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# Luther and The Unity of the Church

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# LUTHER

## AND

# THE UNITY OF THE CHURCH

*Adrian M. Leske*

As we take a look at what Martin Luther had to say about the unity of the church we have to forget all our 20th Century concepts and ideas about the church and try to think 16th Century.

In the first place, we must erase the idea of the Christian church as divided up into numerous denominations and sects and think in terms of one church. Certainly, this church may be divided geographically with orthodoxy in the East and Catholicism in the West. Yet it was historically seen as one church with a schism. Of course, in the West they tended to see the Pope as the head and ruler of all Christendom because they did not give much thought to the East. The church had made its canons and decrees, and one of these was that "there is no salvation outside the church," and of this church the Bishop of Rome was head.

Secondly, we have to think of the church not so much as a spiritual entity, but rather in terms of territorial rule and control, as that domain over which the Pope sought to maintain his control.

Thirdly, we have to think in terms of the church hierarchy by and large having become corrupt through the desire for power. As a consequence, the common people were mostly oppressed by the church, kept in ignorance and given no real understanding of what the church was supposed to be. Obedience to the church was their only hope of salvation.

Fourthly, we have to remember that Luther had known only this church. He had grown up in it, was a child of it, and had no intention of breaking away from it. As he became more and more aware of its corruption and false theological tradition, he was only concerned to reform it, to bring it back to what it should have been. Almost two years after nailing his Ninety-five Theses to the Castle Church door at Wittenberg but before the Leipzig Disputation in

1519, Luther could still write: "If unfortunately there are such things in Rome as might be improved, there neither is, nor can be, any reason that one should tear oneself away from the Church in schism. Rather, the worse things become, the more a man should help, and cling to her; for by schism and contempt nothing can be mended."<sup>1</sup>

But it did not take long for Luther to become disillusioned, for in June, 1520, he wrote: "Farewell, unhappy, hopeless, blasphemous Rome! The wrath of God is come upon you as you deserve . . . We have cared for Bablyon and she is not healed: let us leave her alone then, that she may be the habitation of dragons, spectres and witches, and true to her name of Babel, an everlasting confusion, a new pantheon of wickedness."<sup>2</sup> Yet even with this tirade Luther did not picture himself as breaking with the church. He was breaking with the hierarchical structure of the church, with the Pope and with Rome. But he still considered himself as part of that church which is one, the church catholic, which is found in Rome and in Wittenberg and in most places within the Holy Roman Empire and in many outside of it.

The above quotation calls us to the fifth point in thinking 16th Century: Luther, as with most debaters at that time, did not understand the rationale of diplomacy as, perhaps, Melanchthon did. Debaters generally believed that the best way to get your point across was to speak with as much vehemence and even exaggeration as possible. Unfortunately, there was no love lost in this method. Consequently, it rarely led to any reconciliation and generally widened the gap between the opponents in debate. Some Lutherans today still seek to emulate this particular characteristic of Luther's.

## LUTHER AND THE CHURCH

Let us now take a look at Luther's doctrine of the church. What did he understand by this term? The essential concept for Luther regarding the church was that it is a fellowship, a community or congregation of believers in Christ. It is a solidarity of Christians gathered together in one spiritual body, the head of which is Christ.

He gave powerful expression to this idea already in 1519 in his tract on *The Blessed Sacrament of the Holy and True Body of Christ, and the Brotherhoods*. He saw this Sacrament of the Altar as effecting and signifying the "complete union and undivided fellowship of the saints." Through it, he said: "Christ and all saints are one spiritual body, just as the inhabitants of a city are one community and body, each citizen being a member of the other and of the entire city. All the saints, therefore, are members of Christ and of the church, which is a spiritual and eternal city of God. And whoever is taken into this city is said to be received into the community of saints and to be incorporated into Christ's spiritual body and made a member of him . . . To

1. Quoted from Gordon Rupp, *The Righteousness of God: Luther Studies* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1953), p. 9.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 10.

receive this sacrament in bread and wine, then, is nothing else than to receive a sure sign of this fellowship and incorporation with Christ and all saints.”<sup>3</sup>

