

The Kingdom of Promise

Disappointment and Hope in Luther's Later Ecclesiology

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I Introduction

Commenting on the last words of Jacob in Gn 49, Martin Luther exclaimed near the end of his life:

»Jacob depicts a wonderful kingdom, one that is different from the kingdoms of the world, which are administered through laws and arms and for this reason are kingdoms of commandments, precepts, and weapons. But this is a kingdom of promise. Here God alone is present and works all things through the word. For this is what all the promises and prophets teach.«¹

Behind this exclamation stood Luther's brusque rejection of the medieval papacy and his allegation that it had turned the kingdom of Christ into a kingdom of the sword.² That rejection was in turn based on his interpretation of Shiloh as Christ from the traditional messianic prophecy contained in Gn 49, 10: »The scepter shall not depart from Judah nor the ruler's staff from between his feet, until Shiloh comes, and the obedience of the peoples is his.« According to Luther, this prophecy indicated that Christ »would reign and would govern his church by the word alone. ... Therefore we should learn that the kingdom of Christ consists in the hearing of the peoples. For Christ has determined that he will be present and powerful through the word.«³ In contrast to the papal church, argued Luther, citizens of the kingdom of promise should resist the temptation to trust in human weapons and rely instead on the word of Christ.

1 WA 44, 773, 7-11: »Ad hunc modum pingit Iacob mirabile regnum, et dissimile mundanis imperiis, quae per leges et arma administrantur, ac propterea sunt regna mandatorum, praeceptorum, armorum. Hoc vero regnum promissionis est, ubi adest praesens solus Deus, et operatur omnia per verbum. Sic enim docent promissiones omnes et Prophetæ.« – English translations are based upon Am, where available.

2 WA 44, 772, 38: »Ita regnum Christi spirituale perverterunt in regnum gladii.«

3 WA 44, 772, 34. 39 f: »Dixit *Schilo* solo verbo regnaturum, et gubernaturum Ecclesiam suam, ... Discamus ergo consistere illud [regnum Christi] in audientia populorum. Conclisit enim Christus se fore praesentem et efficacem per verbum, ...«

Luther's commentary on this passage was more than theological exegesis. By 1545 he had good reason to fear the use of human weapons against the Reformation by Emperor Charles V. In contrast to the Schmalkaldic League, which had been weakened by its campaign against Braunschweig-Wolfenbüttel and the fall of Cleves-Jülich, Charles gained strength after returning to Germany in 1543. He reached an agreement with France in the Peace of Crépy (1544) that obliged Francis I (1494, 1515-1547) to support the emperor against the Turks and, if necessary, against the German Protestants. The Reformation in Cologne had failed, and on November 30, 1544, Pope Paul III (1468, 1534-1549) summoned a council to meet the following year in Trent. The council did not open until December 13, 1545, but its convocation signaled the end of the respites enjoyed by Protestants since the Diet of Augsburg (1530). Although tension still existed between the papacy and the empire, the outlook for the Reformation was ominous. Its future had always been uncertain, of course, even during the »halcyon days« of the 1530s when additional cities and territories turned Protestant and the Schmalkaldic League was formed.⁴

As Luther reached the end of his lectures on Genesis in 1545,⁵ he had every right to be pessimistic about the fate of the evangelical churches. If he had lived another fifteen months, the Schmalkaldic War would have provided more sinister reasons to worry. After the defeat of Elector John Frederick (1503, 1532-1547, 1554) at Mühlberg, Wittenberg capitulated on May 19, 1547; less than a week later Emperor Charles V entered the town and in all likelihood visited Luther's grave.⁶

Luther did express concern about the future of the Reformation. Late in his career he called for endurance in the face of Satan's attempts to tear in pieces the church of Christ and to establish his own church.⁷ More often than not, however,

⁴ Thomas A. BRADY, JR.: *The politics of the Reformation in Germany: Jacob Sturm (1489-1553) of Strasbourg*. Atlantic Highlands, NJ 1997, 161.

⁵ Luther began the Genesis lectures on June 1, 1535, and concluded them on November 17, 1545. He had reached Gn 48, 21 by the middle of 1545; see Peter MEINHOLD: *Die Genesisvorlesung Luthers und ihre Herausgeber*. S 1936, 123-141. Accordingly, Luther was lecturing on Gn 49 during the late summer and fall of 1545, about one year after the Peace of Crépy, six months after completing »Wider das Papsttum zu Rom, vom Teufel gestiftet« (late March, 1545; WA 54, 200), and just before the Council of Trent opened in December.

⁶ Helmar JUNGHANS: *Kaiser Karl V. am Grabe Martin Luthers in der Schloßkirche zu Wittenberg*. LuJ 54 (1987), 100-113.

⁷ WA 42, 425, 1 f. 5 f: »Sic eadem Ecclesiae facies et fortuna est, ab initio mundi usque ad nos. ... Igitur paremus nos ad patientiam, et discamus ferre furias et ictus Satanae conantis Ecclesiam Christi lacerare, et suam ecclesiam stabilire.«

Luther's concern was linked to ingratitude for the gospel.⁸ At the beginning of his »Vermahnung zum Gebet wider den Türken« (1541), Luther complained:

»For many years now, we Germans have heard the dear word of God by which the Father of all mercies has enlightened us and called us from the abominable darkness and idolatry of the papacy into the light of his holy kingdom. But today it is a horrible sight to see how gratefully and respectfully we have received and kept it. As if our past sins were not enough in themselves, when we incurred God's wrath (in our ignorance) by masses, purgatory, worship of the saints, and other deeds of human righteousness, and filled every corner of the land with such idolatries, supposing that we were serving God in a special way, we then top this by persecuting that dear word which calls us to repentance for past abominations. And we knowingly and deliberately defend such idolatry and blasphemy with fire, water, the noose and the sword, cursing and blasphemy, so that it would be no wonder if God let loose over Germany not only the Turks but also devils themselves, or if he had not long since swept it away in a flood.«⁹

According to that judgment, the Reformation would never rid Germany of idolatry and replace it with trust in the word of Christ. Luther added to the charge of idolatry an inventory of religious, political, and economic sins that forced him to conclude: »Germany was ripe and bursting with sin against God.«¹⁰

Despite the political uncertainty of his last years and the perception of an ungrateful and wayward Germany, Luther remained remarkably optimistic about the future of the church. He refused to surrender hope in the kingdom of promise and in the continuity of the church.¹¹ This essay will explore the reasons for Luther's

8 For example, within the congregation at Wittenberg; see Martin BRECHT: Martin Luther. Bd. 3: Die Erhaltung der Kirche 1532-1546. S 1987, 252-263; Richard MARIUS: Martin Luther: the Christian between God and death. Cambridge, MA 1999, 475-479.

9 WA 51, 585, 14 - 586, 20: »Wir Deutschen haben nu viel jar her das liebe wort Gottes gehört, Da durch uns Gott, der Vater aller barmhertzigkeit, erleuchtet und von den gewelichen geweltn der Bepstlichen finsternis und Abgötterey geruffen in sein heiliges liecht und Reich. Aber wie danckbarlich und ehrlich wir das haben angenommen und gehalten, ist schrecklich gnug zu sehen noch heutiges tages. Denn gerade als weren der vorigen Sünde zu wenig, da wir Gott mit Messen, Fegfeuer, Heiligendienst und andere mehr eigen Wercken und gerechtigkeit auff's hōhest (wie wol unwissend) erzürnet und alle winckel mit solchen grossen Abgöttereien erfüllet haben, und gemeinet, Gott darin sonderlich zu dienen, So faren wir drüber zu und verfolgen das liebe wort, so uns zur Busse von solchen geweltn berufft, Und verteidigen wissentlich und mutwilliglich solche Abgötterey mit Fewr, Wasser, Strick, Schwert, Fluchen und lestern, das nicht wunder were, ob Gott nicht allein Türcken, sondern eitel Teuffel uber Deuschland liesse oder lengst hette lassen schwemmen.«

10 WA 51, 589, 23: »Also ist Deutsch land reiff und vol allerley sünden wider Gott.«

11 Wolfgang HÖHNE: Luthers Anschauungen über die Kontinuität der Kirche. B; HH 1963, 164: »Luthers ›reformatorisches‹ Werk vollzieht sich somit in dem Bewußtsein und der Gewißheit, selbst in der wahren Kontinuität der Kirche zu stehen und dieser an seinem Ort in der best-

optimism that can be gleaned from his ecclesiology. In the first place, early in the evangelical movement Luther was forced to develop a realistic view of the church that remained intact over the course of his life and enabled him to remain hopeful in the face of grave threats to the Reformation. Luther's ecclesiology possessed this staying power because, in the second place, the church was anchored in the kingdom of God and the promise of its future. The kingdom of God was a critical component of Luther's theology and should not be restricted to his teaching about two kingdoms. Finally, the optimism of his later years was fed paradoxically by his disappointment with the small number of earnest Christians produced by the evangelical movement. That discontent forced him to value the presence of the kingdom in visible assemblies of believers and to entrust their preservation to God alone.

