

Luther and the Church

Response by Scott H. Hendrix

Both papers address themselves to the past and to the present. First, they discuss Luther's reaction to the church of his day; second, they identify the legacy of Luther to the churches of our day, especially in regard to church structure and ecumenism. The lines of thought in both papers, though not identical, are remarkably similar, and can be summed up by the following question: Given the fact that Luther did not develop a systematic ecclesiology, how can we, or should we, appropriate his views for the church of our day?

Their main answers to this question are, briefly stated: a) For Otto Hermann Pesch, the territorial church of much European Lutheranism is a distortion of Luther's real view (*eigentliches Kirchenbild*). The ecumenical question of church structure is an absolutely open question, although Lutherans should realize that Luther's preferred structure was episcopal. b) For Inge Lønning, Luther's non-political view of the church, based on Christ, was an important corrective to the politicized ecclesiology of his day, based upon the *dignitas personae*. The specific lesson we can learn is to avoid idealizing the church as an independent *Glaubensgemeinschaft* within a pluralistic society, because such churches can also be politicized, especially when they are clergy-dominated. The political independence of the church is the only basis from which the church can articulate the political relevance of the gospel.

I want to comment first on these points of view expressed in the papers and then make some statements of my own about the ecumenical relevance of Luther's ecclesiology.

1. On the historical question, both authors seem to agree that Luther did not develop a systematic ecclesiology but reacted theologically to non-theological views of the church. Pesch echoes Joseph Lortz to the effect that Luther reacted to the prevailing unclarity about the church in the Late Middle Ages. This unclarity had to do with the distribution of authority and responsibility in the hierarchy of the church. More precisely stated, this alleged unclarity was a lack of theoretical consensus on where church authority and pastoral responsibility

were located. Some lack of consensus does strike us today as we look back to the Late Middle Ages. In this sense of unclarity, I agree with Pesch's *Teilthese 4* that we cannot make Vatican I anachronistically the norm for sixteenth-century views of church authority and judge Luther in its light.

I do not agree, however, that Luther saw himself facing such a lack of consensus and thus stepped into such an open discussion about authority and pastoral responsibility that he is therefore to be excused if he did not get clear, straightforward answers. Although Silvester Prierias represented an extreme papalist position, Luther was prosecuted because he challenged papal authority and Thomas Cardinal Cajetan concurred in that charge. The theoretical lack of consensus on church authority remained irrelevant in face of Luther's radical challenge to the real wall of papal authority. What may look to us like an overgrown hedge fell upon Luther like a brick wall. If an authoritative dogma or consensus about papal authority had confronted Luther, it would have made little difference to the theological critique, or theological »corrective« as Lønning calls it, that Luther offered.

Furthermore, the brick wall of papal authority that fell on Luther was definitely a theological view of the church. Whereas Pesch contrasts Luther's theological reflexion with a canonical lack of consensus, Lønning contrasts Luther's theological corrective with the political definitions of the church. I see no reason to downgrade medieval views of church authority to the level of non-theological viewpoints. The question of authority in the church, which both of our authors address as a main ecclesiological issue, is an eminently theological question. And the clash between medieval views of papal authority and Luther's authority of the Word was a clash of theologies, or, if you will, ecclesiologies.

What made Luther's criticism significant and tenacious was his recognition that authority and pastoral responsibility in the church could *not* be separated from the theological definition of the church. Since for Luther the church was theologically defined as the communion of the faithful who lived by the Word of God, then, first, the church had to be structured so that the faithful could best have access to that Word; and, second, authority in the church had to be exercised so that the gospel could not be blocked or perverted or, in Luther's words, so that the people would not be starved and deceived. If there is uncertainty about the identity of the church or about the location of genuine authority in it, then the possession of the Word settles the question. Luther proposed this criterion in 1522 to Wolfgang Stein: »That alone is the church which

possesses and teaches the Word of God and adds nothing to it. ... Without the words of God the church neither exists nor is believed.«¹

2. Still, the legitimate question remains: Who determines what the true Word of God is that must be delivered to the people? And this question brings us to the second theme addressed by the authors of our papers: What is Luther's legacy to the ecumenical issues of church structure and unity today? Both authors are quick to warn against any simple identification of Luther's ecclesiology with existing structures: Pesch against the territorial church as a distortion of Luther's ecclesiology, and Lønning against »freie Glaubensgemeinschaften« as an idealistic way of achieving an apolitical church. But does Luther's ecclesiology enable us to draw positive conclusions about who should interpret the Scripture that defines what the Word of God is for the life of the church?

