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The Church is not a Democracy? Toward an Anarchist Ecclesiology

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"Well, the church isn’t a democracy, you know!" How often have we heard this excuse for denying that the Holy Spirit might actually speak through the deliberations of the gathered people of God?

On a technical level the statement is true: churches are almost never organized as democracies. Some are monarchies, some aristocracies, some oligarchies, some autocracies, some bureaucracies – but almost none are serious democracies. Even those that maintain some of the forms of representative democracy spend so much energy screening attendance at and orchestrating the agendas of synods and conventions that the average Christian never has a chance to attend, let alone express an honest opinion at, one of these gatherings. Is it not revealing that while we have all heard disdain for democracy in the church, probably none of us have heard, “Well, the church is not a monarchy/aristocracy/etc., you know”?

And where has this disdain for the common voice of the gathered people of God taken us? You only need to read or watch the news to see. In recent months the scandal of sexual abuse and episcopal cover-up have rocked the Roman Catholic Church in the United States. Those of us who are not Roman Catholic can take no comfort in the fact that our own churches have not yet been exposed, for we know that similar skeletons exist in the closet of every denomination, whether we refer to our hierarchs as bishops, presidents, executive presbyters, moderators, district superintendents or whatever. In each and every church there have been abuses of power which have hurt persons and communities, and all too many of these abuses have been covered up by the ecclesial authorities responsible for the supervision of clergy and congregations.

My guess is that not only Cardinal Law in Boston, but also each and every person exercising episcopate in each and every instance of
abuse and cover up has done what he (and now probably also “she”) did with the best of motives: protecting the reputation of the church and not scandalizing the faithful. Of course, the result has been and will continue to be that victims have been terribly hurt – some beyond repair – and that the reputation of the church has been incredibly damaged and the faithful have been so scandalized that they may never again believe what a bishop tells them. The problems do not end with the sexual abuse scandals. While at one time popes, bishops, and moderators may have been effective stimulators of the mission of the church, they are no longer. A refugee pastor wants to start a ministry among his own people and the bureaucracy says, “No, we don’t have enough money.” A sixty-eight-year-old M. Div. graduate wants to move into a low-income housing complex to minister to recent immigrants in their own language and the bureaucracy says, “No, we’re not sure of the jurisdictional authority system.” Whatever the issue, popes, bishops, presidents, moderators and their like always somehow seem to prevent a creative solution or make things worse.

The problem is not that we have bad people exercising _episcope_. In fact, most of these people are quite competent and in other contexts can be creative, even exciting, contributors to advancing the Reign of God. The problem is certainly not that there is insufficient authority in the church. The problem is that we institutionalize authority at all. Let me restate so that the point is quite clear. The problem is not the people holding authority nor is it the ways we exercise ecclesial authority. _The problem is ecclesial authority itself._ Why is this so? Because authority in human institutions, including the churches, requires coercive power in order to exist, and coercive power is inherently problematic for the disciple community.² The solution to the problem of the abuse of authority will not be to change the people holding office, nor even to establish a more accountable system of authorities, but to eliminate the structure of offices of authority. What the church needs is not better authority, but the end of authority. Jacques Ellul has stated the situation well:

There has developed in effect a kind of corpus which practically all Christian groups accept but which has nothing in common with the biblical message, whether in the Hebrew Bible that we call the Old Testament or the Gospels and Epistles of the New

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Testament. All the churches have scrupulously respected and often supported the state authorities. They have made of conformity a major virtue. They have tolerated social injustices and the exploitation of some people by others, explaining that it is God’s will that some should be masters and others servants, and that socioeconomic success is an outward sign of divine blessing. They have thus transformed the free and liberating Word into morality, the most astonishing thing being that there can be no Christian morality if we truly follow evangelical thinking. The fact is that it is much easier to judge faults according to an established morality than to view people as living wholes and to understand why they act as they do. Finally, all the churches have set up a clergy furnished with knowledge and power, though this is contrary to evangelical thinking, as was initially realized when the clergy were called ministers, ministerium being service and the minister a servant of others.

