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CONFESSIONAL PERSPECTIVES

ON THE CHURCH FOR TODAY

(Continued)

Robert G. Schoenheider

The fact that the church is "holy" was discussed previously. Also noted was its apostolic character. Two additional characteristics which the Lutheran Confessions use to describe the church (in keeping with the ancient ecumenical symbols) is that it is "one" and "catholic."

THE CHURCH "ONE" AND "CATHOLIC"

Care must be taken not to confuse the characteristics of the church with the marks of the church. The former are effects or results which stem from the givenness of the church. The latter are related to the constitutive element of the church, the Gospel, and are thus in the realm of cause rather than effect. In other words, the church is "one, holy, catholic and apostolic," because it is God's creation or work. These characteristics do not make the church what it is. They result from the fact that it is the Holy Spirit's handiwork. Keeping that in mind, consideration is now given to the oneness or unity of the church and its catholicity or universality.

It is helpful to look at these two characteristics together because they always stand in tension. The fact that the church is both one and catholic is a contrast when viewed historically. "The universality of the church (catholicity) calls its unity into question, and the unity of the church calls the catholicity into

question.” The tension resides in the fact that the one church, which spans all time and space and even goes beyond it, includes within its membership the great diversity of believers which history parades before us. God has called together from all nations and corners of the earth those who are to be his people, the church here in the world. And this calling of God continues throughout the span of history.

This prompts a word of caution. The tension between these two characteristics is dynamic and needs to be maintained as such. We cannot have one at the expense of the other. There is a tendency to sacrifice the church’s unity to its universality or vice-versa. This may become a problem particularly when we face practical issues in bringing a larger church body into being. How do we encompass so much diversity both of space and time (our separate geographies and histories) in a unity which is genuine? The answer is found in the givenness of the church, the fact that it is the Lord’s creation. It is he who through the Spirit calls us to one faith in one baptism to acknowledge him as the one Lord over all who are his one body, the church. Also we must remind ourselves at the same time that this one call is the call of the Gospel. It emanates from the gracious love of God which is inclusive not exclusive. God would have all respond to the call of the Spirit in the Gospel regardless of their diversity. The body is made up of many different members, each having their individual place. (LC II, 51)

A further description of the unity and catholicity of the church is given in the Augsburg Confession. “For the true unity of the Church it is enough to agree concerning the teaching of the Gospel and the administration of the Sacraments. It is not necessary that human traditions or rites or ceremonies, instituted by men, should be alike everywhere.” (AC VII, 2-3; see also AP VII, 33.) The unity of the church can be regarded as spiritual unity if it is seen as a unity made possible by the call of the Spirit, a unity which is a gift of the Lord to his church. However, the term “spiritual” is best avoided because it has been misunderstood so often, especially in the context of the visible invisible church distinction so distorted by some within our circles. Perhaps it is better to say, “The unity of the church is the unity of faith.”² The unity of the church resides in the Gospel, thus it is a result of the givenness of the church. It is not something which we bring into being.

The oneness of the church does not require uniformity in worship forms, polity, traditions, organization or structure. Nor does it rely upon having one person at the head of the church or having identical constitutions in all geographic areas of the church. Nothing which has been adopted by believers in the liberty or freedom of the Gospel to facilitate the life in faith can be required as a prerequisite for the unity of the church.

Having said this, one must add that a degree of uniformity is not ruled out by the above; nor is it necessarily bad. A certain uniformity in worship, polity, organization, etc., is conducive to the effective functioning of the church in its life and mission, particularly with the high mobility of people in our present time and

1. Edmund Schlink, *Theology of the Lutheran Confessions* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1961), page 204.

2. Schlink, page 205.

situation. But it becomes intolerable when it is made a condition for the unity of faith.

THE UNITY OF THE CHURCH

The oneness of the church, though not a uniformity of ritual or legal ordinances is a oneness that includes confessional unity. As already observed, the confession of the church is nothing less than the “agreement concerning the teaching of the Gospel and the administration of the Sacraments.” (AC VII, 2.) Even though this is all that is necessary, it is required for genuine unity. It is essential because the creed of the church establishes the content of the preaching of the Gospel and the administration of the Sacraments in accordance with the Gospel.

