Martin Luther and the Concept of a "True" Church

by Mark A. Noll

The last paper sent to us by Dr. Noll, and published by us in October-December 1974, dealt with "Romanticism and the Hymns of Charles Wesley". Here he turns to a different subject. Dr. Noll is now Assistant Professor of History in Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, where he was formerly a student.

As in every period of Christian history, believers today face difficult ecclesiastical issues on local, denominational, and national levels. Not the least of these problems involves the question of precisely what constitutes a truly Christian church, for this is a doctrinal problem whose translation into practice is often complex and fraught with wrenching personal difficulties. For example, Anglicans, and indeed all English Christians, have cause to ponder what the presence of a Vatican observer at the recent investiture of the hundred-and-first Archbishop of Canterbury signifies for the long-range future of the church in England. In the United States. Missouri Synod Lutherans and Southern Presbyterians are called daily to make practical choices concerning ecclesiastical fellowship on the basis of prior decisions about the nature and practice of a truly Christian church. And Christians throughout the world may soon be forced to come to terms with the ecclesiastical implications of the pan-evangelical organization arising in the wake of the Lausanne Conference.

For all sincere believers the Bible must remain the final source of authority in answering ecclesiastical questions. In considering the definition of a "true" church, however, it is not inappropriate to draw attention to the thought of Martin Luther, for perhaps more than any other Reformer, he had agonized over the most significant ecclesiastical fracture in modern times, the break with Roman Catholicism. To comprehend Luther's thinking on this subject is not necessarily to be presented with made-to-order guidelines for decisions in the modern church, but it is to experience a forceful reminder of how securely the existence and the well-being of a true

[1] The following abbreviations are used in the notes for the editions of Luther's works consulted:
LW American Edition of *Luther's Works* (St. Louis & Philadelphia: Concordia & Fortress, 1955-).
StL *D. Martin Luthers sämmtliche Schriften* (St. Louis, 1880-1910).
WA *D. Martin Luthers Werke* (Weimar: Hermann Böhlaus Nachfolger, 1883-).

church are dependent upon the grace which God has revealed to men in his Son Jesus Christ.

Luther wrote frequently about the nature of the "true" church, and Luther scholars have buried his thoughts on the subject under a further avalanche of interpretation and discussion.[2] To understand Luther's definition of a "true" church, it is also necessary to grasp what he meant by the terms "invisible," "visible," and "false." Luther, who preferred the term "hidden" to "invisible" in the discussion of the church, took great pains to define the relevant adjectives.

For Luther the true church and the hidden church were virtually the same entity, but the visible church was not to be identified with the false church. The true/hidden church stood over against the false church in a relationship quite different from that in which it stood to the visible church. Luther frequently conjoined discussion of the true and the hidden churches: the true/hidden church was one in which the Word of God was pure and without alloy, and one which could never err;[3] it was the sacramental form in which the Word himself, Jesus Christ, existed for his people.[4] In Luther's thought the heart of the true/hidden church was, indeed, Christ himself, the living Word of God. It was the word of the Shepherd within the church to which the sheep were drawn, and the sheep received that Word by faith through baptism, the Lord's Supper, and the preaching of the gospel.[5]

This living Word and the written Word of Scripture were joined intimately for Luther. In spite of modern contentions to the contrary, several recent studies have demonstrated anew that Scripture

2 Helpful, organized, and reasonably comprehensive summaries of Luther's doctrine of the church are found in Karl Holl, "Zur Entstehung von Luthers Kirchenbegriff," *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Kirchengeschichte*, Vol. I: *Luther* (4th & 5th ed.; Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1927); Gordon Rupp, *The Righteousness of God* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1953), pp. 310-343; Wilhelm Pauck, *The Heritage of the Reformation* (rev. ed.; Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press, 1961), pp. 29-59; and Paul Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, trans. R. C. Schultz (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1966), pp. 287-344.

3 *Against Hanswurst* (1541), LW 41, 217: "Doctrine must be straight as a plumb line, sure, and without sin. Therefore nothing must be preached in the church except the sure, pure, and one word of God. Where that is missing, we no longer have the church, but the synagogue of the devil."

4 *On the Councils and the Church* (1539), LW 41, 163: "Christ and the church are a sacrament, that is, Christ and the church are one body, as husband and wife are, and . . . this is a great mystery, to be apprehended by faith. It is not visible or tangible; therefore it is a sacrament, that is, something secret, a mystery, invisible, hidden."

