

A Reflection on Ecclesiology A Lutheran Perspective

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I shared with a colleague who teaches at a seminary that I had been asked to submit a brief paper on the ecclesiology of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA). He laughed. Then he offered an encouraging word, saying, "It should be a short paper. I'm not sure we have an ecclesiology." While his statement was intended as humor, like anything funny, it had a patina of truth. Given the diversity of thought within the Lutheran tradition regarding congregational identity, the role of clergy, the place of bishops, and a host of other issues, it seems on the surface that Lutherans provide a kind of warehouse for competing understandings of the church. Given the fact that the ELCA intentionally pursues a structure that refuses to recognize any expression of the church as primary, no obvious organizational model of the church emerges. Given the historic definitions of the church found in the Lutheran Confessions, which appear at first blush to be minimalist and even dismissive of matters of organization, one could conclude there is little offered to build a Lutheran ecclesiology. All of that said, the fact of the matter is that a Lutheran ecclesiology is not only discernable, but offers a rich and deep contribution to the church's self understanding.

A reflection on a particularly Lutheran ecclesiology should perhaps begin with the Lutheran Confessions. The most concise treatment of matters of ecclesiology in the Confessions reads: "*(We) teach that one holy church will remain forever. The church is the assembly of the saints in which the gospel is taught purely and the sacraments are administered rightly. And it is enough for the true unity of the church to agree concerning teaching of the gospel and the administration of the sacraments. It is not necessary that human traditions, rites, or ceremonies instituted by human beings be alike everywhere. As Paul says [Eph. 4:5,6]: "One faith, one baptism, on God and Father of us all..." (Augsburg Confession, Article VII)* Here we find no long explication of institutional or organizational practice. Instead, we find what Ted Peters characterizes as "one of the simplest and most refreshing definitions of the church."¹ It is a definition that makes the gospel itself the constitutive center of the church. This definition influenced thinking about the church beyond the Lutheran movement, finding its way into Calvin's *Institutes*.² This brief article emphasizes the singular and eternal nature of the church; eschews all but the essential source of the church's existence, the gospel itself as revealed in Word and sacrament; relegates matters of practical concern to the periphery, removing them from the center of any debate about ecclesiology.

This article begins by holding to the assertion that there is one church. It was not (and is not) the intention of the Lutheran movement to offer a new definition of the church. Lutherans do not claim to be *The* church. Rather, Lutherans see themselves as a

¹ Ted Peters, *God – The World's Future: Systematic Theology for a New Era*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000) 270

² John Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.1.9; 4.10.30

confessional theological movement within the one holy, catholic, and apostolic church. “Luther was an ecumenist, not a sectarian.”³ In this sense, Lutheran ecclesiology is framed most significantly not by its own particular claims and confessions, but by the tradition of the Western Church. Philip Hefner reminds us that “*The church is best understood within the context of the doctrine of the Trinity. That doctrine places the church within the work of God’s Spirit in this world, to embody the meanings and rationale that God wishes to actualize for creation. Since those meanings are focused in the Logos, incarnate in Jesus Christ, the church is thoroughly christocentric in nature.*”⁴ A Lutheran ecclesiology will be resonant with Trinitarian faith.

The second move of this article is that it sees a dynamic rather than static quality to the church. It is not an effort to define structures or systems. There is no mention of keeping the membership roles of an organization, nor is there concern for buildings or bureaucracy. The church is a gathering centered on an encounter with the Living Word as it is proclaimed in preaching and celebrated in sacraments. Contrary to what most of the culture thinks about the church, the church is not a thing; it is the encounter of God and people as they gather around the means of grace – the gifts of God. Church is an event. This definition guards against two things. First it prohibits constructs that see the church as the repository of dead propositions about God. All too often the church is portrayed or presented as an artifact or dispenser of some version of truth. This article points to the encounter between God and people as a living thing. Second, this view of the church stands against ecclesiology that puts the church (or its leaders) in the place of God. This dynamic treatment of the church also asserts that the church matters because it is the nexus of encounter with the holy in the world.