Thus he saw the church as a very visible community of believers gathered around Christ and made one in the sacrament and the Word. The Eucharist was like a document to the individual which assured him that he was a member of the Christian community. Such a community shared everything in common, both good and bad -- their failures and sufferings and sins as well as Christ's love and forgiveness and salvation. “This fellowship consists in this, that all the spiritual possessions of Christ and his saints are shared with and become the common property of him who receives this sacrament. Again all sufferings and sins also become common property; and thus love engenders love in return and mutual love unites. To carry out our homely figure, it is like a city where every citizen shares with all the others the city's name, honor, freedom, trade, customs, usages, help, support, protection and the like, while at the same time he shares all the dangers of fire and flood, enemies and death, losses, taxes and the like. For he who would share in the profits must also share in the costs, and ever recompense love for love . . . In this sacrament, therefore, man is given through the priest a sure sign from God himself that he is thus united with Christ and his saints and has all things in common with them, that Christ's sufferings and life are his own, together with the lives and sufferings of all the saints.”<sup>4</sup>

By the term “saint” it must be realized that Luther never meant a person who is holy in himself, but one who is declared and made holy by Christ. Saints are those who believe in Christ, nothing more, nothing less. They are still, in spite of their holiness in Christ, marred by sin with inclinations to anger, hatred, pride, envy and immorality. Luther made it quite clear that the community of saints is still a community of sinners.

For this very reason they need this fellowship, or church, so that they might draw on the help of Christ and one another to fight sin and to intercede before God for forgiveness. The Sacrament of the Altar is God's means of grace whereby the individual is assured that he is tied into that fellowship of Christ and his saints through which he can find strength and forgiveness and finally be victorious in his fight with sin. God gave us this Sacrament, Luther said, as much as to say: “Look, many kinds of sin are assailing you; take this sign by which I give you my pledge that this sin is assailing not only you but also my Son, Christ, and all his saints in heaven and on earth. Therefore, take heart and be bold. You are not fighting alone. Great help and support are all around you.”<sup>5</sup>

Thus Luther spoke of the church as being a real close bond of very human people who need each other to live out their lives in Christ. They have entered into the community of the redeemed not by any act of their own but by the work of God in Christ who has called them to faith by the Gospel in Word and

3. Martin Luther, “The Blessed Sacrament of the Holy and True Body of Christ, and the Brotherhoods,” *Luther's Works* 35 (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1960), p. 51. Hereafter cited as LW.

4. *Ibid.*, pp. 51, 52.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 53.



sacraments, called them to be the healing and caring community of Christ's people. As such they were never to regard themselves as an exclusive group, holier or purer than others, but as reaching out and embracing all fellow believers in Christ, partaking of one another and seeking the common good of all. <sup>6</sup>

In the light of this understanding of the church Luther came down in this tract with a vicious attack on the brotherhoods, those medieval religious clubs which, he said, seek to benefit no one but themselves, where "men learn to seek their own good, to love themselves, to think themselves better than others, and to presume to stand higher before God than others. And so perishes the communion of saints, Christian sacrament, while selfish love grows in them. That is, by means of these many external brotherhoods devoted to works they oppose and destroy the one, inner, spiritual, essential brotherhood common to all saints." <sup>7</sup>

This almost sounds like a scathing condemnation of denominationalism of today, to say nothing of separate Lutheran synods excluding one another from the full practice of fellowship!! In contrast to this was the true universal brotherhood, the fellowship of *all* saints of which he said: "In this we are all brothers and sisters, so closely united that a closer relationship cannot be conceived. For here we have one baptism, one Christ, one sacrament, one food, one gospel, one faith, one Spirit, one spiritual body, and each person is a member of the other, No other brotherhood is so close and strong." <sup>8</sup>

