

## Consensus

---

Volume 5 | Issue 4

Article 2

---

10-1-1979

# The Bishop of Rome in a Reunited Church

Wayne J. H. Stuhlmiller

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholars.wlu.ca/consensus>

---

### Recommended Citation

Stuhlmiller, Wayne J. H. (1979) "The Bishop of Rome in a Reunited Church," *Consensus*: Vol. 5 : Iss. 4 , Article 2.  
Available at: <http://scholars.wlu.ca/consensus/vol5/iss4/2>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Scholars Commons @ Laurier. It has been accepted for inclusion in Consensus by an authorized editor of Scholars Commons @ Laurier. For more information, please contact [scholarscommons@wlu.ca](mailto:scholarscommons@wlu.ca).

# THE BISHOP OF ROME

## IN A REUNITED CHURCH

Wayne J.H. Stuhlmiller

At no time since the publication of the Book of Concord in 1580 AD have relations between Roman Catholics and Lutherans been as cordial as they are today. It is apparent, from recent discussions between scholars of these two traditions in North America, that there are broad areas of agreement in their understanding of the ecumenical creeds, the christological center of the faith, the sacraments, and ministry. On the basis of this agreement, Lutheran and Catholic scholars have turned their attention toward the more difficult issue of discovering means of expressing our unity as the universal Church of Christ and achieving a common ministry.<sup>1</sup> It is within this context that the question of ecclesiastical authority, and particularly papal primacy, assumes renewed importance. For Lutherans, the discussion of the possible role of the Bishop of Rome in a reunified Church demands clarity on the Lutheran understanding of "authority" within the Church, the historical relationship of the apostle Peter to the papal office and its implications for papal primacy, and the attitudes toward the papacy among the Lutheran reformers.

### A LUTHERAN UNDERSTANDING OF "AUTHORITY"<sup>2</sup>

Within Lutheranism, the only authority exercised by the Church is that which Jesus Christ exercises through His redeeming action; the authority of the Church is

- 
1. For a comprehensive discussion of Roman Catholic-Lutheran dialogue on this topic, see Paul C. Empie, and T. Austin Murphy, editors, *Papal Primacy and the Universal Church, Lutherans and Catholics in Dialogue V* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1974).
  2. For a more complete discussion of the ideas presented in this section, see E. Kinder, "The Authority of Christ in His Church," *Authority and the Church: Papers and Discussions at a Conference between theologians of the Church of England and the German Evangelical Church*, edited by R.R. Williams (London: SPCK, 1965), pp. 35-46.

soteriological in function. Article XXVII of the Augsburg Confession of 1530 AD states:

Our teachers hold that according to the Gospel the power of the keys or the power of bishops is a power or command of God to preach the Gospel, to remit and retain sins, and to administer the sacraments.

This power is exercised only by teaching or preaching the Gospel and by administering the sacraments either to many or to individuals, depending on one's calling.

Therefore, ecclesiastical and civil power are not to be confused. The power of the church has its own commission to preach the Gospel and administer the sacraments. Let it not invade the other's function . . .

The Church is sent into the world by Christ, as he himself was sent by the Father, on a redemptive mission which it pursues with the authority of Christ. However, Christ remains the Head of the Church. Raised, exalted, living, and present, he discharges his authority through his Church's redeeming ministry of the gospel. The authority remains his, exercised through the Holy Spirit and operative through the gospel.

The nature of the authority which Christ has committed to the Church is that of his own saving action. It is an authority founded upon his self-giving, which asserts and vindicates itself through its saving power in the lives of people. By its very nature this authority cannot be coercive but only persuasive. Although this authority, like all others, claims the right to be heard and heeded and to offer encouragement, advice, warning, or criticism, in order to be compatible with the gospel of Christ, these rights must be exercised in humility and love. This is equally true when the Church is proclaiming the gospel and when it is calling the individual or the society to recognize God's judgment upon its sin.

The ultimate source of this authority is the Father, the Redeemer of Israel, who sent Christ into the world. Its purpose is to bring all men under the gracious rule of the Father as his redeemed covenant community.

Closely related to the Lutheran understanding of ecclesiastical authority is the Lutheran emphasis upon the freedom of the Christian under the gospel. In his treatise on "The Freedom of the Christian" Luther portrays this freedom in the paradoxical statement: "A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none. A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all." The liberating power of the gospel frees the believer from all external authorities and tyranny and unites him with Christ and his life. This liberation from external authorities includes a freedom from the power of ecclesiastical authority to bind the Christian conscience. On the other hand, the life-giving power of the gospel involves the Christian, in union with Christ, in Christ's own self-giving service to all men.