The emphasis is not on the creed or confession as such, but on the contents, the Gospel itself, i.e., salvation by God’s free grace through faith in Christ as Saviour and Lord. This Gospel is constitutive of the church. The creed of the church results from the unanimity of proclamation of this Gospel and also serves to further the continued proclamation of this Gospel. Therefore, the oneness of the church is in reality a confessional unity. Genuine unity cannot exist if the pure Gospel is not taught and the sacraments are not administered according to the Gospel.

Unity does not necessarily require the adoption of the same confessional statements by all church bodies. In fact, creedal statements need not be adopted at all. But when and where they exist, they must be in agreement with the doctrine of the Gospel and the administration of the sacraments in conformity to that Gospel. Unity is not possible with those who have creedal statements which deny the doctrine of the Gospel in any way.

There may be times when we become impatient with those who continue to remind us of the necessity of confessional agreement and consensus as we move toward one Lutheran church body in Canada. We have a strong desire to attain the goal. However, we need these reminders as long as they are proffered with integrity. Delaying tactics for the sake of delay can not be condoned, but the importance of confessional unity as a necessary factor in the unity of the church must always remain clearly before us. This unity of creed is nothing more and nothing less than agreement concerning the doctrine of the Gospel and the administration of the sacraments.

THE CATHOLICITY OF THE CHURCH

The Confessions are insistent that the basis of the church’s catholicity not be found in an over-arching polity or outward government of the church; nor in an historic succession of persons traced back to the original apostles; but only in the unity of faith, i.e., in the Gospel. It is in the proclamation of salvation by God’s grace through faith that the Lord of the church reaches out to embrace all believers of every time and every place. With this understanding the sixteenth century reformers maintained that they stood in this mainstream of the church

catholic. They would not surrender the concept of catholicity to Rome. They ascribed it instead to the assembly of all believers among whom the one Gospel is preached. (AP VII, 20.) The catholicity of the church is encompassed in her Lord's command to preach the Gospel in all the world and in his promise that he is present and active wherever the Gospel is preached and the sacraments are administered to embrace people in the one saving faith through the Holy Spirit.

It should be noted that the catholicity of the church has two dimensions: a temporal dimension and a spatial dimension. In its temporal dimension the church's catholicity reaches back to include all ages in the church's history, from its very beginning and to that point in the future when Christ will come to fulfill the kingdom. Lutherans tend to be very selective when it comes to acknowledging the church's history or tradition. We could use the corrective provided by an honest recognition that we, as the church today, have been formed by the entirety of our past. We should not simply ignore large segments of tradition. The church was present in every age through the Holy Spirit's working. And, there are lessons to be learned from all of the church's history. The Confessions go to great lengths to establish their continuity in this temporal dimension of catholicity.³

In its spatial dimension the church's catholicity embraces all believers in any and every place in the world in the unity of faith. This spatial dimension of catholicity requires us to be genuinely ecumenical in our ecclesiology. The Gospel is inclusive not exclusive, in spite of human diversity. Within the boundaries of the unity of faith, which is a unity in the Gospel, we must remain open to others who are members of the household of faith. We must guard against erecting new laws which only exclude. Nor can we avoid the issue by saying that the unity of the church is spiritual. The oneness of the church is spiritual in that it is a unity of faith, but that unity of faith is manifest in the world. (It is in this regard that the distinction of "visible versus invisible" church has been misconstrued and misapplied in our past.) Of all church bodies, the Lutheran Church should be most truly ecumenical because of its understanding of the "true unity of the church." (AC VII, 2.) In practice this has not always been the case in the past.⁴

What are some of the possible implications of what has been discussed for the formation of a new Canadian Lutheran church body? Certainly the unity of faith requires a unity in the proclamation of the Gospel and the administration of the sacraments. We mentioned above that some degree of uniformity in the church's form and organization is also desirable, at least in its major aspects. It serves to facilitate the identity of individual believers with the church in our day and time when all else seems to be in such a chaotic state. We need to foster some stability.

However, provision also needs to be made for flexibility. The challenge of mission and ministry in our circumstances is so diverse that without flexibility in form and organization some aspects of the challenge cannot be met. Perhaps this flexibility is best provided for at the local level. It may be difficult to strike a fine

3. See the numerous quotations from the Fathers interspersed throughout the Confessions.

4. For a full discussion of the catholic substance of the Lutheran Reformation and catholic substance in contemporary Protestantism see J. Pelikan, *Obedient Rebels* (New York, Harper and Row), 1964.

balance between uniformity and flexibility, but that does not mean we can ignore tackling the issue.