5 *Crucigern Sommerpostille* (1544), WA 21, 233; *Hanswurst* (1541), LW 41, 211.

was the Word of God for Luther in a quite specific and cognitive way.[6] That Luther saw such an intimate relationship between the living Word and the written Word is shown clearly when, for example, he contended in 1526 that the means to reform the mass "must be taken out of the holy Word."[7] Luther linked phrases such as "the firm and dependable foundation of Scripture" and "the Word of God" with none of the modern squeamishness over identifying the Word of God with Scripture.[8]

Ultimately, however, Luther believed that the living Word of God which quickened the church, although it was never divorced from the written Word, was an active presence which "sums up all the activity of God usward."[9] It was the good news of the Gospel that rescued men from the burden of the law.[10] It was the means by which God forgave sin.[11] And it was that which, when joined to faith, called the church and its members into existence and worked holiness in it and them.[12]

Luther's concept of the holy Christian community (*communio sanctorum*) was the focus of his ecclesiology. For this idea best reflected the fact that the church owed its very existence to the activity of Christ in uniting believers to God and to each other. In summary, the church became the true/hidden church, the holy Christian church, "not in itself, especially in this life, but in Christ."[13]

It was this true/hidden church which constituted the antithesis to a false, man-made church that blasphemously arrogated to itself the functions of Christ's body on earth. To Luther the Roman Catholic Church was the most conspicuous locus of the false church, for it spurned the correcting word of Scripture[14] and caused men to

6 Cf. John Warwick Montgomery, "Luther's Hermeneutic vs. the New Hermeneutic," *In Defense of Martin Luther* (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 1970); A Skevington Wood, *Captive to the Word* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1969); and J. Michael Reu, "Luther and the Scriptures," *The Springfielder*, XXIV (August, 1960), 8-111 [orig. pub. 1944].

7 *Ein Ratschlag Doctor Martini Luther, wie man eine beständige Ordnung in der christlichen Gemeine anfangen und vollenden soll* (1526), StL 21a, 905. The clause describing this "holy Word" makes it clear that Luther did not bifurcate the content of Scripture and the power of the Word in it, for "without it [the Word] no order of service is constant and abiding, since nothing stops the mouth and stills the heart of all men so powerfully as the holy Word."

8 *Concerning the Ministry* (1523), LW 40, 36.

9 This is Rupp's happy phrase, *Righteousness*, p. 320.

10 *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church* (1520), LW 36, 116.

11 *The Keys* (1530), LW 40, 366: "Rely on the words of Christ and be assured that God has no other way to forgive sins than through the spoken Word, as he has commanded it."

12 *Babylonian Captivity* (1520), LW 36, 107.

13 *Sermon: Von der heiligen christlichen Kirche* (1531), StL 14, 319.

14 *Ibid.*, col. 317.

turn away from God's grace to their own works and religious efforts.[15] But even the Roman church was not a wholly false church, for the mere presence of Scripture and baptism, even in perverted forms, held Roman Catholicism back from complete capitulation to human and demonic forces.[16] The true/hidden church had the word, sacraments, and offices of God, while the false church was the church of anti-Christ; it had only Satan's aping counterfeits—anti-word, anti-sacraments, anti-offices.[17] The true/hidden church staked all on God's grace in Christ; the false church staked all on the works of men. The struggle between the true/hidden church and the false church was the struggle between God and the demonically inspired pretensions of men,[18] a struggle which raged within *all* groups of Christians.

The relationship of the true/hidden church to the visible church was quite different from that sustained with the false church. The visible church harbored sin in its midst (to that extent it was a false church), and it included unbelievers, even as it was diligent to combat open sin and the perversion of doctrine.[19] Since the visible church was the communion of *human* saints, its life was of necessity sullied by sin and masked in suffering as long as it lived on the earth.[20] Luther expressed this difficult concept in his 1535 commentary on Galatians: "The church is hidden; it lives in spirit and inaccessible light; God has buried it under errors, infirmity, and sin so that it appears nowhere to the secondary senses."[21]

And yet the hidden and ineffable church nevertheless sustained a tight, organic relationship with this visible church whose marks

15 *Hanswurst* (1541), LW 41, 207, 213.

16 Luther did, however, maintain (*ibid.*, p. 209) that Roman Catholics who focused attention on the pope without reservation were not truly *of* the church, but only *in* it.

17 *Councils* (1539), LW 41, 168, 171.

18 On the identification of the false church for Luther and its conflict with the true/hidden church, see Wilhelm Maurer, "Luthers Anschauungen über die Kontinuität der Kirche," *Kirche und Geschichte* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1970), I, 81; and Martin Doerne, "Gottes Volk und Gottes Wort," *Luther Jahrbuch*, XIV (1932), 94.

19 *Hanswurst* (1541), LW 41, 216; *Councils* (1539), LW 41, 152.

20 *Hanswurst* (1541), LW 41, 218. See also *Sermon: Von der Kirche* (1531), StL 14, 319: the church "is a holiness of grace begun here and completed in the next world."

21 *Lectures on Galatians* (1535), WA 40 II, 105 (as quoted in Albert Brandenberg, "Luthers Theologia Crucis und die Auffassung von der Pilgernden Kirche," in *Volk Gottes:* Festgabe für Joseph Hofer, ed. R. Bäumer and H. Dolch [Freiburg: Herder, 1967], p. 329).

(*notae*) Luther taught people to seek and evaluate.[22] In his own words: "The church must appear in the world. But it can only appear in a covering (larva), a veil, a shell, or some kind of clothes which a man can grasp, otherwise it can never be found."[23] The visible church through the centuries and in every locality where Christians lived had been related to the true/hidden church by the Word, the sacraments, and all the other means of grace God had given to men.[24] The Word of God, baptism, and the Lord's Supper were gifts from God; where men received these they participated in the true/hidden church.[25] The true/hidden church, however, revealed itself only to the eyes of faith. Since the sacraments of the church and the Word were supernatural gifts of God, they could only be truly apprehended and appropriated by the supernatural gift of faith. Since, on the other hand, Christians were creatures of the natural realm as well as of the supernatural, the gifts belonging to the true/hidden church would only be apprehended in the naturalness of the visible church.