Hence we have to eliminate two thousand years of accumulated Christian errors, or mistaken traditions, and I do not say this as a Protestant accusing Roman Catholics, for we have all been guilty of the same deviations or aberrations.

What exactly is Ellul talking about here? If we are to eliminate “accumulated Christian errors” or “mistaken traditions,” we need to ask exactly which errors and mistakes we are talking about, and we need to examine what source they might spring from.

Why the Gospel Might Oppose Authority: Some Help from René Girard

One window into Christianity as a critique of myth, religion, and culture rather than an affirmation of authority is the work of René Girard. According to Girard, religion and culture arise out of the fact that we each learn to desire certain goods by imitation of a model. Since we desire by imitation – Girard calls this acquisitive or mimetic
desire – we come to desire those same goods which our model desires. While mimesis can enable us to develop positive relationships, it also leads to us seeing our model as our chief rival for the goods we desire, even for being itself. This results finally in murder and violence. In a “mimetic crisis” violence and chaos threaten to overtake the whole society. The violence of each against each proceeds until, by a process of “mimetic imitation” it begins to coalesce around one object. That one object then becomes the scapegoat whose lynching or expulsion from the community releases the violence, anger and tension. Religion and culture arise as the community tries both to protect itself from the mimetic violence – thus moral prohibitions and taboos which attempt to limit the opportunity for mimetic desire to run amuck – and/or to reproduce the experience of release from inchoate violence – thus rituals which repeat the founding murder in one form or another. From there stories and myths, more advanced moral codes, more sanitized rituals, and institutions develop. These eventually conceal the original murder as the culture becomes more sophisticated.

I find it interesting that Girard’s view of the genesis of authority and its supporting myths, rituals and moral codes in violence parallels anarchist views of the genesis of authority. For example, one of Emma Goldman’s definitions of anarchism is “[T]he theory that all forms of government rest on violence ....”6 In either case, any practice of social authority, whether religious or political, is ultimately coercive authority, based on the use of violence or the threat to use violence.

According to Girard the truth of the scapegoating mechanism begins to be uncovered in the Hebrew Scriptures. For example, unlike the Romulus and Remus story in which the murdered brother deserves death at the hand of the city-building brother, in Genesis the Cain and Abel story presents the city builder as a murderer and the dead brother as an innocent victim. The Old Testament revelation of the violence at the base of religion and culture and the separation of God from any desire for such sacrifice reaches its height in the Servant Songs of Second Isaiah. In the New Testament the revelation goes one step further: Not only does God not demand sacrificial victims, but God in Jesus of Nazareth is godself the victim of the lynch mob and the willing authorities. What the Gospels present is not a new and better sacrifice – not even an “unbloody sacrifice” – at the hands of a new and better priesthood, but the anti-sacrifice which

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reveals the scapegoating murder which lies at the base of every system of order and control.

Thus the Gospels present a completely non-violent God and a non-sacrificial understanding of Jesus and his relationship to God. The problem is that the sense of the sacred – which is really only the clouded memory of the founding murder – and the need for sacrifice is so strong that the Gospels began to be read sacrificially and the non-sacrificial revelation was sublimated. Out of the sacrificial reading of Christianity came the church as we know it and Christendom, the Christian society. Thus, those who held authority, priests and emperors alike, maintained their authority. The non-sacrificial reading of the Gospels would have undermined authority, because it would have revealed that the basis of authority and power is always violence. The sacrificial reading hides the violent nature of religion and culture as a whole, let alone power and authority within a culture.

If we can extend this line of thinking beyond Girard, I think that it is legitimate to claim that even the great reforming movements in the church have only partially understood the violent foundation of Christendom in the scapegoat mechanism. Luther, for example, had some sense that in the church the only source of authority should be the Gospel of the gracious God. Luther, though, could not bring himself to see that the gracious God is also the non-violent God. For Luther, God showed his gracious face in the church and his violent face in the state, which by necessity ruled by coercive power. Luther also failed to prevent the continuation of Christendom in which the church is a powerful institution like any other powerful institution. In this situation authority in the church is little different from authority in the state. It is an authority which rests on its ability to deal with people violently – taking their jobs, expelling them from the community, and even executing them for heresy. Obviously the church today has lost the ability to execute heretics, but it still has the ability to fire its workers and expel recalcitrant members. The Gospel, insofar as it is a revelation of God’s grace overcoming violence in Christ, can never be the source of such actions. Insofar as the church takes these actions, its authority is based on violence, not on grace.

