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Luther's View of the Church

RICHARD J. SCHULTZ

IN 1536 Luther prepared The Smalcald Articles. This he did, as he indicated in the Preface:

In case the Pope with his adherants should ever be so bold as seriously and in good faith, without lying and cheating, to hold a truly free (legitimate) Christian Council (as, indeed, he would be in duty bound to do), that they be publicly delivered in order to set forth the Confession of our Faith.¹

The simplicity and beauty of Luther's view of the Church is expressed in Article XII of The Smalcald Articles:

For, thank God, (today) a child seven years old 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 (catholic or) Christian Church.*²

In 1539 Luther produced his treatise *On the Councils and the Church*. It is a remarkable production. Its first part lays bare the folly of hoping for a reconciliation by appeal to councils and fathers. Councils and fathers present us with a mass of confusing contradictions.

The second part of the treatise is a concise and refreshing analysis of the Apostolic Council (Acts 15) and of the four great Christological councils of Nicea, Constantinople, Ephesus and Chalcedon. Luther neatly dissects the Nestorian and Eutychian errors. Neither of them, Luther contends, denied the humanity or the deity of Christ. Both of them did fall into the trap of denying the communication of attributes. Nestorius refused to ascribe the *idiomata* of humanity to the deity of Christ (hence his refusal to call Mary "mother of God"). Eutyches refused to ascribe the *idiomata* of deity to the humanity of Christ. Their error is basically the same. Both affirmed the premise that Christ is true God and true man in one person. Each in his own way, however, denied the consequence that all attributes, human and divine, are ascribed by Scripture to the one, whole person of Christ.

In the third part of Luther's treatise *On the Councils and the Church* we find a thorough presentation of his view of the Church. Incidentally, while the title *Von den Consiliis und Kirchen* could be (and has been) translated *Of the Councils and the Churches*, internal testimony clearly indicates that Luther was writing about *the Church*.

As a specialist in Christian education and as a catechist, I found one reference which almost made me shout for joy. Writes Luther:

If the words, "I believe that there is a holy Christian people," had been used in the Children's Creed, all the misery con-

nected with this meaningless and obscure word ("church") might easily have been avoided. For the words "Christian holy people" would have brought with them, clearly and powerfully, the proper understanding and judgment of what is, and what is not, church.³

"Children's Creed" is Luther's delightful designation for the Apostles' Creed.

In the new Concordia Catechism Series, course II, *This Is The Christian Faith*, we tried hard to follow this emphasis of Luther. In lesson 31 on "The Holy Christian Church" the word "people" occurs twenty-two times. Our illustrator, in picturing the Church, did not draw a single building. Instead, she drew nineteen faces of people of various ages and races.⁴ Our chief Bible reference is 1 Peter 2:10: "Once you were no people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy." That passage is not among the proof texts of the old exposition of Luther's *Small Catechism*. It is gratifying to see that we have echoed a truly Lutheran concept of the Church.

In his treatise, Luther obliterates the notion that the Church equals the hierarchy. Luther does not deal with the concept of the "invisible" Church in the treatise. One might question whether or not misapprehensions are perpetrated by the use of the word "invisible." In *The Apology* (Articles VI and VIII), the confessors found it necessary to reject a Platonic interpretation of the Church:

Neither, indeed, are we dreaming of a Platonic state, as some wickedly charge, but we say that *this Church exists, namely, the truly believing and righteous men scattered throughout the world.* (We are speaking not of an imaginary church, which is to be found nowhere; but we say and know certainly that this Church, wherein saints live, is and abides truly upon earth; namely, that some of God's children are here and there in all the world, in various kingdoms, islands, lands, and cities, from the rising of the sun to its setting, who have truly learned to know Christ and His Gospel.)⁵

The Confessions operate with "the pure doctrine of the Gospel and the Sacraments" (*das Predigtamt oder Evangelium und die Sakramente, puram doctrinam evangelii et sacramenta*) as the two "marks of the church."⁶

Luther, interestingly, presents *seven* marks of the Church in his treatise. This does not create a problem. Luther's expansion of the two marks to seven provides clarity about the use of the Gospel and the Sacraments.

