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CONFESSIONAL PERSPECTIVES

ON THE CHURCH FOR TODAY

Robert G. Schoenheider

The proposition of one Canadian Lutheran Church is related to the diligent pursuit of the mission and ministry of the Church in our time. There are challenges currently before us to which we will have difficulty responding under the current structures and the functional mechanisms which we now possess. The formation of a new church body provides us with the opportunity, not only to retain and rework that which is valid and good in our past, but also to break new ground where necessary. To undertake this task responsibly we need to have a unified clear presentation of the theological purpose for being. We have to have a well-thought-out, clearly articulated ecclesiology or theology of the church. The forms and structure of the church flow out of the functions of the church. And the functions of the church are only evident when we understand the essential nature of the church.

Lutheranism in North America has never had a well-defined or articulated theology of the church (ecclesiology). This has been evidenced over the years in some very muddy thinking regarding the rights of the congregation, the doctrine of the public ministry, ordination, the sacramental character of the means of grace, and a number of other areas connected with ecclesiology. The doctrine of the church, therefore, impinges not only on questions concerning the shape of the new church body, but on other matters such as alternate forms of ministry, the function of worker-priests, the essential form of a congregation, the practice of Baptism, church membership and what it really is, the various offices of ministry, etc.

We need to hammer out and clearly articulate a theology of the church -- an ecclesiology -- in language suited to our time and situation. This I propose to do

by beginning with the Lutheran Confessions which present an ecclesiology drawn from the Scriptures. Following this, particular note will be made of some of the ramifications and applications of this ecclesiology to the functions and the form of the church in Canadian Lutheranism in our time.

THE ESSENCE OR NATURE OF THE CHURCH

A recent commentary on the Augsburg Confession has some harsh things to say about those who indulge in continually running down the Church. The author points out that the Augsburg Confession proclaims that “God’s church will be and remain forever . . . the church is God’s establishment, ‘and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.’ ”¹ He maintains that only on the basis of such a confession can one make constructive criticisms of the church. Only because the church is God’s people whom he has loved in Jesus Christ does it make sense to attempt to criticize and reform it. Thus any critical study of ecclesiology on our part must be rooted in such an attitude. We dare not write off the church in any of its aspects. It is God’s creation and gift to us. Instead we must grapple with any problems involved, always under the discipline of our faith.

The essence or nature of the church cannot be understood apart from the Scriptural doctrine of the Gospel. The logical progression of the articles of the Augsburg Confession is not accidental. Before we can speak of such things as the life of new obedience, the church, the sacraments, ecclesiastical order and civil affairs, we must deal with the cardinal points of God, sin, and justification by grace through faith (or the Gospel).² It is only with a grasp of the Gospel as the external Word of God’s love in Christ that we can reach a proper understanding of the church. Although the Lutheran Confessions do not include a specific treatment of the doctrine of the Word or Scripture as a separate article (except for the Formula of Concord), there is implicit throughout the Confessions and the claim that the Word is the sole source and norm of all teaching. The proper Lutheran understanding of the Word is incarnational; the love of God in Christ, which is an answer to the judgement of God, is proclaimed or takes form in our world.

The essence or nature of the church is defined by the Augsburg Confession as “The assembly of all believers (*congregatio* or *Versammlung*) among whom the Gospel is preached in its purity and the holy sacraments are administered according to the Gospel” (AC VII).³ This is a two part definition. The church is the assembly of all believers. The assembly of believers is defined by what happens or is done in its midst. Note that the Word of God is not cited here in general, nor the law, but only the Gospel. The Gospel is in essence and in this context a proclaimed word (*rein gepredigt - recte docetur*). The intellectual possession of factual knowledge about the love of God in Jesus Christ is not what is meant. The biblical concept of the Gospel is an active Word that contains

1. George Forell, *The Augsburg Confession: A Contemporary Commentary* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1968), p. 36.

2. Edmund Schlink, *Theology of the Lutheran Confessions* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1961) devotes 73 out of 295 pages to the Lutheran understanding of the Law and the Gospel.

3. Quotations from the Lutheran Confessions are quoted from Theodore G. Tappert, translator and editor, *The Book of Concord* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959).

creative or life-giving power and reaches its epitome in the person-Word of the incarnate Saviour.

Note also that the emphasis is on the use of the sacraments (*recte administrantur sacramenta - die heiligen Sakramente lauts des Evangelii gereicht werden*), not on simply possessing them. This stress on the practical use of the sacraments is also according to the Gospel or the divine Word.

Because the Gospel and the sacraments belong to the concept "church", we must say that a study of the essence of the church takes seriously these "means" through which God "gives the Holy Spirit" (AC V,2), and through which the Holy Spirit is active. Two points should be emphasized. First, the Gospel and the sacraments are 'in' (*inbei*) the assembly of believers as the means through which the Spirit produces faith and creates the believing community. In the Large Catechism, Luther states "...where Christ is not preached, there is no Holy Spirit to create, call, and gather the Christian church" (LC II,45). Secondly, the Gospel and sacraments are 'in' the assembly of believers as the service (ministry) which is entrusted to the believing community and which is performed by it. The Large Catechism affirms that the Holy Spirit "has appointed a community on earth, through which he speaks and does all his work" (LC II,61). "It is the mother that begets and bears every Christian through the Word of God. The Holy Spirit reveals and preaches that Word, and by it he illumines and kindles hearts so that they grasp and accept it, cling to it, and persevere in it" (LC II,42). The Holy Spirit "first leads us into his holy community, placing us upon the bosom of the church, where he preaches to us and brings us to Christ" (LC II,37).

