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Luther's Understanding of "Church" in His Treatise *On the Councils and the Church* of 1539

Eugene F. A. Klug

It is a common belief that Luther's doctrine on the church came into clear focus with the Leipzig Debate of 1519. And this idea is certainly not an erroneous one, because from that time onward Luther very clearly repudiated the notion that the church was simply to be identified with the Roman Catholic Church. History, the Holy Scriptures, and the councils all plainly upheld the teaching that church was to be defined as it is in the Apostolic Creed, namely, as the communion of saints, or believers.

However, as with other aspects of Luther's theology, it was merely a case of sharpening a definition which was already present in his arsenal of Scriptural teaching. For example, Luther's famous theology of the cross (*theologia crucis*), which runs like a brilliantly red thread through all of his teaching and life, was actually present soon after the "reformation" had come to pass in him (1512-1513). His early lectures, letters and sermons all make this fact evident. The debate still rages as to whether it was on the Psalms or on Genesis that his first lectures were given. The evidence seems to point, however, to the former. In any case, the *theologia crucis* is evident throughout the Psalm lectures. In his exegesis of Psalm 96, for example, Luther notes that "we are not righteous by our works," but through and by Christ, and that "righteous works are done by us who have first become righteous" by faith. Those who have and believe the Gospel are in Christ's body, the church (Ps. 101:2). Unbelievers, even though they put on "a right and believing face," are not and cannot be members of His body, but are rejected because of their rejection of His Gospel. The church is a spiritual unity, or spiritual assembly. It is a holy, not a secular, kingdom — holy because of Christ's merits, which are imputed to it (Ps. 111:1; 114:2).

Certainly, therefore, Luther's famous definition of church in the Smalcald Articles (1537) as "the holy believers and lambs who hear the voice of their Shepherd" (III:XII) comes as no surprise. By that time he has expressed the same thought many times over in many of his writings. In his profound and rightly famous treatise on the Lord's Supper (1528), known also as his "Great Confession," Luther defined accurately the church's nature, stating:

I believe that there is one holy Christian church on earth, that is, 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.¹

There are no boundaries which can circumscribe Christ's planting of His church. Thus, Luther notes that it is physically dispersed even in the Roman Church, though the Roman priests and bishops are not its head. Christ alone is its head. Luther sees this doctrine of the worldwide extension of the church as intimately tied to the central article on justification, and so he states in the same context:

In this Christian church, wherever it exists, is to be found the forgiveness of sins, that is, 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, and received. Moreover, Christ and His Spirit are there. Outside this Christian church there is no salvation, or forgiveness of sins, but everlasting death and damnation.²

Not so well known, but equally influential, in the final shaping of the Large and Small Catechisms of 1529 were Luther's Sermons on the Catechism, produced in 1528 like the "Great Confession." These were by no means Luther's first efforts at expounding the chief parts of Christian doctrine. He had done so even before the posting of the Ninety-five Theses on October 31, 1517. But by 1528 his thought and definitions are as clear as the finest crystal. Expounding the words of the Lord's Prayer, "Thy Kingdom Come," Luther stated:

The Christian church is your mother, who gives birth to you and bears you through the Word. And this is done by the Holy Spirit, who bears witness concerning Christ. Under the papacy nobody preached that Christ is my Lord in the sense that I would be saved without my works.³

Luther thereupon proceeds to tie the basic sense of church as the "communion of saints" to the actual situation that obtains in real life, or in local congregations of Christians. The phrase, "the communion of saints," in the Creed is explanatory, he holds, and "is of one piece with the preceding," that is, the *una sancta*, or holy Christian church. "Formerly," he states, "it was not in the Creed"; it was added for clarity's sake. He then adds the helpful comment:

When you hear the word "church," understand that it means group (*Hause*), as we say in German, the Wittenberg group or congregation (*Gemeine*), that is, a holy, Christian group,

assembly, or, in German, the holy, common church (*Christenheit*); and it is a word which should not be called "communion" (*Gemeinschaft*), but rather "a congregation" (*eine Gemeinde*).