What approach can we then take to living as the church in the world? Insofar as we live as the church, authority is a problem that might well obscure the Gospel. Insofar as we live in the world, some
form of organization seems unavoidable. Allow a modest proposal, if you will. Consider the possibility that even democracy in the church – as different as that might be from what we have – does not go far enough. Consider for a moment at least that what the church needs, that the “form” that best expresses the Gospel centre of the church’s mission, is anarchy.

Anarchism: A Brief Introduction
What exactly does that mean? I am certainly not advocating that the church descend into chaos in hopes that something might arise out of the ashes (though one could argue that such would mirror God’s own chosen method of crucifixion and resurrection). What I am advocating is that when we think about ecclesiology we expand our thinking to include not only the monarchical and corporatist options, but also a tradition that has probably been in its history much closer to what Jesus had in mind when he announced the Reign of God than anything we have come up with in any church. That tradition is anarchism.

There are problems with this suggestion, some real and some imagined. The most prominent imagined problems arise from the stereotype that anarchists are for chaos. Some of what are often called the Egoist Anarchists might be considered advocates of the sort of radical individualism which could result in social chaos, but anarchism generally and especially syndicalist, socialist and communist anarchism is not a call for social chaos. It is a call to end the chaotic semblance of order which exists in most societies and institutions. Social anarchism does not advocate the elimination of organization, but of conforming organization more to the human scale and to human needs.

One real problem in considering the anarchist tradition as perhaps helpful for ecclesiology is that anarchism was born among people who considered the established church to be an arm of the state and saw religion as intrinsically authoritarian. Thus the tradition has generally included the church as among those institutions to be eliminated in order to establish a society where both humans and the environment could flourish. There certainly have been Christian anarchists such as Leo Tolstoy, Jacques Ellul and (I would argue) Ivan Illich, so anarchism is not intrinsically anti-Christian, but the majority of anarchists have included religion as among the forces
keeping humanity enslaved. What I would like to do in this section of the essay is to survey some basic anarchist thinking to show that anarchism is not fundamentally opposed to the Gospel and to suggest where anarchist ideas can be helpful for ecclesiology. What I am striving for is not exactly "Christian" anarchism in the sense of Christianity as a religion, but an "evangelical" anarchism in the sense of the Gospel as the Word of the Cross which raises questions about all human attempts at glory, whether religious or political.

Anarchism is a recognizable theory of organization with a specific history. John P. Clark begins an essay defining anarchism with a crucial warning: "According to George Woodcock, one of the most judicious historians of anarchism, 'the first thing to guard against' in discussing the topic is simplicity." In a short essay such as this we may not be able to avoid simplicity completely, but we will attempt to let anarchists themselves define the basis of the idea. Clark offers the following four-point definition of anarchism:

In order for a political theory to be called "anarchism" in a complete sense, it must contain: (1) a view of an ideal, noncoercive, nonauthoritarian society; (2) a criticism of existing society and its institutions, based on this antiauthoritarian ideal; (3) a view of human nature that justifies the hope for significant progress toward the ideal; and (4) a strategy for change, involving immediate institution of noncoercive, nonauthoritarian, and decentralist alternatives.