Even though he knew that the church and the kingdom were not identical, Luther hoped that a reformed Christendom would resemble the kingdom of Christ more than he was able to discern during the early 1540s. His hope, however, remained greater than his disappointment because his ecclesiology was braced by the kingdom of promise.

II A Realistic Ecclesiology

The twentieth-century debate over Luther's ecclesiology focused mainly on the relationship of his early views to the Protestant territorial churches (»landesherrliches Kirchenregiment«) that arose during the late 1520s and the 1530s. It was hard to reconcile a view of the church that was essentially spiritual and hidden with a territorial polity that treated the church as a visible and legal institution. It was also difficult to argue that a territorial church, governed within city limits or wider regional boundaries, coincided with a congregational vision of the church allegedly held by the young reformer. In early twentieth-century Germany, prominent scholars lined up on both sides of the issue: Luther's early ecclesiology either contradicted or allowed for the existence of the »Landeskirche«. ¹² For interpreters like Martin Rade (1857-1940), who insisted that Luther's ecclesiology was so spiri-

möglichen Weise zu dienen.« Cf. Wilhelm MAURER: *Luthers Anschauungen über die Kontinuität der Kirche*. In: *Kirche, Mystik, Heiligung und das Natürliche bei Luther: Vorträge des Dritten Internationalen Kongresses für Lutherforschung Järvenpää, Finnland 11.16. August 1966*/ hrsg. Ivar Asheim. GÖ 1967, 95-121.

¹² See the discussion of these positions by Hans-Walter KRUMWIEDE: *Zur Entstehung des landesherrlichen Kirchenregimentes in Kursachsen und Braunschweig-Wolfenbüttel*. GÖ 1967, 13-47. For extensive literature on Luther's later ecclesiology, see Armin-Ernst BUCHRUCKER: *Wort, Kirche und Abendmahl bei Luther*. Bremen 1972, 59-81.

tual that it stopped short of affirming the church as a communion of love, the territorial church could not be an authentic fruit of the reformer's thought.¹³ Other scholars, who insisted that the local congregation was the essence of the reformer's ecclesiology, concluded that this »Gemeindeprinzip« was either embraced by the territorial church or undermined by the same.¹⁴

During this debate, pessimism and disappointment were already attributed to Luther. Paul Drews (1858-1912) argued that »An den christlichen Adel deutscher Nation von des christlichen Standes Besserung« (1520) exhibited a high level of idealism and naïvete which turned into profound disappointment with the German princes after the Diet of Worms. Luther had hoped for a comprehensive German Christendom free of Rome, but the aftermath of Worms destroyed that vision and produced a »deep pessimism« which left Luther with a view of the world as intractable and of the church as a persecuted remnant.¹⁵ Later in the century, Hans-Walter Krumwiede suggested that the Peasants' War broke Luther's optimism. Prior to 1524, Luther was convinced that the true church consisted of believers who had been reborn in faith and in whom love and suffering abounded. After the Revolution of 1525 belied that dream of the gospel's impact, Luther allowed territorial governments to take over the church and surrendered his hope for a network of vibrant, self-governing Christian communities.¹⁶

The Revolution of 1525 and the rise of territorial churches have long been considered a watershed in Luther's ecclesiology and, for that matter, in the course of the German Reformation. In a recent version of this argument based on the priority of a »Gemeindereformation«, Peter Blickle contended that Luther's reforming agenda was grounded in a communal ecclesiology from which he retreated after 1525.¹⁷ I question, however, whether Luther ever entertained an ideal

13 Martin RADE: *Der Sprung in Luthers Kirchenbegriff und die Entstehung der Landeskirche*. ZThK 24 (1914), 249. 253.

14 For example, Hermann HERMELINK: *Zu Luthers Gedanken über Idealgemeinden und von weltlicher Obrigkeit*. ZKG 29 (1908), 267-322. 479-489; Karl MÜLLER: *Kirche, Gemeinde und Obrigkeit nach Luther*. Tü 1910.

15 Paul DREWS: *Entsprach das Staatskirchentum dem Ideale Luthers?* Tü 1908, 28-35.

16 Hans-Walter KRUMWIEDE: *Reformatorsche Theologie und die Selbstverwaltung der Kirchengemeinde*. JNKG 73 (1975), 211-229.

17 Peter BLICKLE: *Die Reformation im Reich*. S 1982, 36-37. 157-160; DERS.: *Communal Reformation: the quest for Salvation in sixteenth-century Germany*. Atlantic Highlands, NJ; LO 1992, 120-145; DERS.: *Politische Weiterungen der reformatorischen Theologie: die Antwort des Gemeinen Mannes*. In: *Politische Institutionen im gesellschaftlichen Umbruch: ideengeschichtliche Beiträge zur Theorie politischer Institutionen*/ hrsg. Gerhard Göhler, Kurt Lenk, Herfried Münkler, Manfred Walther. Opladen 1990, 160-169.

ecclesiology built around the local community, not even in 1523 when he conceded to the Christian community of Leisnig »the right and power to judge all doctrine and to call, install, and to dismiss teachers«.¹⁸ In the title of this work, »Daß eine christliche Versammlung oder Gemeine Recht und Macht habe, ...«, the accent should be placed over the word »christlich« and not on »Versammlung« or »Gemeine«. Luther did not argue that every local congregation was in essence the church but that the priesthood of believers enabled all Christians (»eyn iglicher Christen«), either on their own or called by others, to preach and teach. The right of a congregation to call such persons in an emergency was derived from this common priesthood and from the apostolic instruction (1 K 14, 30) to those who had received a special word from God to speak that word while others remained silent.¹⁹ Evangelical bishops should normally confirm those preachers who were called by the »Gemeinde«, but if there was a »dearth of God's word« that »might ruin souls«, then bishops had the right to appoint preachers, as did civil authorities. In fact, all Christians could do the same or step into the pulpits themselves, because necessity was necessity and knew no measure.²⁰ The highest office in the church was the office of preaching,²¹ and to preserve the integrity of this office in good and bad times was the responsibility of congregations, bishops, and civil authorities, indeed, of every Christian.

Three years earlier, Luther had used the priesthood of believers to justify the right of the Christian nobility to reform the church in Germany. In »An den christlichen Adel deutscher Nation ...« (1520), the laity were deemed spiritually

18 WA II, (401) 408-416 (Daß eine christliche Versammlung oder Gemeine Recht und Macht habe, alle Lehre zu urteilen und Lehrer zu berufen, ein- und abzusetzen: Grund und Ursach aus der Schrift, 1523).

19 WA II, 413, 7-11: »So denn nu hie .S. Paulus, wens nott ist, mitten unter den Christen eyen iglichen heysst auch unberuffen aufftreten und berufft yhn durch solch gottis wort und heysst den andern abtreten und setzet yhn ynn krafft diser wort abe, Wie viel mehr ists denn recht, das eyne gantze gemeyne eyne berufft tzu solchem ampt, wens nott ist, wie es denn alltzeit und sonderlich itzt ist.«

20 WA II, 414, 1-10: »Uber das, wenn sie nu gleych rechtschaffene Bischoffe weren, die das Euangelion haben wollten und rechtschaffene prediger setzen wollten, Dennoch kunden und sollen sie dasselb nicht thun on der gemeyne willen, erwelen und beruffen, ausgenommen, wo es die nott ertzwnunge, das die seelen nicht verdorben aus mangel gottlichs worts. Denn ynn solcher nott hastu gehort, das nicht alleyne mag eyne iglicher eyne prediger verschaffen, es sey durch bitten odder weltlicher uberkeyt gewalt, sondern soll auch selb zu lauffen, aufftreten und leren, so ers kan, denn nott ist nott und hatt keyn maß, gleych wie yderman tzu lauffen und treyben soll, wens brennet ynn der stadt, und nicht harren, bis man yhn drumb bitte.«

21 WA II, 415, 30 f: »Darumb wem das predig ampt auffgelegt wirt, dem wirt das hohist ampt auffgelegt ynn der Christenheyt.«

equal to the clergy by virtue of the common priesthood that made them all members of the same Christian estate. Since the clergy refused to reform the church, it was the duty of influential laity – the German nobility who were equal to the clergy in spiritual status – to carry out reform for the sake of Christendom.²² In the title of that summons, the accent also rested on the word »christlich« and not on »deutsche Nation«. Luther's point was not that Christendom on a national (German) level was the true church, but that lay Christians bore equal responsibility with the clergy for reform of the church throughout the Holy Roman Empire.

