

# Luther's Theology of the Church

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We think of Luther as the apostle of justifying faith, not as the author of a doctrine of the church. We see him as the protagonist of the gospel, not as the architect of an ecclesiology. It is Calvin, rather than Luther, who comes to mind when we think of the Reformation doctrine of the church in its continental setting, and Hooker when we consider the formation of Anglican ecclesiology. It has been pointed out that all the crises of Luther's life seem to centre on the gospel, and all of Calvin's on the church. And it is perfectly true that all Luther's energies were devoted with obsessive single-mindedness to the defence of the gospel of God's justification of the sinner. He sat lightly to all questions of church order, and cared little whether church structures followed a congregational or an episcopal form. His was an ecclesiology without an ecclesiastical polity—and this is not what we usually understand by a doctrine of the church. I hope to show, however, that Luther had a concept of the church, that it was at the heart of what the Reformation was all about, and that its originality and profundity lie in the fact that it derives from Luther's understanding of the nature of God, the person of Christ and the character of the Christian gospel.<sup>1</sup>

## 1 The mystery of the church

Luther's view of the church reflects his concept of God. For Luther, God was the hidden God (*deus absconditus*) of Isaiah, inaccessible in his ultimate mystery, veiled by impenetrable darkness; yet who, in the baby of Bethlehem and the man on the cross, had made himself known to the eyes of faith in a way that was utterly human and down to earth, in terms of material reality—'the flesh'. 'He who would see God, let him come to the crib.' Luther would know no God but him who had been made flesh.

In a strikingly similar way, Luther affirms the paradox of a church that is ultimately a mystery hidden with Christ in God and yet manifests itself on earth, taking the form of sinful humanity and communicating itself in the elemental signs of water, bread and wine. 'It is a high, deep hidden thing, the church, that you cannot perceive or see, but must grasp only by faith through baptism, sacrament and word' (WA, 51, p.507).

Luther's understanding of the church—which he imparted to the whole Reformation movement—was essentially and fundamentally evangelical and Christological: evangelical in the sense that the evangel, the gospel, constituted the reality of the church and was the one thing

needful to ensure its existence; Christological in the sense that the church was the mode of Christ's saving presence in the world, communicating his life to men through its ministries and sacraments. In the church, the grace of God was, as it were, incarnated, located and made available. And this was brought about solely by the preaching of the gospel, by which Luther meant the informal sharing of the Christian message among believers as much as the art of preaching in a liturgical context. The meaning of the church could not be arrived at in terms of tradition, structure, teaching authority, or canon law, but solely in terms of the gospel. For Luther, the gospel meant justification: administered in absolution, received by faith, experienced as forgiveness, and worked out in mutual service in the universal priesthood of Christians.

Luther laid down this central principle in the *Ninety-five Theses* where he asserted against relics, indulgences and the treasury of merits, that 'the true treasure of the church is the most holy gospel of the glory and grace of God.' The church has nothing, he added later, that is more precious (*LW*, 31, pp.31, 219). Provided the gospel is treasured, the church will never fail, even though its outward existence may disappear from view and the church become hidden, the saints concealed (*abscondita est ecclesia, latent sancti*: *WA*, 18, p.652).

Luther and the early Reformers were acutely aware that this teaching about the hiddenness of the church's ultimate existence invited the criticism that they were postulating a purely ideal church, enjoying a disembodied and illusory existence, uncontaminated by the real world—a Platonic state (*Platonica civitas*) in fact. But Luther did not teach that the church is necessarily invisible; only that the nature of the church cannot be explained in empirical terms. The spiritual character of the church is indifferent to matters concerned with time and place, and yet not wholly independent of them. It is not pure disembodied spirit, for 'without place and body there is no church' (*sine loco et corpore non est ecclesia*: *WA*, 7, p.720). As Melancthon put it in the *Apology of the Augsburg Confession*, 'We are not dreaming about some Platonic republic, as has been slanderously alleged, but we teach that this church actually exists, made up of true believers and righteous men scattered throughout the world and known by certain outward marks, open and visible to the eyes of men (*BC*, p.171). These 'certain outward marks' are the celebrated *notae ecclesiae* that play such a central role in the Reformers' doctrine of the church.

## 2 The marks of the church

Luther speaks of the church—on the analogy of the incarnation—in two aspects, almost two natures: one invisible, elusive, mysterious; the other visible, tangible, identifiable. Every assertion of the mystery of the church carries with it a complementary affirmation of the identity of the church on earth, revealed by recognizable marks. 'The love and com-

munion of Christ and all the saints are hidden, invisible and spiritual and only a physical, visible, and external sign of them is given to us' (WA, 2, p.752). God has always given certain signs to show that he is with his people. In the Old Testament these were the pillar of fire, the cloud and the mercy-seat. In the New Testament they are baptism, the Lord's Supper and the ministry of the word, but this is not an exclusive list, for Luther sees every outward form in which the gospel is visibly embodied, as indicating God's presence with his church (LW, 1, p.309).