The writings of well-known exponents of anarchism illustrate this basic definition in their own writings and speeches. First, there is the view of the noncoercive, nonauthoritarian society. Obviously not every anarchist will have the same view of the precise details of the hoped-for society, but each does have an anarchist ideal clearly in sight. Mikhail Bakunin, for example, one of the leading nineteenth century anarchists, defined noncoercion when, in writing on the Paris Commune, he called for a "liberty that consists in the full development of all the material, intellectual and moral powers that are latent in each person; liberty that recognizes no restrictions other than those determined by the laws of our own individual nature, which ... are the real and immediate conditions of our freedom." In order to secure
this situation there must be no external coercion. Peter Kropotkin gives a simple definition of anarchism: “the no-government system of socialism.” He states that “[anarchists] maintain that the ideal of the political organization of society is a condition of things where the functions of government are reduced to a minimum and the individual recovers his [or her] full liberty of initiative and action for satisfying, by means of free groups and federations – freely constituted – all the infinitely varied needs of the human being.” American anarchist Emma Goldman says that what anarchism stands for is “the liberation of the human body from the dominion of property; liberation from the shackles and restraint of government. Anarchism stands for a social order based on the free grouping of individuals for the purpose of producing real social wealth[,] and order that will guarantee to every human being free access to the earth and full enjoyment of the necessities of life, according to individual desires, tastes, and inclinations.” She sees the ideal as a society where each person is free to choose one’s own mode and conditions of work, a situation in which the carpenter, the artist, and the scientist see themselves and each other as involved in the most creative work. Goldman assumes that such a society will consist of voluntary associations evolving in the direction of noncoercive communism. Rudolf Rocker says, “Anarchists desire a federation of free communities which shall be bound to one another by their common economic and social interests and arrange their affairs by mutual agreement and free contract.” Ellul, as a specifically Christian anarchist, adds the requirement of non-violence to the ideals of noncoercion and nonauthoritarian for the anarchist community. Ivan Illich sees what he calls a “convivial society” in these terms:

I intend it to mean autonomous and creative intercourse among persons, and the intercourse of persons with their environment .... I consider conviviality to be individual freedom realized in personal interdependence and, as such, an intrinsic ethical value .... A convivial society would be the result of social arrangements that guarantee for each member the most ample and free access to the tools of the community and limit this freedom only in favor of another member’s equal freedom.
Second in Clark’s definition is a criticism of the current political, economic, and institutional system which is based on the noncoercive ideal. Bakunin makes this critique by pointing out that the sort of liberty which he favours is neither the liberty guaranteed by national constitutions nor the liberty proposed by bourgeois, individualistic notions of human rights. Ellul expresses his conscientious objection to capitalist or welfare state societies and all aspects of the state apparatus:

I believe that anarchy first implies conscientious objection — to everything that constitutes our capitalist (or degenerate socialist) and imperialistic society (whether it be bourgeois, communist, white, yellow, or black). Conscientious objection is objection not merely to military service but to all the demands and obligations imposed by our society: to taxes, to vaccination, to compulsory schooling, etc.

Ivan Illich carries the critique beyond just governmental systems to all tools (Illich would understand any system as a tool or technology) used in modern, industrial societies: “Now it turns out that machines do not ‘work’ and that people cannot be schooled for a life at the service of machines. The hypothesis on which the experiment was built must now be discarded. The hypothesis was that machines can replace slaves. The evidence shows that, used for this purpose, machines enslave men.” Within these short statements the critique is more implied than stated, but almost any anarchist work includes lengthy critique of current conditions and finds the root of the problem in coercive authority.

Clark’s third criterion for defining anarchism is a view of human nature. One possible theological critique of anarchism is that it drinks too deeply from the well of Enlightenment optimism. Actual anarchists, though, may not be as “optimistic” as people think. An anarchist view of human nature does include a sense of the human capacity for evil and, as Bakunin implies, recognizes certain inherent limitations in human nature. Certainly the anarchist will tend to see people as having “a great potential for voluntaristic action, and ability to overcome the use of violence and coercion.” These characteristics can be seen in Bakunin’s view that each person has latent physical, mental, and ethical abilities which can be expressed in a noncoercive
context. Goldman shows a similar understanding of humanity in her belief that there is a unity between the individual and the social in human nature that can be expressed through a balanced personality when society is structured so that all experience their daily work as a creative adventure.\textsuperscript{21} Ellul expresses belief that people are capable of non-violence and a conscientious pursuit of truth.\textsuperscript{22} Anarchism does not assume that humanity is "inherently good" or "inherently evil," but only that current social arrangements tend to obscure what capability we do have for the good and bend us toward anti-social behaviour. In this respect anarchism is not much different than the view that humans possess "civic righteousness," which enables us to be good citizens or good workers, even as we suffer from the consequences of original sin. Anarchism is also acutely aware of the human tendency to abuse authority, which is why in those few places where anarchist ideas have been put into practice there are always aspects of organization designed to protect against such abuse. If humans were not prone to violence, there would be no need for anarchism.