In summary, within Lutheranism the authority of the Church is the redemptive authority of Jesus Christ exercised through the ministry of the gospel and the administration of the sacrament. This authority is to be exercised in humility and a spirit of self-giving which is compatible with the ministry of our Lord; it must in no

way be coercive, nor can it infringe upon the freedom of the Christian life under the gospel.

This stands in contrast to the Roman Catholic understanding of ecclesiastical authority as exercising the royal sovereignty of Christ as Lord which includes the authority to rule as well as to minister to the Church. In the Catholic understanding of authority, Christ's will for the Church is expressed and finds concrete form in the directives of the Church's hierarchy, to which has been delegated the powers of government.

## PETER AND THE PAPAL OFFICE<sup>3</sup>

In the gospel traditions, Peter occupies a prominent position among the Twelve. He is among the first called to follow Jesus; he is given a new name; he frequently serves as the spokesman for the disciples; and he makes a confession of Jesus in terms of the first century Jewish messianic expectation which is given a pivotal position in the structure of the synoptic gospels. In the early Church Peter was identified as the first apostolic witness of the resurrected Lord and figures prominently in the earliest missionary activity among both the Jews and gentiles and in the decisions made by the Church.

Perhaps more important for Peter's role in the later development of the Church's ministry are the New Testament images associated with Peter: the Fisherman-missionary (Mt. 4:19); the Shepherd-pastor (Jn. 21:15ff.); the Martyr-disciple (Jn. 21:18f.); the recipient of special revelations (Acts 10:9ff.); the Confessor of the True Faith (Mk. 9:29); the Guardian of the Faith who interprets prophecies and corrects misinterpretations (II Peter 3:15ff.); as well as the Repentant and Restored Sinner.

Although Peter is the most prominent of the Twelve and tradition does associate him, and Paul, with the Church in Rome, neither of these factors identifies Peter with the office of the papacy or supports papal primacy. The papal office and papal primacy are later developments; and, although there is considerable agreement with the tradition that Peter was martyred in Rome, there is no evidence from the first or early second centuries that he functioned as a bishop or for the exercise of, or claim to, primacy by the Bishop of Rome based on a connection with Peter. In the New Testament, Peter shares his leadership role with James in the Jerusalem church and with Paul in the missionary activity of the apostles. Paul clearly regards himself as a peer and does not hesitate to reprimand Peter when he believes it is necessary. Finally, with reference to Peter's later career and role in the early Church, the New Testament remains silent.

Although it is anachronistic to identify Peter as the first pope, the association of the prominent figures of Peter and Paul with Rome and the rich imagery associated

---

3. The material in this section is based primarily on Raymond E. Brown *et al.*, editors *Peter in the New Testament: A Collaborative Assessment by Protestant and Roman Catholic Scholars* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1973): cf. also Oscar Cullmann, *Peter: Disciple, Apostle, Martyr: A Historical and Theological Essay* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1953).



with Peter very likely did serve to enhance the role of the Bishop of Rome. Other factors which contributed to the prominence of the Roman See include the prominence of Rome in the Empire and the role played by the Roman bishop in the struggle with heresy, a role which often involved him in the life of distant churches and served as a focus for the unity of Christendom. It is clear that by the end of the fourth and in the early fifth century the bishops of Rome did claim to be the successors of Peter, a claim which implied spiritual authority over all other bishops and a leading role in the unity and universality of the Church and the integrity of its faith.<sup>4</sup>

It is this latter function of the papal office — the so-called “Petrine Function” — which lies at the heart of contemporary ecumenical discussions of the role of the papacy in a reunified Church. The “Petrine Function” has been defined as the role of maintaining a balance within the Church between unity and universality. “In other words, it is to relate local unity to geographic and cultural universality, local units of the church to the church universal, so that pluralism and pluriformity do not undermine oneness, and unity and uniformity do not destroy diversity.”<sup>5</sup>

## SOME REFORMATION PERSPECTIVES ON THE PAPACY

Lutherans, in reviewing their Confessions, have become increasingly aware that in spite of the harsh and condemnatory statements of the reformers regarding the papacy, they were condemning the papacy of their day and not the papacy *per se*. They rejected only those aspects of the sixteenth century papacy which they considered abuses while continuing to recognize the importance of the “Petrine Function” and seeking to reform the papal office in the interests of the unity of the Church. That is, they recognized the symbolical and functional value of the papacy as long as it continued to serve the ministry of the Gospel. The Lutheran reformers were ready to concede the constructive role which the papacy had played many times throughout its history.

The chief point of disagreement between the Lutheran reformers and the Roman Catholic Church was the right by which the papal office exists. The Catholic Church understands the papal office as divinely instituted by Christ’s appointment of Peter as the “rock” upon which his Church would be founded. This role of Peter in the Church of Christ has continued throughout history by means of the succession from Peter of the bishops of Rome. The Catholic church, therefore, considers the papal office to exist by divine right.