Nevertheless, the meaning of "church" in the Creed is the same as its first sense in Scripture, namely, the sum total of believers in Christ:

Someone wanted to explain the first term, "catholic church" [and added the words] *communio sanctorum*, which in German means a congregation of saints, that is, a congregation made up only of saints. "Christian church" and "congregation of saints" are one and the same thing. In other words: I believe that there is a holy group and a congregation made up only of saints. And you too are in this church; the Holy Spirit leads you into it through the preaching of the Gospel.⁴

Thus, it is not the individual congregations, among which there may be unbelievers or hypocrites present, nor is it the larger church group (such as the Roman, Greek, or even Lutheran churches) which should be identified with the "church" of Scripture and the Creed. It all narrows down rather to the one bride of Christ, His spiritual body, of which He is the head, "the holy believers and lambs who hear the voice of their Shepherd."

This emphasis by Luther on the true meaning of "church," reaches its zenith of clarity in his great treatise *On the Councils and the Church* of 1539. In large measure this is so because of the peculiar focus of this work. Luther's discussion of the doctrine of the church is here set into the full context of contemporary issues and burning questions. Luther confronts the existential facts head-on and demonstrates that the church under the regime of the Roman pontiff cannot be reformed if the councils and the church fathers are to serve as criteria. To bolster his case he describes in detail the programs of the four early, ecumenical councils (Nicaea, Constantinople, Ephesus, Chalcedon). Their main goal, it is true, was fulfilled in the defense of the faith. In this area they were, for the most part, successful; but in peripheral matters their efforts at church reform were, on the contrary, often desultory and coupled with much wheel-spinning. Luther's survey incorporates a truly masterful presentation of the whole Christological content of Scriptural teaching as he deals with the questions at issue as to the person and work of Christ. This presentation leads him finally to define the true nature of the church and to delineate in exemplary fashion the marks of the church, the external tokens by which it can be recognized or located.

It is well known, of course, that Luther, very early in his career as Reformer, had urged the convening of a free council. His emphasis was on "free" — in other words, an open general council in which all parties in the dispute might come together and face the questions at issue, discussing and judging them on the basis of the Word of God alone, Holy Scripture. Such was Luther's appeal already in his *Open Letter to the Christian Nobility* (1520), in which he urged the responsible leading laymen of the church, the princes, to call for a general council, much as the early Christian emperors had done in an effort to deal with heretical teachings and dissent within the church. In the ensuing years, however, such appeals were rejected by the papacy a number of times. The German Diet of 1524 at Nürnberg urged the convocation of an open council to meet on German soil, as quickly as possible. But the papal office regularly opposed all such overtures. Its stance was simply a reiteration of the decision of Worms: Luther was a heretic, and all who stood with him were to be dealt with as heretical, subversive, radical revolutionaries. An open, free council was not an alternative.

During the years of his reign upon the papal throne (1523-1534), Clement VII used all stalling devices possible to avoid calling a free council. Under pressure from Emperor Charles V and the powerful German princes, Pope Paul III finally showed signs of yielding, albeit in a hesitant, tenuous, grudging sort of way. Tentative plans called for a council to meet at Mantua in 1537, and, when this failed, for a meeting in Vicenza in 1538. Neither of these prospective conclaves came about. The reasons were several, but chief among them was political expediency.

Needless to say, the Protestant princes opposed any council which was to meet on "foreign" soil, and, most of all, one in which the cards were stacked against them even before their concerns were heard. Such an atmosphere was inevitable if and when the pope should serve as convener of the council, judge and jury all wrapped up in one. Accordingly, the Smalcald League, formed in part to deal with this eventuality, set down the four conditions under which the Protestant princes would attend a general conclave: (1) it had to be a free council; (2) they were to be full participants, not merely accused heretics; (3) Scripture had to be the sole authority; and (4) the council had to be held on German soil, away from the heavy-handed sway which the pope exercised elsewhere.

