

What Does It Mean Today
To Be The Church?

REGIN PRENTER

The Conflict To Renew Lutheranism

HANS-LUTZ POETSCH

The Role Of Conservatives
In An Age of Revolution

RALPH MOELLER

Are We Getting Through
With The Gospel In Our Liturgy?

REINHART TRAUTMANN

Worship In The USA

REINHARD MUMM

Luther's Ecclesiological Significance
For The Twentieth Century
Ecumenical Movement

HARRY J. MCSORLEY C.S.P.

Ignorance About Preaching

WILLIAM F. MEYER

Theological Refractions
Book Reviews



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Luther's Ecclesiological Significance For The Twentieth Century Ecumenical Movement

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THE TWENTIETH CENTURY has justly been called by the late Bishop Otto Dibelius of Berlin "the century of the Church"—the century in which Protestant Christianity, under the impact of the ecumenical movement, has recaptured to a considerable extent the meaning and importance of the visible aspects of the Church and has to that extent overcome the exaggerated spiritualistic-pietistic ecclesiology that was so influential through the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and which still finds sophisticated spokesmen in the Bultmann school of exegesis, for example, and less sophisticated ones in the left wing Christian denominations. Clear evidence of this trend—which, from a Roman Catholic point of view, is surely a welcome one—can be found, for example, in the report on "The Church's Unity" issued by the Third Assembly of the World Council of Churches meeting in New Delhi in 1961, part of which reads:

We believe that the unity which is both God's will and his gift to his Church is being made visible as all in each place who are baptized into Jesus Christ and confess him as Lord and Saviour are brought by the Holy Spirit into one fully committed fellowship, holding the one apostolic faith, preaching the one Gospel, breaking the one bread, joining in common prayer, and having a corporate life reaching out in witness and service to all and who at the same time are united with the whole Christian fellowship in all places and all ages in such wise that ministry and members are accepted by all, and that all can act and speak together as occasion requires for the tasks to which God calls his people.

It is for such unity that we believe we must pray and work.¹

Significant for the purposes of this lecture is that Christians of the Augsburg Confession were directly involved in the drafting of this statement. True, the Missouri Synod, since it is not a member church of the W.C.C., did not take part in drawing up the report, even though two members of that Synod were present as observers, along with several Roman Catholics whose church is likewise a non-member. Of even greater significance is the fact that, leaving aside the pros and cons of membership in the W.C.C., there is no barrier whatever to the full acceptance of this statement by any adherent of the Augsburg Confession and the other Symbolic Books of the Lutheran Church. There is nothing in the Lutheran Symbolic Books

or in the entire corpus of Luther's writings that prevents Lutherans from actively praying and working for the realization of such a visible unity of the Church, not because they have some penchant for a big, "super-church," not because of some fear that the Church will otherwise go under—such a fear would mask a fundamental lack of belief in the promises of our Savior and in the presence of the Holy Spirit in the Church—but simply because they are convinced that any other divided style of life for the Church contradicts the will of her Founder and presents a sinful obstacle—a skandalon in the strict New Testament sense—toward the acceptance of the gospel of salvation by the non-believing world. According to the Fourth Gospel Jesus did not pray for unity among his disciples simply for its own sake; he prayed for a unity that would be a powerful sign and testimony to unbelievers, a motive of credibility in Roman Catholic parlance, that would indicate to them that he was indeed who he claimed to be, One sent by his Father into the world to give new and abundant life to men. His prayer was not simply "that all may be one"—but "that all may be one SO THAT (*hina*, a conjunction here denoting *purpose*) the world might believe that you have sent me." A divided Christian church is simply *not* the Church Christ intended, for it *cannot* be the effective witness to a divided, unreconciled world if it itself is divided and unreconciled.

The old talk about our already present spiritual unity in Christ is just that—old talk. It is talk that is no longer heard among those working and praying for the ecumenical unity of the Church. Not because talk about the already existing unity in Christ is not true talk, but because it reflects a pitifully incomplete concept of ecumenical unity, a concept that was rightfully described by Professor Edmund Schlink at New Delhi as an indication of "ecclesiological docetism," which is the danger whenever stress is made on the already existing unity in Christ of the divided churches without equal stress being laid upon the need for visible unity.

The unfortunate thing here is that such a need for visible unity is still not regarded as self-evident by all Christians. More unfortunate is the fact that through some perverse misreading—or non-reading—of history, certain Christians think that their spiritualistic ecclesiological stance is justified by the reformation theology of Martin Luther. They seem to agree with what Roman Catholic polemicists have attributed to Luther, namely a Church that is in reality invisible.