The fourth characteristic of anarchism is a strategy for change toward the ideal, beginning with already existing examples of noncoercive and nonauthoritarian structures\textsuperscript{23} and associations. As Goldman notes, since the point of anarchism is to encourage the evolution of new conditions through free participation, and each social context will have its own unique starting point, not all anarchists will advocate the same strategies. Nonetheless, all anarchists will have some strategy for bringing about the desired change. So Goldman calls for voluntary producer and consumer associations which will eventually evolve into noncoercive communism while Ellul advocates non-violent conscientious objection to various features of capitalist society.

Why Bother with Anarchism?
While there are compelling organizational and social – not to mention political and economic – reasons for allowing anarchism to influence ecclesiology, the real reason is theological. There are at least two intertwined theological themes which push a Gospel-centred community of disciples of Jesus toward a Spirit-endowed anarchism. These are the doctrine of justification by grace alone through faith alone understood as a central aspect of the paradigm of the theology of the cross.

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The paradigm of the theology of the cross posits that every doctrine and every practice of the church needs to be evaluated by its conformity to the pattern of God's salvation of the cosmos through the crucifixion of Jesus of Nazareth. The question for ecclesiology would then be, "What is the shape of the life of a community which follows a crucified Lord?"

This paradigm has been debated at least since Luther's theses for the Augustinian general chapter in Heidelberg in 1518, if not since St. Paul's letters to the Corinthians and Mark's gospel were written. In contemporary theology it has been advocated by theologians such as Jürgen Moltmann, Douglas John Hall, and Gerhard Forde. It is not my intent in this essay to argue the validity of the theology of the cross as a theological paradigm for the church today, but to draw out implications from applying that paradigm to ecclesiology.

The theology of the cross holds that there is one and only one way to the resurrection, and that is through the cross. Part of this assertion is taking seriously the social and political context of crucifixion in the Roman Empire of the first century C. E. The miracle of the resurrection which makes it a worldview-shattering event is not that some person came back to life after dying, but that specifically an arrested, tried, convicted, and crucified criminal rose up again after being executed. The miracle is not resuscitation, it is vindication. God has chosen to designate a crucified criminal as Messiah and Lord.

We can identify two actions of God in the crucifixion and resurrection. The first action relates to the fact that God's vindication of Jesus is a direct affront to the forces of order and stability represented by the Roman occupation and by local collaborationists. Both of these authorities claim to represent a divinely ordained system of order and therefore to speak for God or the gods. The resurrection of Jesus pulls the rug out from under their claims.

The first action not only relates to Jesus' opponents, but to Jesus himself. The gospels present Jesus as a fairly successful itinerant preacher and healer. He arrives in Jerusalem to great acclaim from the masses. But his success cannot last and in the course of one week of following God's ways Jesus manages to alienate not only the authorities but even the masses. This gives the authorities an opportune moment to arrest him, at which point even his closest followers betray, deny, and desert him. By following the ways of
God, Jesus goes from being fairly successful to being an utter failure. His final cry is "My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?" In other words, the cross not only pulls the rug out from under Jesus' opponents, it even pulls the rug out from under Jesus himself.

The second action relates to the manner in which God accomplishes the vindication of the crucified Jesus. God does not vindicate Jesus by causing his trial to go better than might be expected. God did not vindicate Jesus by causing a peasant uprising to break him out of jail. God chose to vindicate Jesus through resurrection after crucifixion. God did not relieve Jesus of the cross, but God caught Jesus up from the grave of one crucified. The rug is pulled out from under Jesus, he is falling backwards through death, and in the midst of his falling into eternal death God catches him up and raises him up from the dead.