Luther did not elaborate a systematic and consistent doctrine of the marks of the true church. Where he *was* consistent and single-minded was in holding fast to the evangelical and Christological centre of the church. When this was secured, other aspects of ecclesiology would fall into place. There is, therefore, some variation in the accounts of the marks of the church that Luther gives from time to time.

In his treatise of 1539, *On the Councils and the Church*, Luther enumerates seven marks by which the church, or, as he puts it, the 'holy Christian people', may be recognized: the Word of God, the sacraments of baptism and of the altar (rightly administered according to Christ's institution, i.e. communion in both kinds and no sacrifice of the mass); the offices of the keys (confession) and the ministry; public worship, including the Lord's Prayer, the Apostles' Creed and the Ten Commandments; and finally, bearing one's cross (the mark of suffering). Supremely important, however, is the first of these: the church's possession of the Word of God in a greater or lesser degree of purity. Here, adds Luther, 'we are speaking of the external word, preached orally... Whenever 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' (LW, 41, pp.148ff.).

Though Luther will sometimes add such tokens of the true church as respect for the magistrate, chastity and love of one's enemies (LW, 41, pp.196f.), it is the gospel that dominates his thinking on this subject, taking priority even over the sacraments themselves. 'The gospel is before bread and baptism the unique, most certain and noblest symbol of the church because through the gospel alone the church is conceived, formed, nourished, generated, instructed, fed, clothed, adorned, strengthened, armed and preserved—in short, the whole life and substance of the church is in the word of God' (*tota vita et substantia ecclesiae est in verbo Dei*: WA, 7, p.721). Luther makes it clear that he is not talking about doctrinal orthodoxy, or enunciating a principle of *sola scriptura*, but referring to the 'spoken gospel' (*non de evangelio scripto sed vocali loquor*).

### **3 The mixed nature of the church**

When we consider the church, remarks Luther, we are not to look for perfection. No body of Christians is faultless, and human failings do

not detract from the real existence of the church, for which word and sacrament are enough. 'When you are minded to pass judgement on the church,' he warns those with sectarian leanings, 'you must not look for a church in which there are no blemishes and flagrant faults, but for one where there are people who love the word and confess it before men. Where you discover these earmarks, there you may be sure the church exists' (*LW*, 13, p.90). The church is pure if the pure gospel is preached, even though it remains full of human weakness—just as the human body is said to be sound, although it is never without all sorts of impurities: 'filth, matter, ulcers, spittle and excrement' (*LW*, 6, p.34).

This acceptance of the mixed nature of the church determines Luther's assessment of the unreformed Church of Rome. He willingly acknowledges that the Protestant churches have received the Christian heritage from this source: the Scriptures, baptism, the sacrament of the altar, the keys, the ministry, and the catechism (including the Lord's Prayer, the Decalogue and the Creed: *LW*, 40, p.231). The undeniable fact that the Church of Rome possesses these means of grace, together with the equally undeniable fact that she has corrupted them all, present a problem for Luther and all the mainstream Reformers, and their evaluation of the Roman Church remains ambivalent. Luther wavers between conceding and withholding the title of church to the papists: 'We are ready to concede that they are in the Christian church, but not that they are the true members of the church. To be sure, they have the pulpit, baptism, the ministry, the sacrament, and they are in the church, but they are not genuine members' (*LW*, 23, p.286). It is solely the objective means of grace that preserve some semblance of a church among the papists: 'the pope is the Christian church in as much as he holds to baptism, the gospel and the holy writ' (*LW*, 23, p.417).

At last Luther's vivid imagination comes to his rescue. The corrupt papists are found in the church 'just as mouse droppings are found among the pepper or tares among the grain—they merely help to fill the bushel.' Luther proceeds to embroider St Paul's analogy of the church as a body with both noble and ignoble members: 'A body may possess fine, sound and useful members which a man can employ for his various needs; but that same body may also contain perspiration, secretion from the eyes, nasal mucus, scabs, abscesses and other filth.' 'Filth is still a part of the body,' he concludes, 'even though it stinks' (*LW*, 23, p.286).