So the Christian church, according to Luther, is one, and this would remain his conviction in spite of the rift with Rome. In 1520 he summarized his doctrine of the church in this way: "I believe that there is on earth, through the whole wide world, no more than one holy common, Christian church, which is nothing else than the congregation (Gemeine) or assembly of the saints, i.e. the pious, believing men on earth, which is gathered, preserved, and ruled by the Holy Ghost, and daily increased by means of the Sacraments and the Word of God." <sup>9</sup> However, it needs to be reiterated that the church was holy only by grace and not on the basis of its doctrine and practice, according to Luther. He made this quite clear even in his strongest polemic against his enemies. That is why he could still see the church amongst them in spite of their failings, as we shall see. The church is sinful at the same time as it is holy just as the individual is *simul iustus et peccator*, at the same time righteous and sinful. The doctrine of justification by grace through faith alone was an essential element in his doctrine of the church. The church was made up of sinners, wrote Luther in his *Large Catechism* of 1529, hence it needed forgiveness constantly. For that very reason everything in the Christian church

6. *Ibid.*, p. 67.

7. *Ibid.*, pp. 69, 70.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 70.

9. "A Brief Explanation of the Ten Commandments, the Creed, and the Lord's Prayer," *Works of Martin Luther: With Introduction and Notes*, The Philadelphia Edition (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1915), II, p. 373.

had been so ordered to bring the message of forgiveness continually to its members through the Word and sacraments.<sup>10</sup>

In his *Preface to the Revelation of St. John* in 1530 Luther upbraided those who expected the church to be sinless and perfect: "The know-it-alls have heard that Christians are supposed to be a holy, peaceful, united, kindly, virtuous folk. Accordingly they think that there should be among them no offences, no heresy, no shortcomings, but only peace and virtue. They ought to read this book and learn to look upon Christendom with other eyes than those of reason . . . Here we see clearly what ghastly offense and shortcomings there have been prior to our times, when Christendom is thought to have been at its best. By comparison, ours is really a golden age. Do not think that the heathen did not also take offense at this and regard the Christians as self-willed, loose and contentious people. This article, 'I believe in the holy Christian Church,' is as much an article of faith as the rest. That is why natural reason cannot recognize it, even if it puts on all its glasses. The devil can cover it over with offenses and divisions, so that you have to take offense at it. God too can conceal it behind faults and shortcomings of all kinds, so that you necessarily become a fool and pass judgement on it. Christendom will not be known by sight, but by faith . . . A Christian is even hidden from himself; he does not see his holiness and virtue, but sees in himself nothing but unholiness and vice. And you, stupid know-it-all, would behold Christendom with your blind reason and unclean eyes!"<sup>11</sup>

The church could never achieve perfection in this life. So Luther used some vehement language against other reformers who spoke of their "pure" church and seemed to make faith a qualifying achievement. Yet in another sense he could speak of the true church as being the pure and united and holy and apostolic church because Christ is its Lord and the church is his "body." Unity and holiness are gifts of grace and not our own achievements.

Luther's concept of the holy Christian church was never that of some spiritualized ideal community which always remains invisible. To him the church is the actual community of people to be seen everywhere gathering around the Word and sacraments. It is the church which has existed on earth for centuries, and has a history. However, as Luther pointed out above, because of our sinful nature the presence of that church is not always obvious. It is really only recognizable by faith. The unbeliever does not recognize the love and fellowship of Christ and all believers. Even the believer does not always realize it is there until he confesses that Christ sanctifies the sinner.

So to this extent the church, the body of Christ, is a hidden church, an *ecclesia abscondita*. Only God can judge who is and who is not a member of the church of Christ as long as he does not exclude himself from the fellowship of the church.<sup>12</sup> It is essentially a matter of a combination of God's Word toward us and our faith towards him which makes the church identifiable and visible. Thus Luther could pronounce in the short article on the church in his Smalcald Articles of 1537: "Thank God, a seven-year-old

10. *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, translated and edited by Theodore G. Tappert (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1959), pp. 417, 418.