Note that these two actions do not correspond to crucifixion as the first and resurrection as the second. That is too simple and clouds what God is really up to. Rather, both actions happen in crucifixion and resurrection. In the first action, through crucifixion and resurrection, God pulls the rug out from under everyone, both Jesus and his opponents. In the second action, through crucifixion and resurrection, God catches Jesus up and establishes him as Messiah and Lord. Note that the second action vindicates only Jesus, not the Roman occupiers or the priestly collaborators.

These two actions in the cross are directly related to God's justification of sinners by grace through faith. It is through these two actions that sinners are justified. God pulls the rug out from under everyone, "sinners" and "righteous" alike, and God catches up sinners as they fall through death into new life. Thus the pattern of justification is the pattern of crucifixion and resurrection.

When we move from justification to ecclesiology under the paradigm of the theology of the cross, we would expect to find the same pattern operating. What I am advocating in this essay is that using insights from Anarchism can help us develop an ecclesiology and ecclesial practice which fits this theology better than the monarchism or corporatism which has guided our actions up to now. Specifically, I think that anarchism can help in two ways, corresponding to the two actions of God in crucifixion.

First, God pulls the rug out from under everybody, then God vindicates Jesus. Note that nowhere does God vindicate the actions of
the Roman occupation or the priestly collaborators. The actions of the political and ecclesiastical authorities are never more nor less than they are revealed to be on Easter morning. The established authorities are the primary agents responsible for attempting to murder God. They are not content to oppress the poor, they must also attempt to eliminate the God of the poor. Their efforts are revealed for what they are, the essential centre of idolatry.

How then can the community of disciples of Jesus Christ emulate these authorities who crucified Jesus when we turn to structure our own community life? Jesus was not a monarchist. Peter was not the CEO of a globalized bureaucracy. St. Paul never called on bishops to change from being a community of leaders in a mutual benefit society to being the singular *pater familias*. Where then have we ever come up with the bizarre idea that monarchism or corporatism is the way to organize the church? The Reign of God is a glorious anarchy of salvation through crucifixion and resurrection, not a reign of death through order and stability.

More seriously, the attempt to guarantee good order through *magisterium* or convention resolutions denies the reality of justification by grace through faith. When the church attempts to prevent itself from falling through death, it short-circuits the gifts of God’s grace. In the same way that God saves dying sinners, God proclaims the Gospel through dying churches – that is through churches that endure the risks of falling backward as God pulls the rug out from under our feeble attempts at self-preservation. When we attempt to stabilize ourselves to prevent the falling, the only thing we impede is the flow of grace to people who need to hear the Gospel. Our churches will not survive – how many people today honour Pilate or Caiaphas? – they will only atrophy, as they now do. Anarchism is one form of community organization which trusts the Spirit to move where the Spirit will and is willing to fall backward when the Spirit pulls the rug out from under us.

**What Went Wrong?**

If, as I have been arguing, there are good theological reasons for an anarchist ecclesiology, why did the disciple community only seldom explore this option? It has become commonplace to blame the shift on Constantine and Theodosius, “Constantinianism” and Christendom. No doubt the legalization and establishment of
Christianity in the late Roman period did have a profound impact, but I think the problem is deeper and more complex than that. At its root the problem is that even we who have been called to follow Jesus fear that call and fear what Jesus might lead us into. In effect, we fear the very Gospel that has made us disciples.

That fear and its results have been seen in every era of the church's history. Not every opposition to heretics is fear of the Gospel, since quite often the heretics were themselves trying to truncate the Gospel to make it more acceptable to polite society. Yet, not every defense of orthodoxy has been a defense of the Gospel, either. Legitimate opposition to anti-Gospel heresy was used as a cover for making the church more authoritarian and more rigid. What should have been a ringing call to Gospel freedom too often became a squelching of the Holy Spirit.