Reformation ecclesiology, from Luther to Hooker, was much exercised by the case of the Galatians who had embraced 'another gospel' and yet were addressed as churches of Christ by St Paul. Both Luther and Hooker took this as an indication that Rome should not be denied the title of church. In his major (1535) commentary on Galatians, Luther writes: 'Today we still call the Church of Rome holy and all its sees holy, even though they have been undermined and their ministers are ungodly. . . . Although the city of Rome is worse than Sodom and Gomorrah, nevertheless, there remain in it baptism, the sacraments, the

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the church. Luther lays down the principle that what is common to all (the priesthood), no individual may presume to take upon himself without the consent of all. Though all have the same power, he says in *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church*, 'no one makes use of this power except by the consent of the community or by the call of a superior. For what is the common property of all no individual may arrogate to himself unless he is called' (*LW*, 36, p.116). And in the *Appeal to the Christian Nobility* he writes: 'Because we are all priests of equal standing, no one must push himself forward and take it upon himself without our consent and election, to do that for which we all have equal authority. For no one dare take upon himself what is common to all without the authority and consent of the community' (*LW*, 44, p.129).

It follows that, for Luther, ordination bestows not priesthood but the authority to exercise a ministry on behalf of the whole body. It is merely an ecclesiastical ceremony (*ritus ecclesiasticus*) that ratifies the call and election of a minister. Obviously no indelible character is bestowed; public ministry is merely a function that the designated individual exercises for the time being. He may give up his office or be deposed, becoming a layman again. 'Should it happen that a person chosen for such office were deposed for lack of trust, he would then be exactly what he was before. Therefore a priest in Christendom is nothing else but an office-holder. As long as he holds office he takes precedence; where he is deposed he is a peasant or a townsman like anybody else' (*LW*, 44, p.129). Above all, everything in the church must be done decently and in order, as St Paul enjoins, for if anyone could get up and preach it would be 'like women going to the market' (*LW*, 40, p.34; *WA* 10, III, p.397).

The same concern that all should be done *secundem ordinem* underlies Luther's view of the role of women in the church. Naturally, women share equally in the royal priesthood that Christ imparts to his people. The common practice of midwives administering baptism is proof of this: 'When women baptize, they exercise the function of priesthood legitimately and do it not as a private act but as a part of the public ministry of the church' (*LW*, 40, p.23). Thus administered, the sacrament of baptism is a fully effective means of grace in which 'sin is taken away, eternal death abolished, the prince of the world cast out, heaven bestowed; in short, by which the divine majesty pours itself forth through all the soul' (*LW*, 40, p.25). When Luther grants women the power to baptize, he recognizes that this carries with it all the other priestly functions, for the sacrament of baptism includes the ministry of the word and is, in Luther's view, the highest of all priestly functions.

Nevertheless, Luther does hold that women cannot be called to the office of ministry. He can be found offering a theological principle—God's creative purpose—to support this. Women's created constitution is better adapted to domestic than to public affairs. Women were 'not destined by God for government in the state or church, where the

greatest strength of character and wisdom is required' but for the care of the home, for 'the longer they deliberate about important and difficult matters, the more they complicate and obstruct the business' (*LW*, 6, p.60). We observe that the longer Luther talks, the clearer it becomes that his appeal to God's plan for women is simply a rationalization of social conditions in Luther's time. Elsewhere, in fact, Luther shows that his view of this matter was dictated by social considerations—of what was thought fitting. As preaching is a public matter, women, children and other 'unqualified persons' are excluded straight away since they are unfit for any public office (*WA*, 10, III, p.171; 50, p.633). The logic of Luther's doctrine of the universal priesthood, as it arises out of the reality of justification in which there can be no distinction of persons, is that the question of the ordination of women should be answered purely in terms of social expediency. Women were 'unqualified persons' in Luther's day—as in St Paul's—but not in ours. If we allow Luther's doctrine of the universal priesthood to determine the answers we give to current questions concerning the ministry, we are likely to reach a different conclusion from that of the Reformer himself on this particular issue.

Luther's message to the church, as it seeks to reach an understanding of its own nature and mission, is: Hold to the centre. Hold fast to the Christological centre of the church and secondary matters will fall into place of their own accord. The church and its ministries are not ends in themselves but are given to serve the gospel. As Karl Barth puts it (and only a twentieth-century theologian could use this image), the church is simply the crater formed by the explosion of the gospel.<sup>2</sup>

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### NOTES

- 1 Abbreviations used: *WA* (Weimarer Ausgabe), *D. Martin Luthers Werke* (Weimar 1883–); *LW*, *Luther's Works* 54 vols (Fortress Press and Concordia, Philadelphia and St Louis 1955–); *BC*, *The Book of Concord*, T. G. Tappert, ed. (Fortress Press, Philadelphia 1959).
- 2 I develop the theme of this article, together with related issues, more fully in my book *The Church in the Theology of the Reformers* (Marshall Morgan and Scott, London 1982).