The Church is not an outward, tangible institution, with a divinely appointed spiritual government and direction, such as it had been to Catholics through all the ages, rather it is the spiritual congregation of true believers known to Christ alone Men hold "office" in the Church there must indeed be, but only in order to preach and to dispense the sacraments; any spiritual authority with full powers . . . for guiding the faithful is non-existent.²

Such a one-sided caricature of Luther's concept of the church falsely identifies the hiddenness of the Church with its alleged invisibility. As Ernst Kinder has noted, the Lutheran Symbolic Books never refer to the Church as invisible, even if one reads in the Apology of the Augsburg Confession that "the Church is hidden (*verborghen*) under a crowd of wicked men"³

Secondly, this view overlooks completely Luther's early sense of "churchmanship"—to use a good Anglo-American Protestant term—never retracted at any later point in his career, which was expressed in a number of places all the way up to 1520.

In his sermon on the Feast of St. Peter in Chains, for example, of August 1, 1516, Luther attested to his belief in the need for the visible unity of the church by saying: Without the spiritual authority Christ has entrusted to his church, there would be no order, for everyone would say he is illumined by the Holy Spirit. If we were to follow the heretics, each of whom claims to be guided by the Holy Spirit, there would be as many churches as their are heads."⁴

In the Galatians Commentary of 1519 Luther rebuked the Bohemians for breaking the bond of unity with the Roman Church. He writes:

the separation of the Bohemians from the Roman Church can by no kind of excuse be defended from having been an impious thing and contrary to all the laws of Christ, because it stands in opposition to love, in which all laws are summed up. For this solitary allegation of theirs, that they defected because of fear of God and conscience, in order not to live among wicked priests and bishops—this is the greatest indictment of all against them. For if the bishops or priests or any persons at all are wicked, and if you were aglow with real love, you would not flee We, who are bearing the burdens and the truly intolerable abominations of the Roman Curia—are we, too, fleeing and seceding on this account? Perish the thought! To be sure, we censure, we denounce, we plead, we warn; but we do not on this account split the unity of the spirit⁵

In the same year, 1519, Luther again insisted that there could be no justification for separating oneself from the Roman Church. There is no doubt that this church, he said, is honored above all others, for there Saints Peter and Paul, forty-six popes and many hundreds of thousands of martyrs have shed their blood, conquering thereby both hell and the world. This shows the special favor God has for that church.⁶ Especially instructive on this point is Wolfgang Höhne's monograph, *Luthers Anschauungen über die Kontinuität der Kirche*, which describes Luther's genuine efforts to preserve unity with the Roman Church right into the year 1520.⁷

As we all know, it was precisely in that year that Luther's desires to retain the visible bond of unity with Rome were finally frus-

trated. The occasion, of course, was the promulgation of the papal bull, *Exsurge Domine*, which threatened Luther with excommunication unless he retracted 41 propositions gathered from his works, propositions which were censured as "heretical, or scandalous, or false, or offensive to pious ears, or seductive of simple minds." Which propositions were heretical and which were merely an assault on pious ears, *Exsurge Domine* does not say. For this reason, as I have suggested in my own recent Luther book, I regard this decisively important papal document as a supreme example of an inept exercise of the papal teaching ministry. It surely must be reckoned as one of the sins against unity that the Second Vatican Council says have been committed on both sides in the tragic history of Christian division.⁸

For Luther, the promulgation of *Exsurge Domine* was the last straw. He saw it as final, overwhelming proof that what he had begun to suspect in the last two years was true: the Pope was indeed the Antichrist. We shall return to the question of the papacy at the close of the lecture. But first let us summarize what we have already seen about Luther's ecumenical significance for the twentieth century church. So far we have seen that Luther's concern for the visible bond of church unity has clear contemporary ecumenical significance inasmuch as the Reformer himself can be brought forward as testimony to the separated Christian churches of our time that they are on the right track when they are seeking to recover their lost visible unity.

Having said this, we have already implicitly made a general rejection of the criticism of Grisar and others that Luther knew only an invisible church. But let us be more specific. Let us move to the question of the ordained ministry, which is under such careful ecumenical study today and see what Martin Luther and his reformation colleagues have to say to us today. Although Grisar and others admit the undeniable, namely, that Luther and the Lutheran Symbolic Books see the sacraments as divinely instituted means of grace, a fact that renders totally inconceivable any purely spiritual or invisible church, there is among too many Roman Catholic critics, of the past at least, as well as among certain Lutheran apologists, uncommon agreement that the special ministry of the word and of the sacraments is regarded by Luther and the early reformers as a purely human, purely ecclesiastical construct and not a divinely ordained institutional element in the church distinct from, but always related to, the priesthood of all believers.