One example of that occurs in the early history of my own Lutheran tradition. Luther's insights about the nature and truth of the Gospel as "justification by grace alone through faith alone" led him to many important insights, but in the end fear of what the unadulterated Gospel might produce led him to put limits on these insights. One example can make the point. In the "Treatise on Good Works" from 1520 Luther advocates what we might call an anarchy of good works:

God is served by all things that may be done, spoken, or thought in faith .... Now everyone can notice and feel for himself when he does what is good and what is not good. If he finds his heart confident that it pleases God, then the work is good, even if it were so small a thing as picking up a straw .... In this faith all works become equal, and one work is like the other; all distinctions between works fall away, whether they be great, small, short, long, many, or few. For the works are acceptable not for their own sake but because of faith, which is always the same and lives and works in each and every work without distinction .... It further follows from this that a Christian man living in this faith has no need of a teacher of good works, but he does whatever the occasion calls for, and all is well done .... For faith
does not permit itself to be bound to any work or to refuse any work, but, as the first Psalm says, it yields its fruit in its season, that is, in the normal course of events .... Thus a Christian man who lives in this confidence toward God knows all things, can do all things, ventures everything that needs to be done, and does everything gladly and willingly, not that he may gather merits and good works, but because it is a pleasure for him to please God in doing these things. He simply serves God with no thought of reward, content that his service pleases God.32

In this text the anarchism is not merely implicit. Luther says that any work done in faith is a good work. There are no rules that one must learn beforehand; there are no moral arbiters or even teachers of ethics. The person who has been gifted with faith in Christ by the Holy Spirit simply does good works by doing what the situation requires.

As time went on Luther did not ever repudiate what he had written in 1520, but he did put several fences around it. The first and most significant of these was the distinction of two kingdoms. In Luther’s opinion, the freedom of the Gospel was restricted to the spiritual kingdom, in which it remained true that any work done in faith was a good work. In the political kingdom the Law continued to reign supreme and thus civic righteousness continued to be defined by law and order as administered by the authorities. In the spiritual realm, one needed no teacher of good works, but in the political realm coercive authority was required so that citizens could be taught obedience. The Gospel spoke in the church and in spiritual matters, but it was silent in the state and in political matters. Thus, if one came to the conclusion in faith that the situation required revolution, one was wrong and opposed God’s will.

Luther was brilliant enough to develop an extensive theological rationale for this position, but at the bottom is fear that people will come to the conclusion that the Gospel has as much validity in public religion as it has in private religion. If such had happened they might then have come to the conclusion that the status quo in the state was as corrupt as was the status quo in the church. Then some attempt at social change would have resulted, and Luther was clearly afraid that
social change would lead to social chaos. In the end the result was that the power of the Gospel to set people free from "the powers" was truncated and remains truncated to this day in Lutheranism. The definition of Christian discipleship is reduced to a private piety and morality which offers no alternative to what society currently has on offer.  

This is just one example from my own tradition, but the phenomenon is spread throughout all parts of the Christian family. Out of fear we put fences around the Gospel and its message is reduced to personal salvation in a private sphere. We do everything we can to prevent people from actually living the reality that they are justified by grace through faith and not by successful achievement under a legal or law-dominated system. We assert the authority of the "leaders" to make decisions and hold others to those decisions. So-called "Christian" politics becomes either an affirmation of the way things are or an attempt to impose radical views of theocratic authoritarianism on people. None of this has anything to do with the Gospel or any way of life that might conceivably be based on the Gospel. Those of us who claim membership in the disciple community have frittered away our "anarchist" heritage either out of fear for what an unbridled Gospel might do or so that we can attain seats at the table of power.

Conclusion
At the bottom of the many debates about authority which the church has had throughout its history is the question, "Can the garden-variety Christian who has come to the celebration of the Eucharist on this particular Sunday have confidence that what is heard and enacted is really the Gospel?" Unfortunately, the church has almost always tried to answer that question by creating some institutional or intellectual system which is thought to guarantee a correct answer. Ivan Illich in such books as Deschooling Society and Medical Nemesis has exposed the actual results of the institutional response: the institutions originally conceived to produce some good end up existing primarily to assure their own survival by disabling the people they were supposed to help. That is precisely what has happened in the church for many centuries. Institutions of authority in the church end up existing primarily to perpetuate themselves, not to assure the proclamation of the Gospel.