Luther, as always, readily acceded to the request of his prince to prepare a theological brief, or treatise, for the Lutheran party in the eventuality that a council would take place. As demonstrated

above, he had by this time done all the spade-work necessary on the main issues that would lie before such an assembly. As recently as 1538 he had also written on the three ecumenical creeds. The Smalcald Articles of 1537 stated in a very positive way the theological stance of the Lutherans. But now, in addition, he very carefully researched the whole matter of the early councils, the disputed points, the role of the leading church fathers, and like matters. He mentions his sources, too: Eusebius of Caesarea, Cassiodorus, Peter Crabbe, and Platinas. Eusebius (c. 280-339), often called the "father of church history," was schooled in the careful preservation of ancient materials by Pamphilus. He was a friend of the Emperor Constantine and active at Nicaea (325). Later he identified, or sympathized, with the Semi-Arians, opposing Athanasius on the crucial matter of Christ's full deity and equality with the Father. Cassiodorus (c. 490-580) was the author of the important *Historia Tripartita*, which was based on excerpts from Theodoret, Socrates, Sozomen, and Canon Law, and thus continued the story of the church's history beyond Eusebius. Peter Crabbe's *Concilia Omnia* was newly published as Luther was doing his research and thus became his main source of information on the councils. Platinas wrote his *Lives of the Popes* between the years 1471 and 1481.

Luther begins *On the Councils and the Church* on a pessimistic key, expressing doubts whether any pope could seriously want and actually convene a free council for Christendom. To the Wittenberg professor the papal maneuvering was the equivalent of teasing a dog by dangling a morsel in front of him and then smartly rapping the unsuspecting mutt on the snout. In a similar manner, the princes were being victimized by the pope, who all the while had no serious interest in reform in the church. But Luther takes comfort in the fact that Christ is the real and supreme ruler in His church, which is His own body, and that He knows well how to preserve and keep it, though meanwhile many innocent parties must suffer the shame of being branded heretics. Be this as it may, and though papal idolatry continue to run its headstrong course, there is comfort in knowing that the Holy Scriptures are on the side of those protesting the papal arrogance. Perhaps individual parishes have been brought to the brink of perishing and the church at large harassed by such ecclesiastical chicanery; but that God, as always, will have the last word and will preserve His church Luther is confident.

Luther understood history too well to place much stock in the church's ability to reform itself by merely harking back to the councils and the fathers. Granting that some of the early councils

did successfully counteract heretical teachings, he also deplored the amount of time that was spent at later councils (and, for that matter, also at those first significant ecumenical councils) on trifles, or “peripheral piffle.” Issues were often skirted. While the first four councils were better on this score than the rest, Luther noted how unequal was the performance of those which followed. He was frank to acknowledge the good and often heroic work of some of the fathers — how Bernard, for example, reminded the church of his day to have constant recourse to the Scriptures and thus “rather drink from the spring itself than from the brook”; and how Augustine expressed a very cautious estimate of the value of councils in steering a straight course on the central doctrinal issues of the Christian church. Augustine similarly advised that the Scriptures alone be regarded as the ultimate judge and authority in all matters pertaining to the faith; he had “learned to hold only the Scriptures inerrant,” and as a result he “lets the brooks flow and drinks from the spring.” As Luther read the historical accounts, however, he noted with sorrow how the councils had come more and more to outweigh the Scriptures in authority, even though they could scarcely compare with the Scriptures in spiritual significance. Luther felt, indeed, that if the church had depended for its existence on the councils and the fathers, it would long since have perished.

Luther surveys the first four ecumenical councils at considerable length. For the sake of unity in the church and purity of teaching, the first major council at Nicaea met in order “to preserve this ancient article of faith that Christ is true God.” But even that central article of the Christian faith would not have remained safe within the church, if it had been the council alone, and not the authoritative Scriptures, which ruled. As it was, Nicaea was followed by a period during which Arius’ followers actually flourished. They enjoyed the blessing of Constantine and his successors, political leaders who may not have fully understood the theological issues. The church was given the “Judas kiss” by Arius’ followers. In spite of the machinations of his theologians, Constantine, Luther felt, remained true to the Christian faith. But such historical examples should aid us in detecting and forestalling enemies of God’s pure Word when they, like “the papal poltergeists,” inveigh against God’s truth.