When, therefore, Luther requested Elector John in 1526 to authorize a visitation of parishes in Saxony, he was not departing from an early communal or national ideal, but he was applying the same principle that had informed his ecclesiology since 1520. The conflict with Rome had sharpened his conviction that all believers who were taught by the Holy Spirit were united in a common priesthood and enjoyed the same spiritual status.²³ Against the claim that the church must have an earthly head, like the pope at Rome to whom it was bound, Luther insisted that the communion of priests existed universally because Christ was its head.²⁴ The same communion also existed in regional and local assemblies at which the common priesthood gathered to hear the word and to receive the sacraments for the nurture of their faith. Throughout the 1520s Luther's basic ecclesiological principle did not change, but he did invite lay members of the priesthood, city councils and territorial rulers, to execute reform and to confirm the choosing of preachers for the office of ministry (»Amt«) that he had reconceived in »An den christlichen Adel deutscher Nation ...«.²⁵

22 StA 2, 96, 8-17; 99, 19-34 ≙ WA 6, 404, 12-22; 407, 13-28.

23 WA 23, 663, 19-22 (Der Prophet Sacharja ausgelegt, 1527, on Zch 14, 20: »And the cooking pots in the house of the Lord shall be as holy as the bowls in front of the altar«): »Das ist: ym newen testament sollen alle Christen, die am Gotts dienst sind, heilig, geweiht und tüchtig zum priesteramt sein, das hinfurt kein unterscheid zwisschen den geweyheten und ungeweyheten sey, weil sie alle mit Christus geist geweyhet sind.«

24 WA 6, 298, 13-20: »Nu mag keinn mensch des andern noch seiner eygen seelen den glauben und alle syn, willen und werck Christi einflissen, dan allein Christus, dan kein Bapst, kein Bischoff mag sovil thunn, das der glaub, und was ein christlich glidmasz haben sol, in eines menschen hertzenn erstehe. Nu musz ein Christen den syn, mut und willen haben, den Christus ym himel hat, wie i. Corint. iij. [1 K 2, 16; 3, 23] der Apostel sagt. Dartzu geschicht es, das ein christlich glidmasz den glaubenn hat, den doch widder Bapst noch Bischoff hat, wie solt er dann desselben heubt sein?«

25 StA 2, 100, 18-30 ≙ WA 6, 408, 8-21.

Luther does agree to one important adjustment in the »Unterricht der Visitatoren an die Pfarrherrn im Kurfürstentum Sachsen« (1528), the guidelines to be used by inspectors of the parishes and the clergy in Electoral Saxony. The section on the office of superintendent contains the following recommendation:

»We have considered it wise to ordain that in the future when a pastor or preacher either by death or otherwise leaves his benefice and someone is accepted in his place by the patron, such a one shall be presented to the superintendent before he is given the benefice or received as a preacher. The superintendent shall question and examine him as to his life and teaching and whether he will satisfactorily serve the people, so that by God's help we may carefully prevent any ignorant or incompetent person from being accepted and unlearned folk being misled. For time and again and especially in recent years experience has shown how much good or evil may be expected from competent or incompetent preachers.«²⁶

In 1523 Luther had argued that bishops should simply confirm the preacher who was called by a congregation, but now he agrees to submit that call for approval or disapproval by a regional superintendent. If Luther had defended a principle of congregational autonomy in 1523, this concession would have contradicted that principle. In 1528, however, authority was granted to the office of superintendent not because Luther had altered his ecclesiology but because of his experience with »incompetent« preachers during the Peasants' Revolt and its aftermath. We hear more about that experience in the preface to his large [German] catechism (1529), where Luther excoriated pastors for neglecting the catechism and the Bible. They should »feel a little shame that, like pigs and dogs, they are remembering no more of the gospel than this rotten, pernicious, shameful, carnal liberty.«²⁷ Luther's querulous words about the poor quality of many preachers echoed a common complaint among early reformers and inspired the creation of the superintendent's office.

26 WA 26, 235, 26-36 ≙ StA 3, 456, 6-17: »Es ist auch für gut angesehen vnd geordent / ob künfftiglich der Pfarher odder Prediger eyner auff dem Lande seiner refir / mit Tod abgehen / odder sonst sich von dannen wenden / vnd andere an yhre stat / durch yhre lehenherren genomen würden / der odder die selbigen sollen zuuor / ehr sie mit den Pfarren belehent / odder zu Prediger auffgenommen werden / dem Superattendenten fürgestellt werden / Der sol verhören vnd examiniren / wie sie ynn yhrer lere vnd leben geschickt / ob das volck mit ynnen genugsam versehen sey / Auff das durch Gottes hülffe mit vleis verhütet werde / das kein vngelerter odder vngeschickter / zu verführung des armen volcks / auffgenommen werde / Denn man ist oft vnd dick [häufig] / vnd sonderlich ynn kurtz vergangen iaren / wol ynnen worden / was grossen guts vnd böses / von geschickten vnd vngeschickten Predigern zu gewarten.«

27 THE BOOK OF CONCORD: the confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church/ hrsg. von Robert Kolb, Timothy J. Wengert. MP 2000, 380, § 3.

At most, therefore, Luther was afflicted by ecclesiastical realism rather than by ecclesiological inconsistency. His basic conception of the church remained intact: the common priesthood of all Christians served by the office of preaching.²⁸ Experience had taught him and his colleagues, however, that if the highest office in Christendom was to be filled by competent preachers, then supervision was needed. To be sure, the concern of the Wittenbergers was in part self-serving. During the early 1520s, they had endured not only incompetent preachers but also competent sermons by preachers who had attacked the Wittenberg version of evangelical reform. Nonetheless, Luther remained optimistic about the possibility of reform. He had placed high hopes on the German princes and on local congregations and the preachers to be called by them. In both cases, he was forced to become more realistic, and the result of that realism was to entrust the supervision of reform only to those city councils and princes who favored the gospel and to pastoral superintendents who replaced the recalcitrant bishops.

In neither case, however, does the evidence show that Luther was afflicted by a crushing pessimism or that he abandoned his vision of a common evangelical priesthood gathered in local assemblies and served by competent pastors and preachers. Instead, Luther concluded his preface to the »Unterricht der Visitatoren ...« with a realistic expectation that was open to God's future action. While maintaining the right to solicit help from the Elector against uncooperative clergy, Luther expressed the

»hope that all devout and peaceable pastors, who find their sincere joy in the gospel and delight to be of one mind with us as St. Paul teaches in Phil 2 [2], will not ungratefully or proudly reject the diligence of our prince and gracious lord or our own love and good intentions, but subject themselves to this visitation willingly and without compulsion in a loving manner, and live peaceably under the same with us until God the Holy Spirit initiates a better way either through them or through us.«²⁹

28 For the importance of the priesthood of believers in Luther's ecclesiology, see Jan AARTS: *Die Kirche der Glaubenden in Luthers Theologie*. In: *Luther in Finnland*/hrsg. von Mikka Ruokanen. Helsinki 1984, 153-157; DERS.: *Die Lehre Martin Luthers über das Amt in der Kirche: eine genetisch-systematische Untersuchung seiner Schriften von 1512-1525*. Helsinki 1972, 304-310.

29 WA 26, 200, 13-21 = StA 3, 414, 2-9: »So hoffen wir doch / alle frume fridsame Pfarherr / welchen das Euangelion mit ernst gefellet / vnd lust haben einmütiglich vnd gleich mit vns zu halten / wie S(ankt) Paulus leret Philippenses .ij. [Ph 2, 2] das wir thun sollen / werden solchen vnsers landes fürsten vnd gnedigsten herren vleys / dazu vnser liebe vnd wol meynen / nicht vndanckbarlich noch stöltzlich verachten / sondern sich williglich / on zwanck / nach der liebe art / solcher visitation vnterwerffen / vnd sampt vns der selbigen fridlich geleben / bis das Gott der heilige geyst / bessers / durch sie odder durch vns anfahe.«

Luther's endorsement of the visitation and its guidelines did not, therefore, mark a decisive shift in his ecclesiology or the nadir of his expectations for the Reformation. Instead, it signaled a new realism about the way in which that ecclesiology needed to become operational in order for the Reformation, as he envisioned it, to survive. Prior to 1530, the preachers and congregations that followed Luther's teaching had faced growing criticism from Roman and evangelical opponents. After 1530, Luther and his colleagues realized that the Roman opposition would not melt away and that evangelical dissension was also likely to persist, although some hope existed for rapprochement on the Lord's Supper. Emphasis now had to be placed on the visible marks of the church in order to justify the claim of evangelical territories, especially those that adhered to the »Augsburg Confession«, that they contained the authentic church.³⁰ The true church could not be entirely hidden if some councilmen and princes had risked life and limb by declaring that the gospel was being truly taught and the sacraments rightly administered in their own lands. The gatherings of the common priesthood served by competent preachers had to be acknowledged, strengthened, and made aware of their counterparts throughout evangelical Christendom.

