of schools.

Visitations were all good and well. They clarified the status quo in the churches. The burning question was what to do to bring about improvement and order all around.

This opens up the whole subject of the church orders (*Kirchenordnungen*) of the sixteenth century. Because Reformation lands were fragmented into many small political units, ruled over by petty princes each nominally under the Holy Roman Empire and each of whom had historically laid claim to certain powers also in ecclesiastical matters—although they had often been unable to enforce them in the face of the power of the Roman Catholic hierarchy—it was not possible to have one church order for all Reformation lands. Thus a separate church order was worked out for each political unit which had accepted the Reformation.

The study of these church orders is in itself a large order, as even a casual examination of the thirteen volume work edited by Emil Sehling, *Die Kirchenordnungen des Sechzehnten Jahrhunderts*, shows.

We give an overview of one of these church orders, worked out by Luther's good friend and co-worker Johann Bugenhagen for the city of Braunschweig in the year 1528. It is written in the Low German dialect of Pomerania, indicating the very practical turn of mind of Bugenhagen. He meant to be understood by the people.

This church order,¹¹ as well as the other church orders of the sixteenth century generally, is a constitution, according to which the doctrine, life, liturgy, church practice, church discipline, and government of the churches was regulated.

Bugenhagen's church order for Braunschweig mentions that the very first need for the city was to set up good schools for the children. The second is, that the Word of God be preached purely to the people. The third is to provide common treasuries from which the preachers of the Gospel may be supported and the poor helped in their need.

Then he discusses the need to baptize children. This, however, is to be done only where there are Christians who have

accepted the teaching of Christ and who will teach the children after they have been baptized.

Next he discusses the necessity of baptizing children in German. This he says, is much more necessary than the pomp of fine baptismal garments and chrism, which Christians can well do without. He wants the baptismal ceremony in German, not in Latin, in order that the people may understand what baptism is about, "that the heart of the people who bring the infant to baptism, and the hearts of the others who are there, may be lifted up to God, when they hear the name of God and of our Lord Jesus invoked, and the devil banished."

Returning to the question of baptizing in German the church order asks: "How did we Germans get that way, that we want to hide the Word of God in baptism under an unknown language?"

The instruction about baptism is followed by a long instruction for midwives, who were very important people in their communities at the time of the Reformation. Because they were to instruct and aid and comfort women before, during, and after childbirth, the city council was instructed to provide a sufficient number of capable midwives. In particular the midwives had to be capable of baptizing children in cases of emergency, and they were to warn women not to take a child that had been baptized to the priest to have it baptized a second time.

The regulation about midwives is followed by a long section on schools, in which there are suggestions for both Latin and German schools, and regulations for the teachers and their pay.

The supervision over the schools was placed into the hands of the superintendent and his assistant.

Besides the schools for boys, there were to be in Braunschweig four schools for girls situated in places which made it unnecessary for any girl to go far from her parents to attend school. These schools were to be taught by lady teachers.

There follow regulations for the pastors, and for the superintendent and his assistant. It is interesting to note that somewhat later Martin Chemnitz held office, at first, as assistant to the superintendent, and then as the superintendent in the city of Braunschweig.

Concerning the office of superintendent the order says:

Above all things we must and want to have a superintendent that is an overseer to whom, together with his assistant the supervision of all pastors and of the schools is entrusted by the honorable City Council, so far as doctrine and unity is concerned, as also of the treasurers . . . This is very necessary if we desire by the grace of God to preach with one accord according to the Word of God in the whole city, as we have, by the grace of God begun and are doing.

We will not knowingly tolerate sects or parties with respect to the Word.

The preachers, it is said, are to rebuke sin, but they are not to preach disobedience to the government.

Then there are regulations about salary and housing for the preachers, with emphasis on the "double honor," of which those who labor in the Word and doctrine are worthy. And, because the celibacy of priests is now a thing of the past, housing and salary must be such that a preacher can marry and support a family.

Next are detailed instructions about the work preachers are to do, about divine services and instruction of the youth in the Catechism, about visiting the sick and the poor, about matters relating to matrimony, about excommunication, about "bumming" divine services, about dealing with criminals.

Finally there are instructions about the church library, which is to be kept up and enriched with all the books of Augustine, Ambrose, Jerome, etc. and sundry other instructions.

In this way the church orders sought to provide for the churches which had accepted the Gospel a firm order, according to which the practical problems of church life could be handled, and the church be edified through the preaching of the Gospel according to a pure understanding, and the administration of the sacraments in accord with Christ's command, which are the marks of that church. The Augsburg Confession says that this church is "properly speaking . . . nothing else than the assembly of all believers and saints."¹²

FOOTNOTES

1. *Smalcald Articles*, Art. XII.
2. Emil Sehling, *Die Evangelischen Kirchenordnungen des XVI Jahrhundert* (Leipzig: O. R. Reisland, 1902), I, 2.
3. *Ibid.* p. 3
4. *Ibid.*
5. Martin Luther, *The German Mass and Order of Service*, 1526, in *Works of Martin Luther*. (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1932), V/1, 171.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 173
7. Quoted from *The Book of Concord*. Tr. and ed. by Theodore G. Tappert. (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1959), p. 338.
8. Sehling, *op. cit.*, p. 33.
9. *Instructions for the Visitors of Parish Pastors in Electoral Saxony*, in *Luther's Works*. Edited by Conrad Bergendorff. (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1958), XI, 269ff.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 303
11. Sehling, *op. cit.*, VI/1, 348-455.
12. *Augsburg Confession*, Art. VIII, in *The Book of Concord*. Edited by Tappert. (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1959), p. 33.