The Council at Constantinople in 381 defended the true deity and equal majesty of the Holy Spirit who proceeds from the Father and the Son. In the history of the church this council also showed the second-rate place which the Roman bishop occupied in comparison with the bishops from the eastern part of the

Roman empire, Luther observes. From that time onward, however, the rivalry between the eastern and western segments of the Christian church became sharper. Rome did not relish the graphic reminder that it, after all, was but a daughter church of the mother church at Jerusalem, having even less ecclesiastical power than Constantinople or Antioch.

The knotty Nestorian question was before the church at the Council of Ephesus in 431. It is Luther's opinion that Nestorius was probably not an intentional heretic, but a man who had too much prestige and position (he was patriarch of Constantinople, and before that of Antioch) for his intelligence and theological competence. Luther saw Nestorius as a rather simple ecclesiastical official who really wanted to uphold both Christ's true deity and His true humanity. But Nestorius' error derived from his inability to understand and describe accurately the *communicatio idiomatum*, the communication of attributes, of the two natures in the one person of Christ. Because of the personal union of natures in Christ, Luther explains, Nestorius should have seen that whatever is said of Christ as man must also be said of Him as God — that, for example, because Christ suffered death according to His human nature, it was correct, indeed necessary, to say that the Son of God died; and, *mutatis mutandis*, that because the man Jesus Christ is also true God, therefore the man Christ is rightly identified as the Creator of the world. In his wonderfully down-to-earth style Luther gives his readers an excellent lesson on Christology. If the Son of God did not die for us on Calvary, then we are lost. The Christian world has probably never had a teacher who possessed a more sensitive appreciation of the whole content of Sacred Scripture than Luther possessed.

When Luther comes to evaluate the Council of Chalcedon in 451, he proceeds with the same kind of probing scrutiny. He is aware that the agenda of this council was rather foggy. Yet the main issue revolved around Eutyches who, like Nestorius, erred concerning the relationship of the natures of Christ, but in a reverse way. Undoubtedly Eutyches, too, wanted to defend the true deity and true humanity of Christ. His error, like many a heretic before him, was more of the head than the heart. But this was no excuse for his simplistic idea that there was ultimately only a divine nature in Christ since the divine absorbed into itself the human nature. God is the Creator, not the man Jesus, said Eutyches. But if one carried his Christology to its logical result, Christ would be the kind of Savior whose death would not be real, because mortality is not a property of the divine nature. Thus Eutyches wanted to accept the conclusion that the death of Christ

was real but denied the premises; such was Luther's diagnosis of the man's problem.

The faulty, unscriptural thinking of men like Nestorius and Eutyches, says Luther, is repeated only too often within the church, notably on the doctrines of justification and sanctification. In spite of the *nexus indivulsus* that exists between faith and good works (the latter flowing spontaneously from the former) theologians have again and again slipped into the synergistic trap of the *mixtum compositum*, combining works with faith in the salvation of man. Thus, either they make the Law do what only the Gospel can achieve, or *vice versa*, they make the Gospel do what only the Law is able to perform. Again, Luther's handling of the Chalcedonian affair provides him with a ready platform for the instruction of the church.