Luther continued to affirm that the church was an object of faith and that true Christians were hidden; but he also insisted that these Christians could be located because the church would abide to the end.³¹ Prior to the Ottoman siege of Vienna (1529) he wrote:

»Here you ask, »Who are the Christians and where does one find them?« Answer: There are not many of them, but they are everywhere, though they are spread thin and live far apart, under good and bad princes. Christendom must continue to the end, as the article of the creed says, »I believe one holy Christian Church.« So it must be possible to find them.«³²

It was necessary to find these scattered Christians because their »war against the Turks« had to begin with spiritual weapons, the call to repentance and prayer to which »every pastor and preacher ought diligently to exhort the people«.³³

³⁰ Buchrucker: AaO, 137.

³¹ Buchrucker: AaO, 137: »Er [Luther] verkündigt nach wie vor die Kirche als zu glaubende, als verborgene, aber daneben hat sich seine Ansicht vom Ins-Sichtbare-treten, vom Sich-verleiblichen der Kirche in, mit und unter ihren vielfältigen Erscheinungsformen und zahlreichen Hüllen gefestigt.«

³² WA 30 II, 117, 6-11 (Vom Kriege wider die Türken, 1529): »Hie fragestu: Wer sind denn die Christen Und wo findet man sie? Antwort: Wenig ist der selbigen, Aber doch sind sie allenthalben, ob sie gleich dünne stehen und weit von einander wonen, beyde unter frumen und bösen Fürsten. Denn es mus die Christenheit bleiben bis ans ende, wie der artickel laut »Ich gleube eine heilige Christliche kirche«, Also mus man sie aber finden.«

Whether every person in every parish was truly Christian or not was irrelevant to the pastoral task at hand. Luther's point was not that all members of a hidden church had to be identified but that the pastoral exhortation in every visible community would reach Christians with the necessary word.

The hiddenness of the church had been a crucial theological concept during the initial conflict with Rome,³⁴ and it continued to be important. When Luther maintained that the church was hidden, however, he was not affirming the existence of two separate churches, one invisible and one visible. »Die zwo Kirchen«, defined in »Von dem Papsttum zu Rom wider den hochberühmten Romanisten zu Leipzig« (1520),³⁵ were intended as a rebuttal to the claim that the church, or Christendom, could be identified with a single physical location (like Rome) or with a single earthly head (like the pope). The »geystliche, ynnerliche Christenheit« was not so spiritual that it could never be discerned, but it could not be pinned down to a single location at any given time. It was the »Christlich vorsamlung«, a community that according to the soul was united in one faith but that according to the body could never be assembled in its entirety, although each local group of believers had its place to meet.³⁶

After 1530 it was still important for Luther to make this point against other pretenders who were claiming to be the true church.³⁷ Their claim had to be rejected as it had been denied to the Roman Church. Against all these claims, people

33 WA 30 II, 117, 11-15: »Die Pfarher und prediger sollen ein iglicher sein volck auff's aller vleyssigst vermanen zur busse und zum gebet. Die busse sollen sie treiben mit anzeigen unser grossen unzelichen sunde und undanckbarkeit, da durch wir Gottes zorn und ungnade verdienet, das er uns dem Teuffel und Türcken billich ynn die hende gibt.«

34 Carl Axel AURELIUS: *Verborgene Kirche: Luthers Kirchenverständnis in Streitschriften und Exegese 1519-1521*. Hannover 1983.

35 WA 6, 296, 37 - 297, 3.

36 WA 6, 297, 6-9: »... also auch die Christlich vorsamlung, nach der seelen ein gemeyne in einem glauben eintrechtig, wie wol nach dem leyb sie nit mag an einem ort vorsamlet werdenn, doch ein iglicher hauff an seinem ort vorsamlet wirt.« For the debate over the priority of the visible or invisible church in Luther, see Ferdinand KATTENBUSCH: *Die Doppelschichtigkeit in Luthers Kirchenbegriff*. Gotha 1928; Ernst RIETZSCHL: *Das Problem der unsichtbar-sichtbaren Kirche bei Luther: Darstellung und Lösungsversuch*. L 1932; Ernst KINDER: *Die Verborgene Kirche nach Luther*. In: *Festgabe Joseph Lortz*/ hrsg. von Erwin Iserloh; Peter Manns. Bd. 1. Baden-Baden 1958, 173-192; Buchrucker: AaO, 120-154; Aurelius: AaO, 9-18.

37 Michael BEYER: *Luthers Ekklesiologie*. In: *Leben und Werk Martin Luthers von 1526 bis 1546: Festgabe zu seinem 500. Geburtstag*/ hrsg. Helmar Junghans. Bd. 1. B 1983, 116: »Denn damit [die Unterscheidung der »zwo kirchen«] hatte Luther eine Differenzierung vorgenommen, die auch noch 1539/1541 tragfähig blieb.«

had to be shown where the »geystliche, ynnnerliche Christenheit« manifested itself in genuine »christliche Versammlungen«, and to this end visible marks of the church, *notae ecclesiae*, were necessary.³⁸ The true church could not be limited to a single assembly in which those marks were found, but the polarization of religious parties after 1530 strengthened the tendency to identify authentic Christendom with the totality of communities that adhered to the Augsburg Confession.³⁹

In spite of that tendency, Luther refused to constrict the church either in space or in time. Geographically, he insisted that the church was a spiritual assembly ruled by the Holy Spirit and scattered throughout the world without a prescribed external order.⁴⁰ Temporally, he insisted that the true church began with Abel and would endure until the day of judgment.⁴¹ The presence of the church throughout

38 For these marks, see StA 5, 590, 17 - 606, 25 $\doteq$ WA 50, 628, 29 - 643, 26 (Von den Konziliis und Kirchen, 1539); 51, 479, 4 - 487, 2 (Wider Hans Worst, 1541).

39 Beyer: AaO, 116. On the ecclesiology of the older Luther, see Friedrich Wilhelm KANTZENBACH: Strukturen in der Ekklesiologie des älteren Luther: ein Beitrag zur reformatorischen Lehre von den »notae ecclesiae«. LuJ 35 (1968), 48-77; Joachim ROGGE: Luthers Kirchenverständnis in seinen Spätschriften. Zeichen der Zeit 37 (1983), 195-198; DERS.: Luthers Kirchenverständnis in seinen Spätschriften. In: Calvin's books: Festschrift dedicated to Peter De Klerk on the occasion of his seventieth birthday/ hrsg. von Wilhelm H. Neuser; Herman J. Selderhuis; Willem van 't Spijker. Heerenveen 1997, 95-104.

40 WA 21, 333, 25-35 (Crucigers Sommerpostille, 1538, on J 10, 12-16): »[Die Kirche] ist ein geistliche Versamlung, die diesen Hirten höret und an jm gleubet, und von jm durch den heiligen Geist regieret wird, Und wird allein dabey eusserlich erkennenet, das sie sein Wort, das ist, die Predigt des Euangelij und sein Sacrament hat, Inwendig aber ist sie jm allein bekand, wie sie jn auch widerumb kennet durch den Glauben, sich zu jm helt, wo sie sein Wort höret, unangesehen, ob sie nichts helt oder auch nichts weis von jenem eusserlichem jüdischem oder Bepstischem regiment oder ordnung, und hin und wider in der Welt, on einige gefaste eusserliche regierung zurstrewet ist, Wie sie je da zu mal zur zeit Christi und der Apsoteln waren, die ausser und wider die ordenliche gewalt des gantzen Priesterthumbs an Christum gleubten und jn bekenneneten.« See George PÓSFAY: »The whole Christian church on earth« – Luther's conception of the universality of the church. Bulletin of the Lutheran Theological Seminary at Gettysburg 72 (Gettysburg, PA 1992), 20-43.