Although Luther allegedly had no systematic ecclesiology, he did according to Pesch have an »eigentliches Kirchenbild« and an »eigentlichen Verfassungsgedanken«, the latter being a church led by bishops. This assertion belongs to an old debate over Luther's vision of an ideal church structure; did he favor free communities, an episcopal church, a territorial church, or none of the above; The answer depends mainly upon which texts are adopted as normative, but I question in particular how normative the leadership of bishops was for Luther. Certainly he was most familiar with this form of the church and the superintendents introduced by the Visitation did indeed look much like bishops. But in the debates at Augsburg in 1530, the question was not whether bishops were best, but whether Roman bishops were right, i.e., whether the jurisdiction of Roman bishops would permit Christian freedom in matters of worship and clerical life. That discussion of the proper jurisdiction of bishops did not establish episcopacy as Luther's favorite polity; rather it established a criterion that could be applied to any structure: papal, episcopal, synodal.

Instead of a specific polity, that criterion is Luther's legacy to the churches of today. Stated positively, the criterion is: that structure of church authority is best which can protect the integrity of the gospel and the exercise of Christian freedom. Luther's emphasis on the priesthood of believers and on the authority of Scripture suggests that a combination of representative democracy and expertise in the interpretation of Scripture could form such a structure in our age. But

1 WA Br 2, 623, 65-67. 76f (552).

even such a structure could not be viewed as ideal or guaranteed, in Lønning's view, against improper politicization of the gospel.

In any case both authors and I agree that the unity of the church did not for Luther depend upon a uniform structure. This freedom with regard to structure better permits an expression of unity within today's multiplicity of churches than it would have in the Europe of Luther's day. In discussing structure Lutherans can and should be open to all the different traditions. If the ecumenical question is, as Pesch says, absolutely open, it must be truly open and not approached only from a Roman Catholic/Lutheran perspective. I am reminded of Heinrich Bornkamm's appreciation of the Reformed ecclesiological tradition after he reflected on what he called the »Unabgeschlossenheit der lutherischen Kirchenverfassung«.² For Bornkamm this »Unabgeschlossenheit« meant freedom to adopt new structures and not be tied to those of the past – even significant historical offices such as bishops and the papacy. To restrict the ecumenical discussion to possible Lutheran acceptance of these offices is an ecumenical »Engführung« which dismisses other traditions and new forms too easily; and it is an historical »Engführung« which narrows the Reformation to the early conflict between Luther and Rome.

3. In my own view, the ecclesiological connection between the Reformation and our day can best be summarized in the following scenario. Luther did not see himself destroying the unity of the church in the sixteenth century. According to his definition of the church, the universal communion of the faithful, he could not split the church. Instead, Luther and his colleagues rejected the leadership of the pope and the bishops of the Roman Church, while affirming that faithful Christians lived also within it and that positive traditions like infant baptism had been preserved within the Roman Church. Owing to Luther's rejection of Rome and the reaction of the Roman hierarchy to Luther, new Protestant churches had to be organized, but not according to any ideal model envisioned by Luther. For mainly political reasons, the organization of territorial Protestant churches in Germany was the most expedient method of supplying parishes with evangelical pastors. Other Protestants, however, organized their new churches differently from the territorial church pattern. These decisions were made for good historical and theological reasons and there

2 Heinrich BORNKAMM: Bindung und Freiheit der Kirche nach reformatorischer Anschauung. In: ders.: Luther: Gestalt und Wirkungen. GÜ 1975, 250–254.

is no reason why any one of these structures, including papacy and episcopacy, should be regarded as normative for all churches today.