The catholicity of the church requires that we consider all ages of the church's history or tradition in structuring the form and function of the new church body. We restrict possibilities if we limit ourselves to our immediate Lutheran past or to a few specific periods in the life of the church. Something can be learned from all of the various phases of the church's past.

Similarly, we ought to be open to the experiences of other believers outside the immediate circle of North American Lutheranism. What have the particular traditions contributed to the mission and ministry of the church in the world? We should be humble enough to acknowledge that they may have something of value to offer out of their respective tradition. We should be concerned not with putting together a self-perpetuating institution but with a form and organization which will encourage us to be the church (God's pilgrim people) in our time and place.

THE MARKS OF THE CHURCH

We turn then to a consideration of the marks of the church. The one, holy, catholic, apostolic church is not a spiritual ideal, but actually exists and is a present reality in this world. (AP VII, 20.) In reaction to the equation of the church with the institutional hierarchy (which reached its high point in the late Middle Ages), some elements in the sixteenth century Reformation tended to spiritualize the church to the point where it no longer existed in the world except in the hearts of men. The connection between faith in the heart and the existence of the church is obvious since the saving grace of God in Christ (the Gospel) is also the constitutive element of the church. But "the church is present on earth prior to the individual Christians; only out of its reality does the Christian come into being."⁵ The church is more than the sum total of individual believers. It has existence apart from the individual believer because of its givenness. It is the creation of its Lord and Head. It is a gift of God within his economy of salvation.

The church is not only a reality in the world. It is a reality which can be known or experienced. It is here that the full force of the Reformation doctrine of the Means of Grace is apparent. The working of faith in the heart is at one and the same time incorporation into the fellowship of the church, the body of Christ. The Holy Spirit calls me to faith by the Gospel. This call to faith is accomplished through the oral, external Word and the visible physical elements of water, bread and wine. "Our churches condemn the Anabaptists and others who think that the Holy Ghost comes to men without the external Word, through their own preparations and works." (AC V, 4.) That which constitutes the church and sustains its life in this world is present in external visible form (the Gospel in the Means of Grace). It follows, then, that the community of believers is not without recognizable marks. "To make it recognizable, this association (of faith) has

5. Schlink, page 217.

outward marks, the pure teaching of the Gospel and the administration of the Sacraments in harmony with the Gospel of Christ.” (AP VII, 5.)

These marks by which the church is known or experienced or recognized are part of the essential nature of the church. The church is never without the outward signs. It does not exist apart from the means of grace. “Gospel and sacrament are the essential cause of the communion of believers -- Christ is present in them and makes them what they are by giving himself in them -- and as essential cause they are at the same time the ground of recognition for the believers. The church is recognized by the Word and the sacraments; for it is produced by the Gospel and has the commission to preach the Gospel to all the world.”⁶

There is a sense in which we can say that faith is necessary in order to recognize the church. For it is only by faith that we appropriate the promise of the Gospel, the gift of God in Jesus Christ. It is only the believer who distinguishes the Gospel from the false teachings and promises of men. But even though it is only by faith that the marks of church can be known for what they really are, this does not make them any less real or external.

This brings us to the terminology, well-known in Lutheran circles in recent decades, of visible invisible church. This terminology is not used in the Confessions. The Confessions, rather, speak of the true church -- the believers throughout the world -- and the church in the larger sense -- the external fellowship which includes those also who are Christians in name only. We need to say a word about the concept of visible invisible because it has been misconstrued and misunderstood to the point where some would think that there are actually two churches -- a worldly church and an ideal other-worldly church.

In this way some have been able to put off the imperative to be a truly ecumenical church body and seek that unity which is God’s gift to his church. They posit the unity as a characteristic belonging only to the invisible church, and thus there is no need that this unity be manifested. To quote Schlink once more in this regard, “If we do want to use the terms ‘visible’ and ‘invisible,’ we must make clear that in the visible church the invisible church is real and visible for the believer.” “. . . the kingdom of Christ, which is hidden among the wicked in the outward church fellowship, is at the same time manifested in the outward church fellowship.” (Schlink, p. 222.) The term “church” is applied to both circumstances in the Confessions -- the true church and the outward fellowship of baptized believers and unbelievers gathered around Word and Sacrament. This is possible because of the Gospel which is the victorious power of God unto salvation for all who believe.