41 WA 42, 187, 17-20: »Nam Christus quoque Habel vocat iustum et facit eum initium Ecclesiae piorum, quae erit usque ad finem. Sicut Cain initium est Ecclesiae malignantium et sanguinariae usque in finem mundi, Sicut etiam Augustinus in libro de civitate Dei hanc historiam tractat.« See Ulrich ASENDORF: Lectura in Biblia: Luthers Genesisvorlesung (1535-1545). GÖ 1998, 248-298; Jaroslav PELIKAN: Die Kirche nach Luthers Genesisvorlesung. In: Lutherforschung heute: Referate und Berichte des 1. Internationalen Lutherforschungskongresses Aarhus, 18.-23. August 1956/ hrsg. von Vilmos Vajta. B 1958, 102-110; Scott HENDRIX: Ecclesia in via: ecclesiological developments in the medieval Psalms exegesis and the Dictata super Psalterium (1513-1515) of Martin Luther. Leiden 1974, 106-108. 130-139. 266-267.

space and time did not mean, however, that the entire world would be converted. »For we must always have the holy cross that consists of the majority who persecute Christians; consequently, we must always preach the gospel so that some are constantly brought to the point where they become Christians, for the kingdom of Christ is not finished but always in the process of becoming.«⁴²

III The Church and the Kingdom

Although Luther's ecclesiology consistently emphasized the visible assembly of believers under the cross,⁴³ it also featured a close relationship between the church and the kingdom of God. In 1520, this relationship supported the hiddenness of the church. When Luther claimed that the »essence, life, and nature of Christendom« was not a physical assembly but a spiritual unity, he invoked the words of Jesus to Pilate, »My kingdom is not from this world« (J 18, 36), and to the Pharisees: »The kingdom of God is not coming with things that can be observed; nor will they say, ›Look, here it is!‹ or ›There it is!‹ For, in fact, the kingdom of God is among you« (L 17, 20 f). According to Luther, these texts distinguished Christendom, which was not physical (»leiblich«), from all worldly communities, and they taught that the kingdom of God – the term Jesus used for »his Christendom« – was »not at Rome or bound to Rome, was neither at this location nor at that one, but was present where there was inward faith, whether the person was in Rome or somewhere else«.⁴⁴

42 WA 12, 540, 8-15 (Ein Sermon D. M. Luthers von dem guten Hirten, 1523): »Also ist nun alles eyn kirch oder gemeyn, ein glaub, ein hoffnung, eyn liebe, eyn tauff etc. Das weret noch heuet zu tage ymmer dar, bis auff den Jüngsten tag. Darumb müst yhrs nicht also verstehen, das die gantz welt und alle menschen an Christum werden glewben, denn wyr müssen ymmer das heylig Creutz haben, das yhr das mehr teyl sind, die die Christen verfolgen. So musz man auch ymmer das Euangelion predigen, das man ymmer ettlich hertz zu bringe, das sie Christen werden, denn das reych Christi stehet ym werden, nicht ynn geschehen.« On the cruciform church in Luther, see Eric GRITSCH: Martin – God's court jester: Luther in retrospect. Phil 1983, 178-185.

43 Heiko A. OBERMAN: Luther: Mensch zwischen Gott und Teufel. B 1981, 283: »Zusammenfassend ist für den ganzen Luther festzustellen: Seine Sicht von der Kirche bleibt seit der ersten Bibelvorlesung zentral und konstant. Kirche ist sichtbar, doch eben als leidende Christusgemeinschaft.«

44 WA 6, 293, 14-23 (Von dem Papsttum zu Rom ..., 1520): »Das ist yhe ein klarer spruch, damit die Christenheit wirt auszgetzogen von allen weltlichen gemeynen, das sie nit leiplich sey, unnd diesser blind Romanist macht ein leipliche gleich den andern gemeyne drausz. Er [Christus] sagt noch klerer Luce .xvij. das reich gottis kumpt nit mit einer euserlichen weysze, und wirt niemandt sagen ›sich da, odder hie ist es‹, dan nempt war, das reich gottis ist in euch inwendig. ... Ausz wilchen klerlich yderman vorstet, das das reich gottis (szo nennet er seine Christenheit)

After 1530, the inseparability of the kingdom and the visible church became more pronounced. To support his assertion that Lutherans were not heretics and that their ordinations should be accepted by the Roman Church, Luther wrote in 1533:

»For we have, God be praised, the word of God in its purity and certainty, as the pope does not have it. However, where God's word is pure and certain, there everything else must be: God's kingdom, Christ's kingdom, the Holy Spirit, baptism, the sacrament, the office of ministry, the office of preaching, faith, love, the cross, life and salvation, and everything the church should have, as Christ says: 'We will come to them and make our home with them' (J 14, 23); 'And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age'« (Mt 28, 20).⁴⁵

The kingdom was listed first among the assets of the church when the pure and certain word of God was present. Wherever the church was gathered, therefore, not just spiritually, but visibly with the word, sacrament, faith, love, cross and ministry, the kingdom of Christ was also present and would abide until the end of time. For Luther the church did not merely anticipate the kingdom of God; the kingdom was already present in the church and its ministry. He underscored this point in the lectures on Genesis. All that God has promised us, he said, we should promise ourselves »with great certainty as if we held them in our hands. I have the kingdom of heaven, baptism, the word, and the eucharist. These things pertain to me and are mine with greater certainty than this very life which I live.«⁴⁶

Christians, therefore, possessed a spiritual kingdom that guaranteed the preservation of the church amidst persecution. The »glorious promises« of spiritual blessings assured the church that it would remain forever, although it could not escape persecution any more than the ancient church was able to do.⁴⁷ The conveyers of those promises were ministers of the church. Consequently, they were

ist nit zu Rom, auch nit an Rom gebunden, wider hie nach da, sondern wo da inwendig der glaub ist, der mensch sey zu Rom, hie odder da.« See Aurelius: AaO, 57 f.

45 WA 38, 237, 10-16 $\approx$ StA 5, 82, 17-83, 2 (Von der Winkelmesse und Pfaffenweihe, 1533): »Denn wir haben (Gott lob) das wort Gottes rein vnd gewis / wie es der Bapst nicht hat / Wo aber Gottes wort rein vnd gewis ist / da mus es alles sein / Gottes reich / Christus reich / Heiliger geist / Tauffe / Sacrament / Pfarrampt / Predigampt Glaube / Liebe / Creutz / Leben vnd seligkeit / vnd alles was die Kirchen haben sol / wie Christus spricht / Wir wollen zu jm komen vnd wonung bey jm machen [J 14, 23] / Vnd sihe da / Jch bin bey euch / bis an der welt ende [Mt 28, 20].«

46 WA 44, 700, 16-19: »Sicut nos ea, quae promisit Deus certius nobis polliceri possumus et debemus, ac si manibus ea teneremus. Habeo regnum coelorum, baptismum, verbum, Eucharistiam, haec certius ad me pertinent et mea sunt, quam haec ipsa vita, quam vivo.«

47 WA 44, 710, 40-711, 6: »Hasce promissiones habemus, quanquam tenues, tamen sufficientes ad hanc vitam sustentandam. Illae autem de bonis spiritualibus gloriosae sunt, et a nobis quoque amplificandae et extollendae. Nimirum, quod Ecclesia manebit, quod habebit hospitium, cibum, potum, defensionem, quanquam aliqui persequutionem sustinent, et occiduntur: quia nec vetus

also »ministers of the kingdom of God and eternal life, the forgiveness of sins, and the destruction of hell, in short, [ministers] of the opening of heaven and the kingdom of God.«⁴⁸ According to Luther's sermon at the Pleißenburg (1539), a sinner who was pardoned in the absolution was delivered by God's power from the kingdom of the devil and transferred to the kingdom of God.⁴⁹ The life of faith, nurtured by the promise of forgiveness in the church, was already certain life in the communion of saints and the kingdom of God: »But if you do not believe, you have nothing. Through faith and the promise, however, you already possess the kingdom of God. The communion of saints is completely certain and firm for you, not otherwise than if you were already in heaven.«⁵⁰

The affirmation of the kingdom's presence made the visible church the locus of the Spirit's gifts⁵¹ and of the new, heavenly life in Christ. Language expressing this heavenly existence was not limited to the indwelling of Christ. Luther frequently echoed the biblical notion that believers were already living in the kingdom of God: »He has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins« (Kol 1, 13 f). The realm of redemption, mediated by the Holy Spirit through ministers of the kingdom, was both christological and ecclesiological. Believers in Christ not only participated in the reality of Christ, but through the church they also participated in the reality of his kingdom. According to the biblical language used by Luther, Christ not only lived in the faithful, but the faithful were also transferred into the realm of Christ, the new redemptive reality of the kingdom of God.

Ecclesia sine Martyrio et cruce fuit. Quod si nec Reges sumus, nec temporale regnum habemus, sicut Iudaei: tamen Spirituale regnum obtinemus, in quo vivimus in Christo.«

48 WA 44, 713, 6-8: »Mira certe res est, quod minister Ecclesiae, aut frater quilibet est minister regni Dei et vitae aeternae, remissionis peccatorum, et destructionis inferni, denique apertionis coeli et regni Dei.«

49 WA 47, 775, 23-26 (Predigt auf der Pleißenburg zu Leipzig, May 24, 1539): »Also auch in der Absolution, da wird ein betrübter Sünder loß gesprochen. Aus was Krafft und Befehl? Nicht aus Menschen, sondern aus Gottes Befehl, Sihe, da reisse ich dich durch Gottes Krafft aus des Teuffels Reich und setze dich in Gottes Reich.«

50 WA 44, 713, 38-40: »Quod si non credis, nihil habes. Per fidem autem et promissionem iam possides regnum Dei. Communio sanctorum certissima et firmissima tibi est, non aliter, ac si iam in coelo esses.«

51 Jared Wicks: Heiliger Geist – Kirche – Heiligung: Einsichten aus Luthers Glaubensunterricht. Cath 45 (1991), 88-91 = Jared Wicks: Holy Spirit - church - sanctification: insights from Luther's instructions on the faith. In: Jared Wicks: Luther's reform: studies on conversion and the church. MZ 1992, 206-209.