Lutherans, on the other hand, have traditionally understood the “rock” which forms the foundation of Christ’s Church as Peter’s confession of faith. Although recent Protestant exegesis has generally agreed that the “rock” must be identified with Peter, it is also agreed that there is no reference here to any successors to Peter.<sup>6</sup> The text speaks only of Peter and the Church without mentioning a continuing Petrine office within the Church. Consequently, for Lutherans, the papal office, as

---

4. Empe and Murphy, p. 44.

5. George H. Tvard, “What is the Petrine Function?” *Papal Primacy and the Universal Church, Lutherans and Catholics in Dialogue V*, p. 212.

6. Cullmann, pp. 206-212.

it developed in the history of the Church, cannot claim to perpetuate the Petrine office or to exist by divine right.

For Lutherans, the papal office, as all other ecclesiastical offices or structures, is a human development and, therefore, exists by human right only. Christ alone is the Head of the Church and the divine authority which he exercises through his Church is soteriological rather than sovereign or juridical in nature. Ecclesiastical authority and structures exist only to serve the ministry of the gospel and the sacraments. Church polity is, therefore, understood to be an *adiaphoron*, that is, something which is neither commanded nor forbidden by the Scriptures. No form of church polity is endorsed and, indeed, various forms do exist within world-wide Lutheranism.

## THE ROLE OF THE PAPACY IN A REUNIFIED CHURCH

Lutherans today are becoming more conscious of the fact that no church exists in isolation; both individual congregations and church bodies exist in relation to the universal Church of Christ. With this growing understanding of the universal nature of the Church there is also a growing desire for a means to more effectively institutionalize the "Petrine Function" in the interests of the unity of the Church. One alternative for the institutionalization of the "Petrine Function" is a Ministry to serve the unity of the universal Church.

In response to this emerging need, Lutherans, who are convinced that the Church lives by the Gospel and its freedom, are free as well to re-examine and re-consider the role of the papal office in exercising the "Petrine Function" in a reunified Church. The Lutheran reformers had already desired to reform the papacy in the interests of serving the unity of Christendom. In the same way, many Lutherans today are ready to consider the office of the papacy as one legitimate form — although not the necessary form — of the "Petrine Function."

There are, however, some typically Lutheran concerns which would have to be resolved before such a recognition of the papal office by Lutherans could take place. First, the Lutheran understanding of the primacy of the gospel would make it necessary that the papacy be reformed both theologically and practically to make clear its subordination to the gospel. On this point, general agreement has already been reached by Lutheran and Roman Catholic churchmen.<sup>7</sup>

Second, and closely related to the previous concern, Lutheran recognition of the papal office would be dependent upon the structuring and interpretation of the papacy in pastoral terms, as serving the ministry of the gospel and the unity of the Church without exercising its authority in a manner which could infringe upon the freedom of the Christian under the gospel. In this regard the Second Vatican Council also stressed the pastoral function of the papal office.

Third, and perhaps the most difficult issue to resolve to the mutual satisfaction of Catholics and Lutherans, is the matter of the right by which the institution of the papacy exists. While they recognize that the "Petrine Function" is an integral part of the ministry

---

7. Cf. the Report of the Joint Lutheran - Roman Catholic Study Commission on "The Gospel and the Church," *Lutheran World* XIX (1972), pp. 259-273.

of the gospel, Lutherans consider the papacy as the institutionalization of this function, as well as all other ecclesiastical structures, to exist only by human right. Their stress upon the primacy of the gospel makes all offices or structures instrumental in function, and, therefore, changeable or dispensable. This means that the papacy could not be considered the only legitimate institutional form of the "Petrine Function".

A fourth concern, which has also been expressed by Roman Catholic churchmen, is that the office of the papacy be understood in functional terms, and, therefore, as a flexible structure which can be adapted to meet changing needs within the Church.

A fifth concern is for the need for legitimate diversity within the Church. Lutherans, who understand Christ as exercising ultimate authority as the Head of the Church, maintain that Christ, through the Spirit's guidance, may lead various members or segments of the Church to develop diverse forms of piety, liturgy, theology, custom, or law, and that the ecclesiastical structures should not restrict such developments or become causes of division within the Church. Such healthy diversity serves to build up the whole Church.

A final concern, also addressed by the Second Vatican Council, would be for the development of collegial responsibility for the unity of the Church which could better protect the values and rights of groups within the Church which could be stifled or neglected by excessive centralization.

In conclusion, three major areas of discussion will determine the outcome of the Lutherans' reconsideration of the role of the papacy in exercising the "Petrine Function" for the universal Church: (1) the primacy of the gospel; (2) the scope of ecclesiastical authority; and (3) the need for a visible manifestation of the unity of the Church, and the possible alternatives for filling this need.