The church, then, is to be found in our churches where the Gospel is preached and the sacraments are administered according to the Gospel. As those who drafted the Confessions were convinced that they were a part of the one, holy catholic and apostolic church in communion with all believers -- both the fathers of the ancient church and their contemporary brethren in other churches -- so we

6. Schlink, page 218.

must be convinced of the same. The church is a concrete reality, and it is to be recognized or found wherever its marks are in evidence. This also has important implications for the functional forms with which we invest a new church body. We must be clear on what belongs to the essence of the church's concreteness, and what is added simply to facilitate the life and mission of the church.

AUTHORITY IN THE CHURCH

It is difficult even to speak of "authority" in the church because the term connotes raw power or coercive force. Properly speaking, the concepts of political or legislative authority can be applied only in the realm of civil government. While the confessions do use the same or similar terminology in reference to both the civil and the ecclesiastical realms, there is a sharp distinction made in the basic meaning of authority as applied to the one or the other.

Within the spiritual realm, there is no coercive power either political or legislative. Authority in the church is bound up in the office of preaching the Gospel and administering the sacraments. Any and all authority or power in the church is inherent in God's Word alone; indeed, properly speaking, in the Gospel. It is in the Gospel that Christ comes to his people. It is through the Gospel that the Holy Spirit is given. No other power is necessary to the life and task of the church. To allow or permit any other power would be a confusion of the civil and ecclesiastical realms, established by God for different purposes and ends. (A.C., XXVIII, Of Ecclesiastical Power)

So then authority in the church is nothing more than the office of the Word, the ministry of teaching the Gospel and administering the sacraments. Yet, proclaiming the Gospel also involves proclaiming the law. Gospel without law would not be Gospel. Along with the authority to forgive sins is the authority to retain sins. Christ has given His Church the two-fold power, to loose and to bind.⁷

To understand the nature of this power or authority of the spiritual realm, it should be viewed in the light of its purpose or end. As AC XXVIII, 8, points out "(through the teaching of the Gospel and administration of the sacraments) are imparted not bodily but eternal things and gifts, namely, eternal righteousness, the Holy Spirit, and eternal life." Also AC, V, "For through the Word and the sacraments, as through instruments, the Holy Spirit is given, and the Holy Spirit produces faith, where and when it pleases God, in those who hear the Gospel. That is to say, it is not on account of our own merits but on account of Christ that God justifies those who believe that they are received into favour for Christ's sake." The power of the civil realm produces a certain order for life in this world, an order which relies upon law which can only condemn and eventually results in death. In contrast, God's grace and love which is the power of the spiritual realm, results in deliverance from death and the creation of the new life of God in Christ.

This view of authority in the church must be kept in context and related to the rest of our understanding of the church. As in the concept of church the geographically circumscribed congregation of some believers and "the assembly of all saints and believers" (AC, VII, 1) dare never be separated, so the spiritual

7. Schlink, p.230.

power of the local congregation should not be separated or differentiated from the spiritual power which governs and serves a large number of congregations and their pastors. "As the one church is a reality both in every individual congregation and in the whole Christian church on earth, so the one ministry is a reality in the office of the pastors and bishops."⁸

Essentially then, authority in the church is operative at all levels. It is a power or authority invested in the church as a whole, not just in local congregations. The commission to teach the Gospel and administer the sacraments is given to the whole church, the body of Christ in the world. To say anything less would be to deny the corporate character of the church and its catholicity.

Having said this, we are immediately confronted by a problem of extreme congregationalism as practiced in North American Lutheranism. Is this congregationalism not perhaps due more to the subtle pressures of our culture or society with its democratic political philosophy than to the influence of Scripture, the confessions and the tradition of the church? The Scriptures contain far more references to the presbyterate and the episcopate in the early church than to what could be called congregationalism. Now practical considerations, related to the task of the church in our time, seem to call for something other than or more than a strict congregational form of order.

OFFICE OF THE PUBLIC MINISTRY

Most present day Lutheran theologians agree that, in essence, the nature of the office of the ministry derives from the apostolic office. One might even be tempted to speak of "apostolic succession" in this regard. However, the term is not used in the confessions and it has become encumbered with various unfortunate connotations down through the years. Although the term is not a good one, we do draw the conclusion that the office of the ministry is directly related to the apostolate.