We have several things to say about this: (1) The exegetical study by John Hall Elliott entitled, *The Elect and the Holy*,⁹ however one might wish to criticize it, surely shakes that facile complacency that would solve all questions concerning the Church's ministry by a simple retreat to the slogan: "the priesthood of all believers." (2) Look through the Book of Concord and you will find the text in question 1 Peter 2:5-9, cited only one time in all of the Symbolic

Books, and when it is invoked, it is in no way used to supplant or compete with the doctrine of the ordained ministry as later became the fashion in some Protestant circles, including, unfortunately, Lutheran ones. (3) Surprising as it may sound, the church that has the most extensively developed official doctrine on the priesthood of all believers is not the Church of the Augsburg Confession, nor the Church of the Westminster Confession, but the Roman Catholic Church! I simply refer you to articles 10 and 11 of the Constitution on the Church of the Second Vatican Council. Symptomatic of this is the fact that, as far as I know, it is Roman Catholic theologians today, not Lutheran or Presbyterian theologians, who are speculating about the possibility of laymen leading the Eucharist in emergency situations. (4) The doctrine of a priesthood of all believers which would permit an unordained laymen to officiate at the Lord's Supper can be found in Luther early in his reformation career, but this doctrine gradually diminishes in his thought under the influence of the corporate reflection with his reformation colleagues that eventually led to the doctrine of the ordained ministry articulated in the Augsburg Confession. (5) As my fifth and final point in reply to the attribution to Luther of an exaggerated concept of the priesthood of all believers that diminishes the meaning and necessity of the ordained ministry, I wish simply to state my conviction that many Lutherans have done themselves, the Reformers and the twentieth century ecumenical movement a disservice by not paying more attention to Article XXVIII of the *Confessio Augustana*. This Symbol of Faith was, of course, penned by Melancthon, but as we know it had the full approval of Dr. Martin Luther.

Too often I have received from Lutheran colleagues the impression that the sum total of the ecclesiology of the Lutheran Confession is to be found in Articles VII and VIII of the Augsburg Confession. Article XXVIII of that confession is more often than not either entirely overlooked or else not studied with care. And yet it is precisely the rehabilitation of Article XXVIII concerning "The Power of the Bishop" (German text) that could help so much today in the present ecumenical discussion concerning ministry, episcopacy and apostolic succession. Why should only Roman Catholics, Orthodox, Anglicans and American Methodists be standing up for an episcopal church structure in ecumenical discussions? Why do we not hear Lutheran voices joining in, confessing as they once did at Augsburg, that:

the power of bishops is a power and command of God to preach the Gospel, to forgive and retain sins and to administer and distribute the sacraments According to divine right, therefore, (*de iure divino*), it is the office (*Ambt*) of the bishop to preach the Gospel, forgive sins, judge doctrine that is contrary to the Gospel, and exclude from the Christian community the ungodly whose wicked conduct is manifest . . . On this

account parish ministers (*Pfarrleute*) and churches are bound to be obedient to the bishops according to the saying of Christ in Luke 10:16, "He who hears you hears me." (The Latin text reads: "Churches are therefore bound by *divine law* to be obedient to the bishops according to the text, "He who hears you hears me").¹⁰

May I say, as a Roman Catholic whose Church has a very highly developed understanding of magisterium or *Lehramt*, that this concept of the ordained ministry of the episcopate is extremely congenial. When we find this in such an authoritative document as the Augsburg Confession, we become all the more aware that we're not just soul brothers with you, but body brothers as well. Just as Lutherans rightly would like to see Roman Catholics giving more evidence of that freedom of the sons of God which they profess as Christians, so Roman Catholics wish to see a real implementation of the magisterial function of the bishop that Lutherans profess in their greatest confessional book. Can one disagree with the Lutheran theologian, Johann Heinrich Lerche, when he asserts that "the office of the *Landesbischof* is not the office of the bishop in the sense of Article XXVIII of the Augsburg Confession and (that) it has arisen not from the Reformation but from the *Landeskirchentum* that, in the course of time, developed (in Germany)?"¹¹ The office of a bishop and the title of bishop are not the same thing!