Luther's "seven marks of the Church" are:

1. The possession of the holy Word of God. "Now wherever you hear or see this word preached, believed, professed, and lived, do not doubt that the true *ecclesia sancta catholica*, 'a Christian holy people' must be there . . ."⁷

2. The holy sacrament of baptism. "That too is a public sign and a precious, holy possession by which God's people are sanctified."⁸
3. The holy sacrament of the altar. "This too is a public sign and a precious holy possession left behind by Christ by which his people are sanctified so that they also exercise themselves in faith and openly confess that they are Christian . . ."⁹
4. The office of the keys exercised publicly. "Now where you see sins forgiven or reprov'd in some person, be it publicly or privately, you may know that God's people are there."¹⁰
5. The public ministry. ". . . the church is recognized externally by the fact that it consecrates or calls ministers, or has offices that it is to administer."¹¹
6. Prayer, public praise, and thanksgiving to God. "Where you see and hear the Lord's Prayer prayed and taught; or psalms or other spiritual songs sung, in accordance with the word of God and true faith; also the creed, the Ten Commandments, and the catechism used in public, you may rest assured that a holy Christian people of God are present."¹²
7. The possession of the sacred cross. Here Luther refers to the suffering of the Christians for the sake of the Gospel. He contrasts it with the boastful possession of relics and pieces of the "original" cross which Romanists considered to be essential for the presence of the church.¹³

Luther lists many other minor "signs" of the Church. Whenever a Christian anywhere keeps any of the commandments out of fear and love of God, that is a sign of the presence of God's holy people. However, because these signs are so readily confused with works of civil righteousness and decency, they are not reliable and definitive signs.

Regarding "externals" which are often taken as primary marks of the Church, Luther is tolerant. Holy seasons, holy places, pulpits, altars, fonts, bells, vestments, candles, etc. do not sanctify God's people. They are not marks of the Church. They are to remain as *adiaphora*. They may be useful and edifying, but they are in no way to be used to find the Church.

If we think ourselves back to the ecclesiastical milieu of Luther's day, we will marvel at the simplicity and clarity of Luther's view of the Church. That few of the "common" members of the evangelical congregations could so readily cast off the ceremonies of an institutionalized, hierarchical church is understandable. Yet, they did have access to a beautiful, Scriptural exposition of the nature of the Church.

In the treatise *On the Councils and the Church*, there is no strong emphasis upon the "mission" of the Church. Luther was de-

voutly concerned with identifying the Church as God's holy people. Perhaps he was naive in thinking that once Christians identified themselves as the people of God, they would naturally seek to carry out the will of the Lord as the body of Christ. One gets the impression that Luther was only too happy if people would hear the Word preached regularly and receive the sacraments faithfully. We see no evidence that he attempted to organize them into committees for evangelism, stewardship, education, fellowship or social action. He was struggling to express the definition of the Church.

Today we are keenly sensitive to the task of the Church in action. The emphasis is upon every Christian *functioning* daily as a member of the body of Christ. We are impatient with Christians who merely hear the Word and receive the Sacraments. We stress the transition from *being* the Church to *acting* as the Church. Luther may have underestimated the difficulty of moving people from *belonging* to *being* to *doing*. Nevertheless, in all of our eagerness for getting God's people active in mission, we still need the clear witness of Luther regarding the nature of the Church as a sound foundation.

FOOTNOTES

1. Martin Luther, "Preface to the Smalcald Articles" in *Concordia Triglotta* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1921), p. 455.
2. Martin Luther, "Article XII of the Smalcald Articles, Of the Church," *Concordia Triglotta* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1921), p. 499.
3. Martin Luther, "Of the Councils and the Church" translated by Charles M. Jacobs, revised by Eric W. Gritsch, in *Luther's Works*, Volume 41, *Church and Ministry*. Edited by Eric W. Gritsch. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966), p. 144.
4. Richard J. Schultz. *This Is The Christian Faith*, in *Concordia Catechism Series*. Edited by Walter M. Wangerin. (St. Louis: Concordia, 1967), p. 154.
5. *Concordia Triglotta*, "The Apology of the Augsberg Confession," (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1921), p. 233.
6. *Op. cit.*, pp. 232f.
7. Martin Luther, "Of the Councils and of the Church," translated by Charles M. Jacobs, revised by Eric W. Gritsch, in *Luther's Works*, Volume 41, *Church and Ministry*. Edited by Eric W. Gritsch. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966), p. 150.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 151.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 152.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 153.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 154.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 164.
13. *Ibid.*