Councils have a significant place in the church's life, as history shows; but, Luther contends, in no way can they be considered as reliable as the Holy Scriptures. Nothing more, nothing less, than what the Scriptures themselves teach may councils impose upon the church. The doctrines of faith and good works, and their proper relationship, were cases in point. Synods demonstrate that the Holy Spirit has no hand in what they decide or rule, if they go beyond Scripture's teaching. The chief value of councils, therefore, in the history of the church has been their service as consistories confronting heresies and heretics, keeping the church safely on Scripture's sure path. Councils have no power to establish new articles of faith, nor to bind consciences to "new good works" or ceremonies beyond what the Scriptures teach, nor to label as sin or evil works what is not so judged by God's Word. Nor is it their task or right to interfere in secular affairs. In sum, synods have their place — and a useful one — when, on behalf of the church, they "confess and defend the ancient faith."

It was such a council for which Luther yearned during the days of the Reformation. He saw, however, that there was no hope of its coming from the Roman see. For this reason Luther saw the need (1) "to summon from all lands people who are thoroughly versed in Holy Scripture and concerned with God's honor, the Christian faith, the Church, the salvation of souls, and the peace of the world," and (2) to "promote the small and young councils, that is, the parishes and schools," as stop-gap measures to provide the leadership lacking in the worldly-minded papistic, hierarchical "church."

In the final section of *On the Councils and the Church*, Luther zeroes in on the nature of the church itself. He has, unavoidably, been circling around the question all the while. Now he carefully

pinpoints "What, who, where the church is." Rome, of course, would very much like to usurp the honor of being, in its highly structured papal form, the church. But that identification would be simply preposterous, according to Luther. The children's Creed, Luther avers, explains very simply "what the church is, namely, a communion of saints, that is, a crowd or assembly of people who are Christians and holy." This is no ordinary assembly. For "Christians are a people with a special call and are therefore not just *ecclesia*, but *sancta catholica Christiana ecclesia*. They are holy because the Holy Spirit daily cleanses them. They are "God's people," as the Old Testament calls them, because they comprise the sum total of all followers of the true and only God throughout the world and history. They are *Christiani per redemptionem, per vivificationem et sanctificationem*, that is, because of and through Christ and His merits alone. The Holy Spirit sanctifies His people by faith and by the godly living which flows from faith. This is quite a different thing. Luther reminds us, from throwing a surplice over your head, or doing another such thing, and thinking yourself holy because the church says so. We are dealing here with a basic article of faith, one that has to do with the church's very nature and location. Luther sets down a sevenfold guideline whereby the true church is to be recognized.

The *una sancta*, first of all, is to be spotted by its possession of the Word of God. God's Word is itself holy and it sanctifies everything it touches. Straw or stubble, that is, impurity, cannot be in it; for the Word of God is like gold or silver, pure. It is inevitable that a holy people will be present where this holy Word is present, for God's Word cannot be without God's people. It is God's Word, more specifically the saving Gospel, that builds the church; it is not the church which stands over the Word.

Baptism is the second mark by which the church's presence can be recognized. Where it is present and honored, taught, believed, administered according to Christ's institution, there Christ's people, the church, will also be. Christians live daily by and in their baptism. And though for a time they forget it or live carelessly in defiance or neglect of it, baptism does not lose its validity or power; it is there like a seaworthy ship to which the sinner may return with a repentant, believing heart. Its validity, after all, depends upon Him who gave it, God, and not upon him who administers it, nor upon him who receives it. Of course, its blessing, the forgiveness of sins, is a benefit which only the believing heart receives.

Similarly, and in the third place, the Lord's Supper betokens

the church's existence, for "Wherever it is rightly administered, believed, and received, according to Christ's institution," we may know that the true church is present, says Luther. Male or female, young or old, it does not matter; the important thing is "to be anointed with the sublime and holy chrism of God, with the Word of God, with baptism, and also this sacrament." These are the *notae purae* of which the Lutheran Confessions speak.

In the fourth place Luther mentions the Office of the Keys. This mark might well be subsumed, Luther notes, under the previous marks, especially the Word of God as it is proclaimed to sinners. But it deserves to be singled out for special emphasis. Where the keys are administered rightly, where Law and Gospel are faithfully and correctly applied and distinguished, whether privately or publicly, there "you may know that God's people are." The keys are a very important possession, or treasure, of the church, that is, the people of God, young and old, male and female. These believers constitute the royal priesthood. To them belong the keys, and not to the pope as though they were his special prerogative, nor to the clergy exclusively as to some special class.