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How then can we guarantee that the message spoken and heard in the church is the Gospel? We cannot. Any message which can be guaranteed is not the Gospel in exactly the same sense in which, as St. Paul reminds us in 1 Corinthians 1 and 2, signs and wisdom are not the Gospel. The Word of the Cross is simply not a message whose truth and power can be guaranteed; it is always and only a message which calls its hearers to hopeful and trusting discipleship.

That is not to say that avoiding heresy in the church’s proclamation is not a serious issue. But it is to say that avoiding heresy cannot be accomplished through “apostolic” hierarchies or “inerrant” scriptures. Even “infallible” popes and interpreters of “inerrant” bibles can and have filled the church with error after error. Since the approaches we have tried in the past have obviously not worked, why not try a different way in which the entire community is biblically and theologically informed and capable of discerning the spirits? Why not try a dose of Spirit-endowed, community-based anarchism?

Notes

1 I want to be perfectly clear that this essay is not directed against any one or any group of particular denominations. It is directed against all denominations, especially including my own. Particularly those denominations who claim to be “de-centralized” or “charismatic” are often the most authoritarian.

2 My source for this assertion is not some supposed “Sixties” mentality, but Martin Luther. See “Temporal Authority: To What Extent It Should Be Obeyed,” Luther’s Works, Vol. 45, pp. 81-129, particularly pp. 104 ff.

3 Again, the source of this seemingly outrageous statement is Luther. In this case, see the “Treatise on Good Works,” LW, Vol. 44, pp. 21-114, particularly pp. 23-39.


5 At least three of Girard’s works relate directly to the topic at hand. These are: Violence and the Sacred (Baltimore, Maryland: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977); Things Hidden since the Foundations of the World: Research Undertaken in Collaboration with Jean-Michel Oughourlian and Guy Lefort (Palo Alto, California: Stanford University Press, 1987); and I See Satan Fall Like Lightening, James G. Williams,


This is not to say that Luther agreed that authority in the church ought to be the same as in the state. He did not. Nonetheless, authority in churches that call themselves “Lutheran” or “Evangelical” follow the practices of the states within which they have found themselves, not Luther’s theories.


Anarchists are not Marxists (in the classical sense of the term) and they are certainly not Leninists or Maoists, so what an anarchist means by “communism” is different from what is meant by those we usually think of as “Communists.” When anarchists speak of “communism” they always maintain the sense of free, noncoercive, nonauthoritarian association.

Anarchists are not opposed to structure per se. What anarchists oppose are coercive, authoritarian, and centralizing structures and technologies. Structures which facilitate free associations of people to accomplish the common good are encouraged by anarchists.

Luther's Works, Vol. 31, pp. 35-70.


A phrase for naming the church taken from Douglas John Hall.


I am not here disputing the proper distinction of Law and Gospel, nor am I disputing that God works accord
God works both “right-handed” and “left-handed,” or that God exercises both an *opus alienum* and *opus proprium*. I am also not denying that the First Article of the creed is as important as the Second Article. What I am disputing is the exclusive connection of God’s “right hand” and the Second Article with the church and God’s “left hand” and the First Article with the state. The point is that it is Gnosticism, not the proper distinction of Law and Gospel, when we restrict the Gospel to the “spiritual” and pretend that it has nothing to say to the material. I must admit that I am no longer convinced that the doctrine of two kingdoms is a necessary corollary of the distinction of Law and Gospel. See Robert A. Kelly, “The Liberatory Possibilities of the Doctrine of Justification,” *Consensus* Vol. 19 No. 2 (Fall, 1993): 41-70; and “Lutheranism as Counterculture? The Doctrine of Justification and Consumer Capitalism,” *Currents in Theology and Mission* 24, 6 (December, 1997):496-505; reprinted in Wolfgang Grieve, ed., *Justification in the World’s Context: Documentation No. 45* (Geneva: Lutheran World Federation, 2000):209-212.