The ecumenical question facing the churches is not whether Protestants can accept the papacy or the historic episcopate. Rather the question which derives specifically from Luther's view of the church is a twofold question that can be addressed to all. First, does the structure of the church enhance the proclamation of the gospel and encourage the freedom of Christians within the community? This question is addressed to Lutheran churches as well as to Rome, and to the other communions. No one structure is a guarantee against the undermining of Christian freedom. In 1778 Gotthold Ephraim Lessing made this point in defense of a broader concept of freedom addressed to Pastor Johann Melchior Goeze in Hamburg. Although reflecting already the spirit of the Enlightenment, Lessing's words are not incompatible with Luther's defense of the freedom of Scripture at Worms in 1521. Lessing protested: »Herr Pastor, wenn Sie es dahin bringen, daß unsere Lutherische Pastores unsere Päbste werden; – daß diese uns vorschreiben können, wo wir aufhören sollen, in der Schrift zu forschen; daß diese unserm Forschen, der Mittheilung unsers Erforschten, Schranken setzen dürfen: so bin ich der erste, der die Päbstchen wieder mit dem Papst vertauscht.«³

The second question is: Would the union of now separate Christian communions under a common leadership structure enhance the proclamation of the gospel, the integrity of its message, and Christian freedom within the newly formed communion? Given the fact that Luther did not in the first place intend to split the Western Church, we can presume that such a union would indeed help to express visibly his view of the church as the universal communion of believers. But it is also Luther's legacy that such a union should occur only on the right terms since church structures exist on behalf of the gospel and Christian freedom. A church which cannot internally demonstrate these with integrity is unlikely to present a convincing testimony to the world. Not a certain form of jurisdiction but an organization that minimizes jurisdiction and demonstrates love and service is the ideal with which Luther left churches to struggle: »Euangelium et Ecclesia nesciunt iurisdictiones, quae sunt non nisi hominum tyrannicae inventiones. Solam scit charitatem et servitatem, non potestatem et

3 Ernst ZEEDEEN: Martin Luther und die Reformation im Urteil des deutschen Luthertums. Vol. 1. FR 1950, 270.

4 WA 7, 721, 30–34.

tyrannidem; ideo qui Euangelium docet, ille Papa est, Petri sucessor, non docet, Iudas est, Christi traditor.«⁴

Therefore, whether a bishop of bishops, or a council of bishops, or no bishops at all formed the structure of an ecclesiastical union is significant only if the gospel and Christian freedom are best served by one of these forms. The most pertinent legacy of Luther on the church to the current worldwide Christian communion is not Luther's personal views on the usefulness of the papacy or his familiarity with bishops, but his view of the purpose of any and every ecclesiastical structure: to bring the communion of believers to expression for *charitas* and *servitus*. This legacy challenges the churches in every age, just as it did in Luther's own.

Luther und die Kirche

Korreferat von Bernhard Lohse

Die beiden Referate von Inge Lønning und Hermann Otto Pesch sind in ihrer Anlage und in ihrer Zielsetzung recht unterschiedlich; trotzdem ergänzen sie sich in gewisser Weise, nämlich insofern, als Pesch Luthers Ekklesiologie in die Ekklesiologie des ausgehenden Mittelalters hineingestellt hat und Lønning auf divergierende Interpretationen Luthers sowie auf die Hauptlinien in Luthers Aussagen über die Kirche eingegangen ist. Es hat den Anschein, daß manche Probleme bei den modernen Wiedergaben von Luthers Ekklesiologie und wohl auch manche offengebliebenen Aspekte bei Luther selber mindestens teilweise darin ihre Ursache haben, daß die Ekklesiologie im hohen und späten Mittelalter ungleich weniger entfaltet worden war als andere wichtige dogmatische Themen. Die Hinweise von Pesch, daß schon die Hochscholastik »ein ekklesiologisches Defizit« (Seite 115; jetzt: »Eine ekklesiologische Unklarheit«) gehabt