11. LW, 35: pp. 410, 411.

12. See Gustaf Aulen, *Reformation and Catholicity* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1961), p. 79.

child knows what the church is, namely holy believers and sheep who hear the voice of the Shepherd. So children pray, 'I believe in one holy Christian church.' Its holiness does not consist in surplices, tonsures, albs, or other ceremonies of theirs which they have invented over and above the Holy Scriptures, but it consists of the Word of God and true faith." <sup>13</sup>

## THE CHURCH AND ROME

All the above have to be remembered in spite of the vehemence of Luther's polemic against the Church of Rome. And Luther could be vehement! Let me give you a few examples which also illustrate Luther's concept of the unity of the church. From his tract on the *Office of the Keys* in 1530: "What kind of church is the pope's church? It is an uncertain, vacillating and tottering church. Indeed, it is a deceitful, lying church, doubting and unbelieving, without God's Word. For the pope with his wrong keys teaches his church to doubt and to be uncertain. If it is a vacillating church, then it is not the Christian church, but it must be an unchristian, antichristian, and faithless church which destroys and ruins the real, holy, Christian church. So they testify here with their own mouth that the pope must be the Antichrist who takes his seat in the temple of God, being a corrupter and master in sinning, as St. Paul says in II Thess. 2. Good heavens, one dare not make the keys uncertain and questionable." <sup>14</sup>

This is tempered by his view that the church is in every place where the Word and sacraments are to be found. So he could state in his Lectures on Galatians in 1535 that the one Christian church is to be found even in Rome. "So today we call the Church of Rome holy and all it sees holy, even though they have been undermined and their ministers are ungodly. For God 'rules in the midst of His foes,' (ps. 110:2) Antichrist 'takes his seat in the temple of God,' (2 Thess. 2:4) and Satan is present among the sons of God (Job 1:6). Even if the church is 'in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation,' as Paul says to the Philippians (2:15), and even if it is surrounded by wolves and robbers, that is, spiritual tyrants, it is still the church. Although the city of Rome is worse than Sodom and Gomorrah, nevertheless there remain in it Baptism, the Sacrament, the voice and text of the Gospel, the Sacred Scriptures, the ministries, the name of Christ, and the name of God. Whoever has these, has them; whoever does not have them, has no excuse, for the treasure is still there. Therefore the Church of Rome is holy, because it has the holy name of God, the Gospel, Baptism, etc. Thus this Wittenberg of ours is a holy village, and we are truly holy, because we have been baptized, communed, taught, and called by God; we have the works of God among us, that is, the Word and the sacraments, and these make us holy." <sup>15</sup> But his strongest attack against the Church of Rome came in 1541 when he heard that Duke Henry of Braunschweig Wolfenbuttel had come home after fighting in the imperial forces and found that most of his electorate had become

13. *Book of Concord*, p. 315.

14. LW, 40: pp. 348, 349.

15. LW, 26: pp. 24, 25.



Lutheran. To this he objected and tried to change it back to the Roman Church charging that the Lutherans were not the one true Christian church. In these arguments he sought to demonstrate how the Lutherans were bound in faith and doctrine to the ancient apostolic church. He then concluded by acknowledging with biting sarcasm that the Church of Rome is also part of the true church. "We acknowledge not only that you have, with us, come from the true church and been washed and made clean in baptism through the blood of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, as St. Peter says here, but also that you are in the church and remain in it. Indeed we say that you sit and rule in it as St. Paul prophesied in II Thess. 2 that the accursed Antichrist would sit (not in the cowshed), but in the temple of God. But you are no longer of the church, or members of the church, for in this holy church of God you are building your own new apostate church, the devil's brothel and limitless whoredom, idolatry, and innovation by which you corrupt those who have been baptized and redeemed along with yourselves . . . But it is God, who by his wonderful almighty power in the midst of so much abomination among you and the whoredom of the devil, nevertheless still sustains the young children through baptism, and some old people . . . So it is that the true ancient church with its baptism and the work of God still remains with you, and your god, the devil, has not been able to obliterate it entirely with all this new idolatry and all your devilish whoredom." 16

## THE CHURCH AND THE FANATICS

The term "Fanatics" (*Schwärmer*) was a name Luther originally used for Karlstadt and his group of iconoclasts, but he later widened this use to include Ulrich Zwingli and the Swiss reformers who were denying the real presence of Christ in the Lord's Supper. To Luther, this denial was a very serious thing because they were thus denying that the Sacrament was a means of grace and were making their faith in Christ's work central to salvation. While they, together with him, had repudiated the idea of salvation by works, they now seemed to be making faith a meritorious work upon which salvation rested. Luther was sure the devil had taken possession of the fanatics.