What then is the relationship of this office to the priesthood of all believers? It should be noted that the office of the keys has been entrusted not only to the apostles but to the whole church. The great commission authorizes both the apostles and the entire church. "The authority to preach the Gospel includes the authority to send out other messengers with the authority to preach the Gospel. Together with the power of the keys the whole church has been given also the right to ordain; together with the Gospel, also the responsibility for the spread and preservation of the Gospel."⁹ When the Augsburg Confession says in XIV, ". . . nobody should publically teach or preach or administer the sacraments in the church without a regular call," this does not stand in opposition to the royal priesthood. It means simply that, because the spiritual office has been entrusted to the church corporately, its administration is not left to the whim of the individual.

Is the public ministry then created out of the authority given to the church? Is it a case of collective power designated to one or more of the members to be

8. Schlink, p. 231.

9. Schlink, p. 242.

exercised in behalf of the corporate body? Is the public ministry simply a form of order constituted by the community of believers? Although such conclusions would seem to follow logically, they are false. "The public ministry is not a creation of the congregation demanded by the moral principle of order, but is an immediate institution of God through the command and promise of Jesus Christ. The idea of a transfer of the rights of the universal priesthood to the person of the pastor is foreign to the Confessions. The church does not *transfer* its office of preaching the Gospel and administering the sacraments to individuals in its membership, but it *fills* this office entrusted to it by God, it *calls* into this office instituted by God."¹⁰ Thus, the pastor not only acts with the authority over the congregation as God's representative and under God's commission. The office of the ministry is divinely instituted. It is a gift of God to his people.

So then, rather than speak of the relationship between the two, one should speak of the relationship of both to their Lord Jesus Christ who through the ministry governs his kingdom, the communion of believers.

A parallel can be seen in the relationship between the church and the Gospel. The church is constituted by the preaching of the Gospel and the Gospel is preached or proclaimed as the task of the church . . . "Just as the Gospel created the church, and not inversely . . . so in the doctrine of the ministerial office attention is directed above all to the speaking of God through this office, and not to the human word which calls into this office and is heard in this office."¹¹

Returning to the question of the concrete form of authority in the church as exercised in the office of the ministry, the church has no choice but to use the office of the ministry in accomplishing its commission. A congregation cannot do without the office of the public ministry. It is a gift of God to the church.

Yet the confessions do not prescribe one specific form or constitution of this office which exercises spiritual authority. There is nothing specific in the confessions to differentiate the various functions inherent in this one office of authority in the church, for instance between the pastor of a congregation and the president of a district or of the church body at large. Nor are there specific directives for the relationship of the ministry and the congregation.

The church has the right and the responsibility to ordain ministers, but the confessions do not specify how this is to be done. Nor do they give any concrete instructions about the practical matters involved in ordination, the call, installation and the conditions to be met in setting an individual apart for the office of ministry. The confessions do not obligate the church to a specific constitution since the Scriptures do not do so. There are guiding principles but no binding bylaws. According to XC, XIV, every properly ordered public ministry is "ecclesiastical order."

There is only one authority in the church having a divine commission. This one church power may be active in different forms at different levels. The functions of this one office may be carried out in different ways. For example, the administrative offices in the church have the same responsibility or duty to the district or synod as the pastor has for the congregation committed to his charge,

10. Schlink, p. 245.

11. Schlink, p. 247.

i.e., to see that the Gospel is preached in the church and the sacraments are administered according to the Gospel. The difference by which a president or bishop is distinguished from a pastor are determined by practical human considerations.

Recognition of the above opens the horizons of what is possible in meeting the challenges which God places before us in our time. It frees the church to be faithful to the commission which the Lord has given. It challenges us to constitute ecclesiastical order in such a way as to "offer the office of the ministry a maximum of possibilities to accomplish its service of preaching the pure Gospel and of properly administering the sacraments in the name and by the command of the Lord of the church."¹²

Church order, then, needs to be determined by God's gift of the ministry to the church for service to all the world. ". . . the church which lives by faith in the Gospel as the fellowship of liberated saints receives from this doctrine of the Confessions an unheard-of possibility and impetus for its devotion to the preaching of the Gospel and is permitted the most extensive missionary activity. Since even the New Testament statements concerning ecclesiastical order and its offices are not imposed as a law but are received in the liberty of faith, the church is commanded to shout the Gospel into the world in ever-new advances, in ever-new forms and arrangements of the one spiritual office."¹³

12. Schlink quoting H. Sasse, *Kirchenregiment und weltliche Obrigkeit nach lutherischer lehre*, p. 60.

13. Schlink, p. 253.