"The church," moreover, "is recognized externally by the fact that it consecrates or calls ministers . . . who publicly and privately give, administer and use the aforementioned four things, or holy possessions, in behalf of and in the name of the church, or rather by reason of their institution by Christ." Thus, Luther, listing it as the fifth mark of the church, speaks of the pastoral office as existing *jure divino*. "The people as a whole cannot do these things [the four marks previously mentioned] but must entrust or have them entrusted to one person." Except for certain emergencies, states Luther in addition, "the Holy Spirit has excepted women, children, and incompetent people from this function, [and] chooses only competent males to fill this office." Luther cites the usual Scriptural references in defense of his position (1 Cor. 14: 34; 1 Pet. 3:7; Gen. 3:16) and thereby settles a question which has become quite unsettled in our day, namely, the ordaining of women to the pastoral office. Now, the person of the pastor cannot "make God's Word and Sacraments worse or better for you," says the Reformer, but he must adhere strictly "to correct doctrine and practice." Nothing less than such adherence can be expected of a servant who will be held accountable before God.

As the sixth and seventh marks of the church's presence, Luther designates two very intimate and lively elements in a Christian's life: prayer and cross-bearing. These marks are aspects of the Christian's sanctification as fruits that blossom forth in his life

from faith. Elsewhere Luther has described prayer as the pulse-beat of a Christian and sets this challenge before the believer in a forceful double negative: "There is no Christian who does not have time to pray without ceasing." The Christian's life is to be marked by prayer. It will be marked, moreover, by suffering or cross-bearing, by "misfortune and persecution, all kinds of trials and evil." Luther highlights the fact that the Christian is schooled by God's chastisement to be a better, stronger, more faithful follower of Christ, the foremost Cross-bearer. The child of God looks upon his trials as heaven-sent, by God's grace and mercy, for his good, and not just as the common lot of sinful mankind. "For the only reason they must suffer," says Luther of his fellow-believers, "is that they steadfastly adhere to Christ and God's Word."

There are other externals by which the church can also be recognized, though these perforce are not so reliable. Among these Luther lists sanctification, which is always imperfect in the believer's life here on earth, but is nonetheless to be encouraged. There are also ceremonies, certain festival days, the church building, the pulpit, the font, candles, vestments, etc. These, too, have a proper place in Christian usage, Luther allows, but "nevertheless there should be freedom here" and the church and its members can well exist without them. But without the God-ordained instruments of salvation, Word and Sacrament, God's church cannot exist, for these are "commanded, instituted, and ordained by God." These are the *larvae Dei*, the gracious veils of God, whereby He has deigned to make himself known and to channel His mercy to men. The church must remember and retain these supports of its very life; they are heaven-sent and blessed gifts, and "in this guise God performs His majestic, divine works." The true church is known by its attitude towards these means of grace, which seem so lowly when compared with the so-called mighty works of men. But, says Luther, God's church, and the people who constitute it, are known by this faith: even if God were to bid them to pick up a straw and to know that thereby their sins were forgiven, they would do so and so believe. It is not a matter of the greatness of our works, our faith, or the church's outward majesty or piety. The facts are these, states Luther:

Even if you were able to bear heaven and earth in order to be saved, it would all be lost; and he who would pick up the straw (if this were commanded) would do more than you, even if you could carry ten worlds. Why is that? It is God's will that we obey His Word, use His sacraments, and honor his church.

God's church, like God's Word, will endure into eternity. This is God's promise and it will not fail. *Verbum Dei manet in aeternum.*

Footnotes

1. Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut T. Lehmann, eds., *Luther's Works* (St. Louis and Philadelphia: Concordia Publishing House and Fortress Press, 1955-1972), 37, 367.
2. *LW* 37, 368.
3. *LW* 51, 166.
4. *LW* 51, 167.