So far we have dealt with two aspects of Luther's ecclesiology that he never repudiated, both of which have significance for the ecumenical movement of our century: (1) his genuine concern for maintaining visible bonds of unity in the Church and (2) his adherence to the doctrine of the institution of bishops by divine right, as well as the duty of the churches—by divine law—to obey the bishops. What about that aspect of his theology of the Church that he once wholeheartedly embraced and then most vehemently repudiated—his insistence until 1520 of the need to retain union with the Church of Rome, a need so important that he said no reason justified separating oneself from the Roman Church? What is to be said about his constant identification—from 1520 until his death—of the papacy with the Antichrist?

Obviously the question of the papacy is a crucial question—if not the most crucial one—for the future of the ecumenical movement. The requisite national and international dialogue among Christians on the doctrine of the papacy has scarcely begun and we are surely in no position to contribute substantially to that discussion in the brief space of this lecture. We can, however, suggest some points that might be fruitful for such a discussion insofar as Luther's theological attitude toward the papacy is concerned. As more than one Lutheran theologian has reminded us: the infallibility of Luther has never been defined by the Lutheran Church. Yet the position of

such a seminal theologian on such a decisive issue cannot simply be ignored.

(1) The first thing that would have to be said is by way of an important reminder. The attack on the papacy as the Antichrist was not the center of Luther's reformation protest. The center, as we know, was his proclamation of the good news that man is justified solely by faith in Christ and solely by the grace of Jesus Christ, through no merits of his own. It was primarily because Luther believed that the Pope was denying the Gospel or prohibiting him to preach it that he came to the conclusion that the Pope was the Antichrist. As I have pointed out in my own Luther book, Luther's ecclesiology, including his concept of the papacy, is subservient to and conditioned by his doctrine of justification. "If the Pope will grant us," wrote Luther in his Galatians commentary of 1531, "that God alone by his mere grace through Christ justifies sinners, we will not only carry him on our shoulders, but will also kiss his feet."¹²

Remigius Bäumer, a Roman Catholic theologian, has recently written a very useful essay on "The Young Luther and the Pope." But Bäumer is wrong, in my judgment, when he fails to see with Lortz, Iserloh, Peter Manns, Albert Brandenburg and other Roman Catholic Luther scholars the positive possibilities of this statement which occurs not once, but twice in the commentary on Galatians.¹³ Bäumer does not think that an agreement between Lutherans and Catholics on the doctrine of justification in 1531 would really have affected Luther's attitude toward the Pope. I frankly cannot understand how he can uphold this position and still take Luther's own words seriously.

Regardless of what might have happened in 1531, but actually did not, what is to be the Lutheran attitude toward the papacy *today* now that such extraordinary and unprecedented agreement has been reached between Roman Catholic and Lutheran theologians on "the key issue" that someone has remarked: it's hard to get a good debate going anymore on the doctrine of justification among theologians acquainted with the literature?

(2) We have already mentioned what we consider to be one of the Roman Catholic sins against unity at the time of the Reformation—the inept, insensitive exercise of the papal teaching ministry in the case of *Exsurge Domine*. Can Lutherans, for their part, entertain the possibility that Luther might have been guilty of excessive over-reaction, or imprudence, or pride—or hatred—in affirming so confidently and vehemently that the papacy was the Antichrist?

(3) Is it Luther's judgment that the papacy as an institution is the Antichrist, or is he simply indicting the popes of his time? The answer to this question is of obvious importance for our approach to the question of the papacy today. If Luther identified the papacy as such with the Antichrist, it would seem very hard—if not impossible—to reconcile such a position with Luther's words of 1519—words

he never retracted because he knew they were based on historical fact—that forty-six popes died martyrs' deaths in Rome for the love of Christ. If Luther believed that only the lax popes of his time—or of the medieval period—were the Antichrist, did he have to use such an eschatological category as that of the Antichrist to denounce them? Could he not just as well have called them sinners, hirelings, worldlings—or even heretics—all of which judgments were possible according to both medieval theology and canon law.¹⁴

(4) As Edmund Schlink has pointed out, the statements of the Confessions in which the papacy is linked with the Antichrist were all

made in the conviction of living in the last times and days immediately before Christ's return. This conviction may by no means be minimized; it is basic for decisions of doctrine and practice . . . Therefore we all have to weigh carefully to what extent these historically conditioned statements about the Antichrist are to be understood as dogma or paradigm. To understand them as paradigm would mean to regard them as a model of how to take seriously the Lord's directive that we should look in the present moment of every age for the harbingers of the end. In this case the statements about the *essence* of the Antichrist would have a more binding significance than the judgments about the *pope* as the Antichrist.¹⁵