What made it almost unforgivable for Luther was that by the denial of the Real Presence in the Sacrament the Fanatics were destroying the very foundation of the doctrine of the church. It is only with the presence of Christ that we can enter into that intimate bond of unity and fellowship with him and with one another in the Sacrament. This understanding of the Lord's Supper was fundamental to Luther's doctrine of the church and essential to his understanding of the unity of the church. Yet the fanatics had the gall, Luther exclaimed, to say that whether Christ is truly present in the Sacrament or not is only a minor matter!

So in 1537 he wrote a pamphlet entitled: *That These Words of Christ, "This is My Body," etc., Still Stand Firm Against the Fanatics*. These are a few of his arguments: "They write, produce books, and admonish that these subjects

16. LW, 41: pp. 209, 210.



ought not be the occasion for rending Christian unity, love and peace. It is a minor matter, they say, and an insignificant quarrel, for the sake of which Christian love should not be obstructed . . . I shall add a Lutheran warning and say: Cursed be such love and unity in the abyss of hell because such unity not only divides the Christian Church wretchedly, but in true devilish fashion even mocks it and pokes fun at it for its wretchedness . . . If we are to practise Christian unity with them and extend Christian love to them, we must also love and be satisfied with, or at least tolerate, their doctrine and behaviour. Let anyone do that if he wishes. Not I. For Christian unity consists in the Spirit, when we are of one faith, one mind, one heart, Ephesians 4. This, however, we will gladly do: in civil matters we are glad to be one with them, that is, to maintain outward, temporal peace. But in spiritual matters, as long as we have breath, we intend to shun, condemn, and censure them, as idolaters, corrupters of God's Word, blasphemers, and liars." <sup>17</sup>

While Luther regarded their differences on the Lord's Supper as being so serious as to destroy their unity in the body of Christ, Zwingli responded that it was only a matter of theological subtlety which Christians should not worry about. This did not satisfy Luther. He wrote a book the following year on the subject called: *Confession Concerning Christ's Supper* and finally broke off with Zwingli at the Marburg Colloquy in 1529. A final devastating rejection of the Fanatics came in 1535 in his lecture on Galatians where he placed them outside of the church together with Jews and Turks. "The church is holy even where the fanatics are dominant, so long as they do not deny the Word and the sacraments . . . The church is universal throughout the world, wherever the Gospel of God and the sacraments are present. The Jews, the Turks, and the fanatics are not the church, because they oppose and deny these things." <sup>18</sup>

## THE UNITY OF THE CHURCH

It seems strange at first that Luther should see greater evidence of the church amongst the Romanists than he did in some of his fellow reformers. However, the central issue for him was that the unity of the church is dependent on God's grace in Word and sacrament. It is grace alone which gives salvation. This excludes all possibility of man putting his confidence in any work of his own. For this reason he strongly condemned the Anabaptists for doing the same with rebaptism. Yet he often acknowledged that this seeking to trust in one's own works was part of the sinful tendency in man. Not to acknowledge this fact and to persist in this error was to put oneself outside of the church.

The church for Luther was always one holy Christian church united in one faith, one baptism, one Lord Jesus Christ. There could be no other church. This church may be sinful and corrupt and in need of reform, but it is still the community of the redeemed. Luther set about the task to reform it, not to form

17. LW, 37: pp. 23-27.

18. LW, 26: pp. 25-26.

another church. He did not agree with the idea of breaking away. At first he thought that everything could be worked out within the one organization through reform. When that became impossible he thought of establishing an inner fellowship, but this had negative implications for his concept of the unity of the church. Finally the impetus of the reform movement led to the concept of the territorial church wherein those areas which were predominantly Lutheran were organized according to Luther's reforms.

Nevertheless, the unity of the church was not dependent on organizational structure any more than it was dependent on vestments or tonsures or the papacy. It was dependent solely on the grace of God in Word and sacrament. This grace is the common and equal possession of all Christians wherever they may be. For Luther denial of fellowship to a group could not have been based on anything less than the denial of the grace of God in Word and sacrament by that group.