Thus the two parts of the definition of the church (AC VII,1) must be kept together. The relative clause only explains the term "assembly of believers". The church can never exist without the proclaimed Word and the sacraments. Just as the Word and Sacraments properly understood are objective outward means which have active concrete reality apart from the subjective religious experience of the individual, so the church, the assembly of believers, is an objective concrete reality apart from the individual's experience of it. The living Word of God comes to people as an external Word in the word of men and concealed under water, bread, and wine. This external Word is not man's possession but God's living voice. Anyone who fails to see this misses the point in the doctrine of the church.

This sacramental or incarnational concept of the church and the means of grace must be maintained over against those who would spiritualize the church and make of it nothing more than a fellowship of faith, a body of individuals who have experienced a similar response to a religious stimulus. Those neo-Protestants who see the concrete reality of the Word and sacraments originating from the fellowship of faith or who conceive of them as a means of expression which the fellowship creates for itself have no part in the Lutheran biblical understanding of the church or the means of grace.

A practical ramification is that this understanding of the nature or essence of the church provides a corrective for the faulty idea of voluntarism with which many members approach their involvement in the Body of Christ and the local assembly of believers. Greater stress on this could do much to fostering a recognition of the church as an objective gift of God and the framework within which and out of which the Spirit works in human lives, through the externally real means of the Word and sacraments. Too often our Lutheran people view the church as a voluntary association of the faithful a fellowship for which they opt in

varying degrees. This may be due largely to the fact that we have not taught our people what the church really is!

One other thing needs to be said. The definition of the church in the Augsburg Confession does not limit itself to the assembly of believers as spatially circumscribed (the local congregation). As the German text of Augsburg Confession indicates, it presupposes the assembly of *all* believers (*Versammlung aller Glaubigen*).⁴ “Though the Gospel is always proclaimed in a local fellowship of believers (as opposed to being proclaimed to all believers at once, which is impossible), AC VII looks beyond the size, large or small, of local assemblies to the whole Christian church on earth.” Both the church and the churches, local congregations, each being an assembly of believers, is the church in the most real sense. The one does not preclude the other. However, this definition does not permit a concept which isolates the individual congregation as the only legitimate form of the church which is recognizable in the world.

This point is quite relevant for us as we contemplate a new church body because our history has tended to push us into a very narrow and restricted concept of what constitutes a congregation. In turn that concept of the congregation has often been linked with a refusal to acknowledge anything other than the congregation as a legitimate, empirical, concrete manifestation of the church in the world. On the basis of the Confessions and the biblical evidence, it is questionable whether we can draw the lines as tight as we have.

This has implications not only in the form of a new church but in its function. There are challenges in ministry that are before us right now which we cannot face adequately if we adhere to our previous thinking and practice in this regard. Also extreme congregationalism might be compatible with the neo-Protestant view of the church as a voluntarily-constituted fellowship of the faithful, but it is precluded in the Lutheran view of the church as presented in the Confessions.

THE CHARACTERISTICS OF THE CHURCH

In keeping with the ancient ecumenical creeds, especially the Nicene formulation, the Lutheran Confessions characterize the church gathered by the Holy Spirit under Christ, the head, as the “one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church.” After defining the essential nature of the church it is necessary to consider what each of these characteristics contribute to our understanding of ecclesiology.

The church is holy as the community of those whom the Holy Spirit has made holy. In referring to the church the German text of AC VII uses the term assembly or congregation of all believers. The Latin at the same point reads, “the congregation of saints.” Both designations are accurate. From the progression of Articles IV, V and VI of the Augsburg Confession we are aware that new obedience follows upon justification. Faith or justification is not without sanctification. Faith alone justifies, but faith is never alone. As Luther states in the Large Catechism, “I believe that there is on earth a little holy flock or community of pure saints under one head, Christ. It is called together by the Holy Spirit in one faith, mind, and understanding. It possesses a variety of gifts, yet is united in love without sect or schism.” (LC II, 51) “By it (the Word) he (the Holy Spirit) creates and increases sanctification, causing it daily to grow and become

4. Schlink, p. 202.

but who, through the working of the Spirit are saints (*simul justus et peccator*). As God's creation in Jesus Christ through the Spirit, we cannot deny this holiness. As with all of the other characteristics it derives from the basic givenness which is at the heart of the essential nature of the church. Only as God's work can the church, which consists of human beings like you and me, be holy.

The apostolic character of the church relates to the fact that the church is the assembly of believers among whom the same Gospel is proclaimed which Christ commissioned the apostles to preach. This concept can be traced back to the high-priestly prayer of Jesus in John 17 where the Lord prays not only for his disciples, but also for those who shall believe in him through their word (the apostolic witness, the *kerymna*). If the church has and holds fast to the word of the apostles, it is apostolic. If it has departed from the apostolic word, it is "un-apostolic". The Spirit who through the Gospel produced the confession of Peter (Thou art the Christ, the Son of the Living God!), produces a similar apostolic confession in the hearts and on the lips of those who belong to the church in all of its subsequent ages. Again, the apostolic character of the church derives from its givenness, in this case from the commission of its Lord and Head, Jesus Christ. The continuity of apostolicity depends on the active working of the Spirit witnesses to Christ in and through the church. This characteristic has implications which need to be discussed in regard to ecclesiology and its relation to the doctrine of the public ministry and teaching authority in the church.

(Concluded in the next issue)

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