This concept appeared regularly in Luther's writings both before and after 1530. In 1521, arguing at length that monastic vows were against faith because they undercut the sufficiency of Christ's work, Luther reasoned: »Now faith establishes us on the foundation of the works of Christ without our own works, and transfers us from the exile of our own sins into the kingdom of his righteousness.«⁵² Contrasting the kingdom of Satan with the kingdom of Christ in »De servo arbitrio« (1525), Luther maintained that into »this kingdom we are transferred, not by our own power but by the grace of God, by which we are set free from the present evil age [G 1, 4] and delivered from the dominion of darkness«.⁵³ Years later, in the middle of his lectures on Genesis, Luther combined in similar fashion the power of God's grace with liberation from the gloom of sin. Having denied that their confidence rested on their own praiseworthiness and righteousness, »wretched sinners« would acknowledge »that they are holy, redeemed, and washed with the blood of Christ, and that they have been conveyed from the kingdom of darkness into the kingdom of light«.⁵⁴

For Christ to live in the faithful and for the faithful to be transferred into Christ and his kingdom described the same new reality of salvation. In his Galatians lectures (1531; 1535), the unity of Christ and the believer (G 2, 20: »And it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me«) evoked the following commentary:

»Abiding and living in me, Christ removes and absorbs all the evils that torment and afflict me. This attachment to him causes me to be liberated from the terror of law and of sin, pulled out of my own skin, and transferred into Christ and into his kingdom, which is a kingdom of grace, righteousness, peace, joy, life, salvation, and eternal glory. Since I live in him, no evil can harm me.«⁵⁵

52 WA 8, 599, 23-25: »Fides enim nos super opera Christi ponit, sine operibus nostris, et transfert de exilio peccatorum nostrorum in regnum iustitiae illius. Haec est fides, hoc Euangelium, hic Christus.«

53 WA 18, 782, 30-38 ≡ StA 3, 350, 24-32: »Sciunt (inquam) duo esse regna in mundo, mutuo pugnantisima, in altero Satanam regnare, ... In altero regnat Christus, quod assidue resistit (et) pugnat cum Satanae regno, in quod transferimur, non nostra ui, sed gratia Dei, qua liberamur a presenti saeculo nequam, (et) eripimur a potestate tenebrarum.«

WA 40 I, 97, 26-30 (G 1, 4: »... who gave himself for our sins to set us free from the present evil age«): »Habes nunc duas definitiones, Mundi et Christi seu regni Mundi et regni Christi: Regnum Mundi est regnum peccati, mortis, diaboli, blasphemiae, desperationis et mortis aeternae. Econtra regnum Christi est regnum gratiae, remissionis peccatorum, consolationis, salutis et vitae aeternae, In quod nos transtulit Dominus noster Iesus Christus, cui sit gloria in secula, Amen.«

54 WA 43, 248, 28-31: »Omnis gloria et confidentia miserrimorum peccatorum non in hoc consistet, quod per se sint laudabiles et iusti: sed praedicabunt se esse sanctos, redemptos, ablutos sanguine Christi, et translotos de regno tenebrarum in regnum lucis.«

55 WA 40 I, 284, 14-19: »Sic Christus in me manens et vivens tollit et absorbet omnia mala quae

In a sermon on J 14, 3 (»And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also«), Luther used Col (1, 13) and Eph (2, 19) to interpret the words of Jesus: »... when we have been baptized, we already have Christ dwelling in and with us, and have already been transferred out of the wretched dominion of darkness into the spiritual, heavenly existence, where we are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God.«⁵⁶ In this passage, the indwelling of Christ and escape from the »dominion of darkness« led to the same »spiritual heavenly existence«.

The transfer of forgiven sinners into the kingdom of God did not, in Luther's mind, make them immune from worldly harm and persecution, but it did ensure their eternal invulnerability: »Since I live in him, no evil can harm me.« In this world the kingdom was still a »tiny flock« who were »weak, despised and few«, as Luther pointed out in 1535, and their persecutors were mighty and prosperous. When the faithful prayed the second petition of the Lord's Prayer, »Your kingdom come«, they should therefore pray for the conversion of those persecutors who were still to become members of God's kingdom, so that all of God's children might serve in true faith and unfeigned love and »from your kingdom which has begun ... may enter into your eternal kingdom.«⁵⁷ Service was both the luxury and the duty of those believers who had been transferred »from the dominion of the devil to the kingdom of God, that is, into the church of Christ«:

me cruciant et affligunt. Quare haec inhaerentia facit, ut liberer a terroribus legis et peccati, eximare cute mea et transferar in Christum ac in illius regnum, quod est regnum gratiae, iustitiae, pacis, gaudii, vitae, salutis et gloriae aeternae; in illo autem agens, nihil mali potest nocere mihi.«

56 WA 45, 487, 26-32 (Das 14. und 15. Kapitel S. Johannis durch D. M. Luther gepredigt und ausgelegt, 1538): »..., Sondern was ich rede und sage, Das ich euch nicht wil lassen noch von euch bleiben, sondern zu euch komen und euch zu mir nemen also, das ich bey euch, und jr bey mir bleibet etc. Das hat S. Paulus also ausgelegt, das, wenn wir getauft sind, so haben wir schon Christum jnn und bey uns wonen, und sind bereit gesetzt (spricht er Coloss. j. Ephe.j.) aus diesem schendlichen wesen und reich der finsternis jnn das geistlich, himlisch wesen, da wir sind bürger mit den Heiligen und Gottes hausgenossen, etc.«

57 WA 38, 360, 29 - 361, 3 (Eine einfältige Weise zu beten für einen guten Freund, 1525): »Ah, lieber Herr Gott Vater, du sihest, wie nicht allein der welt weisheit und vernunft deinen namen schendet und deine ehre der lügen und dem teuffel gibt, Sondern alle jr gewalt, macht, reichthum und ehre, die du auff erden jnen gegeben hast, weltlich zu regirn und dir damit zu dienen, wider dein reich setzt und strebt, sie sind gros, mechtig und viel, dick, fett und satt, und plagen, hindern, verstören den geringen hauffen deines reichs, die schwach, veracht und wenig sind, ... Lieber Herr Gott Vater, Hie bekere und were, Bekere die, so noch sollen kinder und gelieder deines reichs werden, das sie mit uns und wir mit jnen dir jnn deinem reich jnn rechtem glauben und warhafftiger liebe dienen und aus diesem angefangenen reich jnn das ewige reich komen.«

»Now that we have the Word and the sacraments, now that we have been baptized, now that we are children and heirs and fellow heirs with Christ the Son of God [R 8, 17], who has given us eternal life, now it is necessary that we look to and really devote ourselves to the glorious calling and gifts.«⁵⁸

In Luther's ecclesiology, the tension between present and future still marked the relationship between the church and the kingdom. The church was »das angefangene reich«, not yet »das ewige reich«. Nevertheless, the participation of the church in the fullness and eternal invulnerability of the kingdom of God should not be undervalued. Baptized believers already have eternal life, and through faith and the promise they already possess the kingdom of God. The communion of saints is as certain for them as if they were already in heaven. The church is still a kingdom of promise, but the fulfillment of those promises has already begun. Believers in those promises still live in the world, but they already participate in the life of the kingdom. The present reality of the kingdom is the basis of the church's preservation and of Luther's confidence in its endurance.

IV Realism, Hope, and Optimism

As a biblical and theological ideal, the reality of the kingdom in the church was a matter of faith even though visible signs marked its presence. It was similar to the ideal of the true Christian portrayed in »Tractatus de libertate christiana« (1520) and, as a consequence, the true church, like the true Christian, had to remain hidden. Nevertheless, Luther was disappointed by the visible fruit of the evangelical movement. He had counted on a richer harvest.⁵⁹

To a remarkable extent, however, that disappointment was converted into realism early in his career. By 1523, Luther was predicting that only a few would take advantage of hearing the gospel and that the church would face persistent

58 WA 51, 124, 15 - 125, 1 (Last sermon in Wittenberg, January 17, 1546, on R 12, 3): »Nunc docet opera eorum, qui Christiani sunt. Nunc opulenti sumus per Dominum Christum, a Diabolo et mundo translati in regnum Dei i.e. in Ecclesiam, habemus verbum, Sacramenta, sumus baptisati, sumus filii et haeredes Dei, fratres et cohaeredes Christi, qui in aeternum vivere debent. Das wir nu zusehen und schicken uns recht in die herrliche berufung und gaben.«