Luther's concept of this relationship between the true/hidden church and the visible church has been described well by Ernst Kinder: "One may distinguish between an outward belonging to the church and true membership in the body of Christ—distinguish, that is, but not separate, for we possess the latter only through the former."[26] Luther, as early as his first lectures on the Psalms, employed the relationship of body and soul as an image for the relationship between the true/hidden church and the visible church. The soul inspires and directs the body, but the body may have countless imperfections without violating the essential integrity of the soul. On the other hand, the appearance and actions of the body

22 See his reply to Emser (*Auf das überchristlich, übergeistlich und überkunstlich Buch Bock Emser zu Leipzig Antwort* [1521], WA 7, 683, as quoted in Lewis W. Spitz, "Luther's Ecclesiology and his Concept of the Prince as *Notbischof*," *Church History*, XXII [June, 1953], 122): "Since I have spoken of the Christian church as a spiritual congregation, you ridicule me as though I wished to build a church as Plato a city, which nowhere exists." Luther then proceeded to show how wrong Emser had been. Nor did Luther's tentative proposal for an *ecclesiola* within the *ecclesia*, made in the *Preface to the German Mass* (1523), ever come to be an operative part of his ecclesiastical practice. Cf. Doerne, "Gottes Volk," pp. 89-91.

23 WA, *Briefwechsel* 9, 608 (as quoted in Rupp, *Righteousness*, p. 319).

24 Luther taught that the true/hidden church would reveal itself by the following marks (*notae*) in the visible church: the Word of God, baptism, the Lord's Supper, the keys, a properly functioning ministry, prayer and public worship, and suffering. These marks are discussed at length in his *Councils and the Church* (1539), LW 41, 9-178.

25 Cf. Althaus, *Theology of Martin Luther*, p. 343.

26 Kinder, "Die Verborgenheit der Kirche nach Luther," in *Festgabe Joseph Lortz*, Vol. 1: *Reformation*, ed. E. Iserloh and P. Manns (Baden-Baden: Bruno Grimm, 1957), p. 181.

do reflect the nature of the soul. Just as the body and the soul are separated only by death, so the true/hidden church will be separated from the visible church only when the latter passes away with this present world.[27]

In all of Luther's thought on this subject there is a strong incarnational thrust. Albert Brandenberg, in his article "Luther's Theology of the Cross and the Conception of the Pilgrim Church," says that for Luther, "God speaks to us through the cross. . . . That which obtains for Christ obtains also for Christians."[28] Just as an individual meets God in the suffering Christ (and what could be a greater concealment than the Lord of creation undergoing pain, humiliation, degradation, and death at the hands of the creature!), so the true/hidden church is "veiled in flesh" and masked by an aspect of finitude and temporality.[29] The church as the body of Christ in the world must undergo suffering and death. For as it is through the (innocent) suffering and death of its Head that the church gains life, so in its own (forensically innocent) suffering and death it offers life to the world. That is, the visible church is peccable and marred by error, but in it the gospel is active, and it is the gospel which brings life to men.

In conclusion, let us restate the crucial conjunctions in Luther's thought on this subject. The true/hidden church is the absolute antithesis to any church organized by the word of man and propelled by the hubris of Satan. The visible church, on the other hand, is the body of the true/hidden church; it contains evil and is constantly threatened by distortion in doctrine, but in and through the visible church the eye of faith perceives Christ and needy believers receive the balm of the Gospel.

Luther's discussion of the true/hidden church, its antithetical relationship to the false church, and its intimate relationship with the visible church does not provide simple solutions to the problem of those who are called upon to make ecclesiastical decisions today, for he did not face the specific issues which trouble the modern church. His teaching on the subject is important, however, especially because of its emphasis on the gospel of the grace of God in Jesus Christ as the pole star of the visible church and the rock upon which all anti-gospels are broken. Actions which Christians take on troublesome ecclesiastical issues should be carried out with Luther's clear-eyed perception that a church's measure of value is the degree to which it preaches and practises the gospel of God's grace. We should

27 Cf. Rupp, *Righteousness*, p. 316; Pauck, *Heritage*, p. 38.

28 Brandenberg, "Luthers Theologia Crucis," *Volk Gottes*, p. 326. For an excellent short discussion of this crucial topic, see Regin Prenter, *Luther's Theology of the Cross*, Facet Books (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971).

29 Althaus, *Theology of Martin Luther*, p. 291.

pray that our view of the church would be both as high and as realistic as Luther's. Martin Luther did not shrink from discussing and taking action on the difficult ecclesiastical problems of his day, but neither did he lose sight of the beauty, the strength, and the integrity of the bride of Christ who "looks forth like the dawn, fair as the moon, bright as the sun, terrible as an army with banners."

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