(5) A final point to be considered is that made by Peter Brunner, who suggests that, had Luther been able to see in New Testament passages such as Mt 16, 18 and Jn 21, 15ff. that which the more recent Protestant exegesis from Bultmann through Cullmann finds in them, this knowledge would surely have had immediate dogmatic consequences for his doctrine of the Church and its order.¹⁶

Time does not permit me to deal here with those problems concerning the papacy that have become especially acute since the Reformation. I refer to the problems surrounding the Vatican I definition of papal primacy and infallibility and those connected with the two papal definitions about Mary which Roman Catholics widely regard as infallible teaching. I can only refer you to the treatment I will give to these neuralgic problems in my forthcoming book on the papacy.

As a concluding word I wish simply to express my hope that these reflections on Luther's ecclesiological significance for the twentieth century ecumenical movement may in some small way further the progress of Lutherans, Roman Catholics and other Christians toward a Church that will be truly evangelical, truly reformed, truly catholic and truly uniting. Only then will the Church of Jesus Christ be what it was intended to be: such an impressive example of unity that it will lead men to believe that Jesus Christ has indeed been sent into the world by his Father to give them more abundant life.

FOOTNOTES

1. *The New Delhi Report*, ed. W. A. Visser 't Hooft (Association Press: New York, 1961), p. 116.
2. H. Grisar, *Luther*, tr. E. M. Lamond, vol. VI (St. Louis, 1917), p. 291.
3. E. Kinder in: H. Lamparter, *Und ihr Netz Zeriss* (Stuttgart, 1957), p. 271. Cf. *Apology*, art. VII and VIII, 19.
4. WA 1, 69. This statement is couched in a very strong attestation to the supreme pastoral authority of the pope, a point Luther did retract later with vehemence. Cf. R. Bäumer, "Der junge Luther und der Papst," *Catholica*, 21 Jhg., H. 4 (1969), pp. 392-420, esp. pp. 400-401.
5. WA 2, 605. Cf. *Luther's Works*, vol. 27, tr. R. Jungkuntz (Concordia Publishing House: St. Louis, 1964), p. 392.
6. WA 2, 72 f., from *Luthers Unterricht auf etliche Artikel, die ihm von seinen Abgönnern aufgelegt und zugemessen werden*.
7. Berlin-Hamburg, 1963.
8. *Decree on Ecumenism*, n. 3.
9. Leiden, 1966.
10. *Augsburg Confession*, XXVIII, 5, 21; cf. V and XIV. In his recent essay, "Die Entstehung und erste Auswirkung von Artikel 28 der Confessio Augustana," in *Volk Gottes*, Festgabe f. J. Hofer (Freiburg, 1967), pp. 361-394, Wilhelm Maurer in our judgment emphasizes too much the restriction on episcopal authority in the area of human ecclesiastical ordinances (XXVIII, 29-74) while overlooking the contemporary ecumenical significance of XXVIII, 5, 21-22. Symptomatic of this "forgotten" section of Article XXVIII is that such a great churchman and theologian as Peter Brunner, in an important article, could warn against the ecumenical movement becoming a "Protestant Synthesis" that would be "coupled with acceptance of the episcopal constitution of the Anglicans." What has happened to the episcopal constitution of the *Lutherans* that is provided for in Augustana XXVIII? Cf. "Commitment to the Lutheran Confession—What does it mean today?" *The Springfielder*, vol. XXXIII, n. 3 (December, 1969), p. 12. Further, why does Brunner say (p. 13) that the "Lutheran confession, as *norma normata*, will exercise concrete authority in the Church" when the foremost book in that confession ascribes to a living person—the bishop—the function and duty of exercising authority by "judging doctrine and condemning doctrine contrary to the Gospel." That is as concrete as authority can get! No book, however sacred and authoritative, and no confession makes concrete authoritative judgments; only persons do who are committed to that book and that confession.
11. In: *Das Amt der Einheit* (Stuttgart, 1964), p. 63.
12. WA 40/I, 181, 11.
13. Cf. WA 40/I, 357; Bäumer, op. cit., p. 418, n. 204.
14. Cf. H. Küng, *Structures of the Church* (New York, 1964), pp. 249-268.
15. *The Theology of the Lutheran Confessions* (Philadelphia, 1961), pp. 282-283.
16. Cited by Bäumer, op. cit., p. 392.