59 Mark U. EDWARDS, JR.: Luther's last battles: politics and polemics, 1531-46. Ithaca; LO 1983, 113: »In his grimmer moments, and in the articulations of his theology, [Luther] recognized that true Christians were rare, and that the great bulk of the population would remain fast in its sin despite the renewed preaching of the gospel. Yet at some level of his being, above or below his understanding as a theologian, he had apparently hoped for more than the actual course of events had provided.«

opposition. The good news brought comfort only to faint and fearful consciences, but since it could not be aimed at such people alone, the yield of the gospel was small. The fault was not in the gospel but in the hearers. Everywhere large numbers of people had rejected the good news, even at Pentecost where the three thousand who believed (Act 2, 41) made no impact on Jerusalem as a whole. No change was obvious, and scarcely anyone knew that Christians were there. »Hence the gospel must not be measured by the multitude that hear, but by the small company that receive it. They indeed appear as nothing, they are despised and persecuted, yet God secretly works in them.«⁶⁰

Luther's realism led, as we have seen, to the support of visible congregations that catechized new converts and nurtured new generations of believers. Early on Luther was convinced that the education of children was the future of the church,⁶¹ and his conviction became stronger as the Reformation progressed. The children turned into a »younger generation« of teachers and preachers who had not experienced how tough the opposition could be. In the late 1530s, Luther stopped in the middle of a sermon on J 3, 13 to explain why the two natures of Christ were so important:

»We take such pains to stress this article, because it alone has toppled the pope. May God grant that it will yet overthrow the Turk too before the Last Day. ... And you young people who are not aware of the devil's powerful attacks against this article – for you have not yet

60 WA 12, 507, 25-31 (Sermon am dritten Osterfeiertag, April 7, 1523): »Darumb wer es gut, wens also kundt seyn, das man das Euangelion alleyn predigt an dem ort, da solche blöde unnd erschrocken gewissen weren. Man kans aber nicht thon, drumb geschichts, das es so wenig frucht schaffet, daher man uns schuld gybt, wir wollen vil new ding predigen unnd sich doch nyemant von unser lere bessert. Es feelet nicht am Euangelio, sundern an den Schulern, die horens wol, sie fulen aber nicht yhren jamer und hertzleyd, ...«

12, 509, 3-15: »Denn sehet was zu Jerusalem geschahe, do man das Euangelium zum ersten horet und des volcks sovil was, als man schreibt, das inn der stat uff das Osterlich fest gewesen synd eylff mal hundert tausent man, wie vil wurden yhr davon bekeret? Da sanct Petrus uffstund und predigt, triben sie das gespot draus und hielten die Apostel fur volle narren, und do sie lang das Euangelion triben, brachten sie zusammen drei tusent man und weib, Was war das gegen der gantzen stat? es ist gegen den andern hauffen gewest, als kundt man nicht spuren, das es etwas gewurckt het, denn es belib alles ynn dem vorigen wesen und regiment, das man keyn anderung sahe und niemant gewar wurde, das Christen da weren. Also bleybt es noch ymmer dar, drumb soll man das Euangelion nicht messen nach der mennig der die es horen, sunder nach dem kleynen heufflin der die es fassen, die selben scheynen nicht, man sicht sie nicht an und Got handlet verborgen ynn yhn.«

61 WA 1, 494, 10f: (Decem praecepta Wittenbergensi praedicata populo, 1518): »Haec est etiam ecclesiae ruina tota: si enim unquam debet refluere, necesse est, ut a puerorum institutione exordium fiat.«

engaged in this battle – must hold firmly to this article. We old teachers have not yet disposed of the sects; they all rage against it. Even though they are vanquished for a while, they do not quit but rise up again and grow.«⁶²

In 1526, to be sure, Luther expressed regret that he did not have enough earnest Christians to gather for simple evangelical worship. Failing the same, however, he invested his energy in Latin and German services for the people who were available, »the youth and the others«, on whom the future of the church depended and from whom earnest Christians might arise on their own.⁶³

Luther's realism existed alongside optimism about the church despite the hard times and persecution that lay ahead. Comparing his own age to the state of the world which had left Noah the only righteous man on earth (Gn 7, 1), Luther commented:

»It is horrible to live in such an evil and impious world. Today, by the kindness of God, since we have the light of the word, it is still a golden age. The sacraments are in legitimate use in our churches, pious teachers convey the word purely, and even though government is weak, there is as yet no hopeless wickedness.«⁶⁴

A tired and resigned Luther had encouraging words for Wenzeslaus Linck (1483-1547) in 1543: »I do not leave our churches looking badly; they flourish in pure and sound teaching, and they grow day by day through many excellent and sincere pastors.«⁶⁵ Although worried about the raging of the Turks and convinced that people were becoming Epicureans and atheists as predicted (2 T 3, 1-5),⁶⁶ Luther

62 WA 47, 63, 36 - 64, 9: »Derhalben so keilen und treiben wir vleiszig an diesem Artickel, den er hatt allein den Bapst gestorzt, gott gebe, das ehr den Turcken auch noch fur dem Jungsten tage sturtze. ... Und ihr junge leuthe, die ihr solchs noch nicht wisset, was der Teuffel widder diesen artickel konne, den ir seidt in dem kampff und Streit noch nicht gewesen, sollet fest uber dem artickel halten. Wir alden lehrer sind der rotten noch nicht loss worden, die alle widder den artickel gesturmet haben, dan wen man sie gleich einmahl uberwindet, so lassen sie doch nicht nach, wachsen und gehen immer widder auff, ...«

63 WA 19, 75, 23-27: (Deutsche Messe und ordnung Gottis diensts, 1526), »Inn des wil ichs bey den gesagten zwo weysen lassen bleyben und offentlich unter dem volck solchen Gottis dienst, die jugent zu uben und die andern zum glauben zu ruffen und zu reytzen, neben der predigt helffen foddern, bis das die Christen, so mit ernst das wort meynen, sich selbst finden und anhalten, ...«

64 WA 42, 321, 22-26: »Horribile itaque est in tam malo et impio mundo vivere. Hodie, Dei beneficio, cum lumen verbi habeamus, adhuc aureum seculum est. Sacramenta enim sunt in legitimo usu in nostris Ecclesiis, pii Doctores verbum pure tradunt, Magistratus quoque etsi infirmus sit, tamen nondum desperata malicia est.«

65 WA Br 10, 335, 14-17 (3887), Luther to Wenzeslaus Linck, June 20, 1543: »Non relinquo tristem faciem nostrarum Ecclesiarum, sed florentem pura et sincera doctrina, multis optimis et sincerissimis Pastoribus in diesque augescentem.«

was also confident that God would never abandon the creation but would renew and preserve the world unto the end.⁶⁷ God would also preserve the church: »We can rest assured that neither force nor lies, neither wisdom nor holiness, neither tribulation nor suffering shall suppress Christendom, but it will gain the victory and conquer at last.«⁶⁸

How was that kind of optimism possible? A fruitful relationship existed between Luther's realism about the challenges that faced the church and his optimism about its future. Although they were different, the two attitudes were not contradictory but complementary. The promises which fortified the faithful had to be announced and believed in visible assemblies, and these assemblies in turn had to endure in order for the faithful to be sustained.

A similar complementarity obtained among the hidden church, the kingdom, and the visible church. Once Luther realized that the gospel would take root only in a few earnest believers, he continually affirmed the hiddenness of the church and insisted that it was an object of faith. In 1530, for example, he maintained that the book of Revelation should be read as a warning, so that the manifold blemishes of the church would not mislead the faithful and prevent them from recognizing it:

»This article, I believe in the holy Christian church, is as much an article of faith as the rest. This is why natural reason cannot recognize it, even if it puts on all its glasses. The devil can cover it over with offenses and divisions, so that you have to take offense at it. God too can conceal it behind faults and shortcomings of all kinds, so that you necessarily become a fool and pass false judgment on it. Christendom will not be known by sight but by faith.«⁶⁹

Furthermore, since the »perpetual course of the church at all time« involved promises, the faithful were forced to believe in what they could not see and to hope for what was not apparent. Whoever could not do this was not Christian, concluded Luther. »For Christ himself entered into glory only by first descending

66 WA Br 10, 335, 23-25 (3887).

67 John M. HEADLEY: Luther and the problem of secularization. *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 55 (Boston, MA 1987), 32 f.

68 WA DB 7, 418, 6-8 Æ StA I, 411, 29-31: »... das wir wissen / wie das keine gewalt noch lügen / keine weisheit noch heiligkeit / kein trübsal noch leid / werden die Christenheit vnter drucken / sondern sie sol endlich den sieg behalten vnd obligen.«

69 WA DB 7, 418, 36 - 420, 4 Æ StA I, 412, 26-31: »Es ist dis stücke (Ich gleube ein heillge Christliche kirche) eben so wol ein artickel des glaubens / als die andern / Darumb kan sie keine vernunft / wenn sie gleich alle brillen auff setzt / erkennen / Der teuffel kan sie wol zu decken / mit ergernissen vnd rotten / das du dich müssest dran ergern / so kan sie Gott auch mit gebrechen vnd allerley mangel verbergen / das du must drüber zum narren werden / vnd ein falsch vrtail vber sie fassen / Sie will nicht ersehen / sondern ergleubt sein.«

into hell. When he was about to reign, he was crucified, and when he was to be glorified, he was spit upon.«⁷⁰

At the same time, Luther insisted upon the continuity and preservation of the church in real communities of the faithful. Precisely because the church was always under attack and the number of true Christians small, they could only be preserved through God's promises, and those promises were found in visible assemblies in which faithful preachers supplied the common priesthood with word and sacrament. The visible church was a kingdom of promise, the place where God alone was present and was working all things through his word.⁷¹ God's way of working could not always be seen, but the divine promises could always be heard and received wherever the faithful gathered. Answering the question of how the flood which destroyed the human race harmonized with God's creation, Luther responded that God preserved his creation in the same way that God sustains the church: »God remains truthful and preserves the church, rules and guides it, but in a manner that the world neither sees nor understands.« Luther was confident about the course of divine action in his own time. God had expelled the pope from the church, and »meanwhile God has chosen for himself another church, which receives the word and shuns idolatry, although it is so hard pressed by the cross and dishonor that it is not considered a church but a heretical body and a school of the devil.«⁷²

Luther's hope was also confirmed by the history of church: Christ, who was the same yesterday, today, and forever (H 13, 8), had sustained the church long before Luther's own generation and would preserve it long after Luther was gone:

»A thousand years ago you and I were nothing, and yet the church was preserved at that time without us. He who is called »who was: and yesterday« had to accomplish this. Even during our lifetime we are not the church's guardians. It is not preserved by us, for we are unable to drive off the devil in the form of the pope, the sects, and malicious people. If it were up to us, the church would perish before our very eyes, and we together with it (as we experience

70 WA 43, 567, 36 - 568, 1: »Hic cursus perpetuus est Ecclesiae omnibus temporibus, promittere, et postea ita tractare eos, qui credunt promissionibus, ut cogantur expectare invisibilia, credere, quae non vident, sperare, quae non apparent. Hoc qui non praestat, non est Christianus. Christus enim ipse sic intravit in gloriam suam, ut descenderet prius ad inferos. Regnaturus crucifigitur: glorificandus conspuitur.«

71 See above, note 1.

72 WA 42, 332, 30-37: »... Deus manet verax et conservat Ecclesiam, regit, gubernat, sed tali modo, qualem Mundus nec videt nec intelligit. ... Elegit autem Deus sibi aliam Ecclesiam, quae verbum amplectitur et idolatriam fugit, cruce et ignominia sic oppressam, ut non Ecclesia, sed haeretici et schola Diaboli aestimetur.«

daily). For another person obviously preserves both the church and us. He does this so plainly that we could touch and feel it, if we did not want to believe it, and we have to rely on the one called ›who is‹ and ›today‹. Likewise we will contribute nothing toward the preservation of the church after our death. The one ›who is to come‹ and who is ›forever‹ will accomplish it. What we are now saying about ourselves our ancestors also had to say, as is borne out by the psalms and the scriptures. And our descendants will make the same discovery, prompting them to join us and the entire church in singing Psalm 124: ›If it had not been the Lord who was on our side, let Israel now say, etc.‹⁷³

In the tumultuous year 1525, Luther had expressed similar confidence when he preached that Christians were secure because they were never beyond Christ's reign:

›The sum of the matter is this: Depressed or exalted, circumscribed in whatsoever way, dragged hither or thither, I still find Christ. For he holds in his hands everything in heaven or on earth, and all are subject to him – angels, the devil, the world, sin, death and hell. Therefore, so long as he dwells in my heart, I have courage, wherever I go, I cannot get lost. I dwell wherever my Lord Christ dwells. ... We are, through Christ, better fortified [than with reason]. We are assured that he dwells everywhere, be it in honor or dishonor, hunger, sorrow, illness, imprisonment, death or life, blessing or affliction. It is Paul's desire for the Ephesians [E 3, 18] that God give them grace and strength to embrace [the rule of Christ] with their heart.‹⁷⁴

Was this hope in Christ's reign and the continuity of the church merely an expression of theological idealism? At the end of the nineteenth century, Karl Müller (1852-1940) argued that Luther's view of the church breathed ›the highest

73 WA 50, 477, 1-16 (Wider die Antinomer, 1539): ›Denn du und ich sind vor tausent jaren nichts gewesen, da dennoch die Kirche on uns ist erhalten worden, und hats der müssen thun, der da heist: Qui erat und heri. So sind wirs itzt auch nicht bey unserm leben, denn die Kirche wird durch uns nicht erhalten, weil wir dem Teuffel im Bapst, Rotten und bösen leuten nicht können wehren, und unsert halben die Kirche für unsern augen und wir mit jr müssten zu grunde gehen (wie wir teglich erfaren), wo nicht ein ander man were, der beide, die Kirchen und uns, scheinbarlich erhelte, das wirs möchten greiffen und fñlen, ob wirs nicht wolten gleuben, und müssen den thun lassen, der da heist: Qui est und hodie. Eben so werden wir auch nichts dazu thun, das die Kirche erhalten werde, wenn wir tod sind, Sondern er wirds thun, der da heisst: Qui venturus est und in secula. Und was wir jnn solcher sachen von uns itzt sagen, das haben unser vorfarn von sich auch sagen müssen, wie die Psalmen und Schrifft zeugen, Und unser nach komen werdens auch also erfaren, das sie werden mit uns und der gantzen Kirchen singen den 124. Psalm: Were Gott nicht mit uns diese zeit, so sol Israel sagen etc.‹

74 WA 17 I, 437, 32 - 438, 4 (Eyn Sermon von Stärke und Zunehmen des Glaubens und der Liebe, October 1, 1525?): ›Ist nu die summa: Ich werd genidrigt odder erhoet, miss mich, wie du wilt, reyss mich hieher odder dorthyn, so finde ich Christum da. Denn er hat alle ding ynn seynen henden, ynn hymel und erden, und ist yhm alles unterworfen, Engel, Teuffel, welt, sund, tod und hell. Darumb wenn er ynn meynem hertzen wonet, so bleybt der mut stehen, wo ich hyn kome und fare, kan ich nicht verloren werden. Denn wo Christus, meyn herr bleybt, da bleybe ich auch. ... Wir aber erlangen eyne andern mut [als durch die Vernunft] durch Christum und

idealism, the idealism of faith«. When Müller claimed that Luther's concept of the church had »no trace of realism«, he meant that it was completely incompatible with the attempts of his day to make the church outwardly as splendid as possible. Luther's ecclesiology was »für all diese Dinge im höchsten Maße »unpraktisch«.⁷⁵ In this sense, Luther's later ecclesiology certainly retained his early »idealism of faith«. The church did not depend on clever human strategies for survival but on God's sustaining word. It was a kingdom of promise and not a kingdom of splendid accomplishment. In this world the kingdom of promise would forever appear cruciform.

In the eyes of the older Luther, however, the evangelical churches were still a praiseworthy accomplishment. Erich Foerster (1865-1945) observed: »Luther betrachtet vielmehr das Werk der Kirchenreformation in allen wesentlichen Stücken als gelungen und rühmt die Kirche seines Landes.«⁷⁶ Luther's praise was not based on starry-eyed idealism but on ecclesiastical realism about visible congregations of believers that were both necessary and imperfect. This realism, acquired early in the Reformation, was also theological. The kingdom of God could never be fully identified with visible assemblies of believers, »denn das reych Christi stehet ym werden, nicht ynn geschehen«.⁷⁷ These same visible assemblies nevertheless embraced the kingdom of promise and the realm of eternal life into which the faithful had now been transferred. The kingdom of God and the true church were not to be sought somewhere distant from visible gatherings of believers. Instead, the kingdom was present in their very midst.

The presence of the kingdom in the visible church enabled hope to overcome disappointment as the older Luther faced a menacing future. It gave validity to the cause of the evangelical churches which, in spite of their blemishes, claimed to be the nucleus of a restored Christendom that he and his colleagues sought to preserve from the perils of the end time. The optimism that was generated by this ecclesiology, however, would be severely tested by the religious strife which intensified after Luther's death.

wissen, das er an allen orten seye, es sey ehre oder schand, hunger, kummer, kranckheyt, tod odder leben, gutes odder boses. Solches wunscht S. Paulus den Ephesern, das yhn Gott geluck und heyl dazu gebe, das sie es also mit dem hertzen fassen ...«

75 Karl MÜLLER: Wesen und Bedeutung der Kirche für die einzelnen Gläubigen nach Luther. In: Aus der akademischen Arbeit: Vorträge und Aufsätze. Tü 1930, 173.

76 Erich FOERSTER: Fragen zu Luthers Kirchenbegriff aus der Gedankenwelt seines Alters. In: Festgabe für Julius Kaftan zu seinem 70. Geburtstage/ dargeb. von Schülern und Kollegen. Tü 1920, 89.

77 See above, note 42.