While it may seem that this seemingly minimal definition of the church might lead to an ecclesiology confined to the interior of the gathering space, it instead opens up the understanding of church to be the gospel-centered, provisional, and anticipatory people of God in history. The event that we call “Church” is formative because it is an encounter with the God who forms us. This encounter “calls, enlightens, and sanctifies” the church for its mission in the world. As Vitor Westhelle says, the church formed around Word and sacrament moves “from house to the street.”⁵ We live out the Word and become sacraments ourselves in our daily lives beyond the formative event. Church keeps happening in every move we make. Certainly, it might be countered that while the event called church can at times change the world as it moves into the street, it is also true that this event called church can also all too easily end at the door of the building where the gathering happened having no impact at all on the world. This is not a sign that church does not happen, but rather is a testimony to the provisional character of the church. The church, when it is fully church is a gathering of the *saints*. But, as Luther taught so clearly, we are *simul justus et peccator* – saints and sinners. He spoke then of the visible church – an earthly regime – as *magna peccatrix*.

That the church is provisional implies that this gathered community moves into the street not only in response to the gospel, but in anticipation of the fulfillment of the gospel. We

³ Eric W. Gritsch & Robert W. Jenson, *Lutheranism: A Theological Movement and its Confessional Writings* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1976) vii

⁴ Carl Bratten & Robert Jenson, *Christian Dogmatics, Vol II*, “Ninth Locus – The Church” by Philip Hefner, (187)

⁵ Vitor Westhelle, “Communion Ecclesiology and the Cross: Limits and Possibilities,” www.elca.org/planning/westhelle.html (Westhelle is Professor of Systematic Theology at the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago)

are an “already, and not yet” church living in a world that is moving between the moments of creation and consummation. As Daniel Migliore writes: “(I)t is entirely fitting to describe the nature of the church as essentially the beginning of new life in communion. Human life comes to completion by participation in and reflection of the triune love of God. As it participates in the love of God through Christ in the Spirit, the church becomes a sign and a provisional realization of the destiny of humanity and indeed of the entire creation. While by no means identical with the coming reign of God, the church’s proclamation and practice are to be a witness to and an anticipatory participation in God’s reign.”⁶

This image of movement between “house and street” breaks down a bit if applied too narrowly. It might be easy to draw a sharp parallel between church and local congregation with the use of the term “house.” While it is perhaps true that Lutheran teaching on the nature of the church at the time of the Reformation worked to restore a sense of the church to the congregation, it was not done at the expense of a wider view. H. George Anderson, former Presiding Bishop of the ELCA points out that “Luther’s definition of the church as ‘holy believers and sheep who hear the voice of their Shepherd’ (Smalcald Articles III, 12:2) broke out of the medieval box and restored both a more universal and a more local dimension. His assertion that the gospel could be found among the Turks, for example, called for a view of the church that transcended many institutional boundaries.”⁷

Understanding that the church is both universal and local, gives rise to organizational and structural practice. The ELCA sees itself not as a national denomination with subordinate synods or congregations acting as branch offices. Neither does it embrace the notion that the congregations are the church and the synods and churchwide offices as kind of administrative cooperatives. Each expression of the church – churchwide, synodical, and congregational -- is both fully the church in its own right and part of the whole. That this construct recalls Trinitarian thought, while not intended to be any kind of emulation of the Trinity itself, is rooted in the reality of a Trinitarian ontology that sees a unified communality in all things. The Trinity is the ultimate grounding for an attempt to live out the fullness of this particular ecclesial relationship, as it is the grounding for any hope of human community.

That the structure of the ELCA is not identical with other expressions of the Lutheran movement in the world also reflects the confessional definition of the church offered in Article VII above. That “human traditions, rites, or ceremonies instituted by human beings” are not essential for unity in the church reflects a very pragmatic stance toward matters of organization, structure, ministry, and worship. That the Confessions commonly refer to such matters as “*adiophra*” has been the cause of disagreement among Lutherans. For some, the term has come to be seen as almost a prohibition, while for most this pragmatic approach grants permission to do what is necessary. The sometimes contentious debates that arose in the ELCA over the establishment of a relationship of full communion with the Episcopal Church USA were centered on the historic episcopate. The two approaches to the pragmatism of the confessions fueled the debate. In the end, the historic episcopate was received not as an essential element of the church, but an acceptable expression of unity.

⁶ Daniel Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 2004) 263

⁷ H. George Anderson, *Ecclesiology, Mission and Structure* (Chicago:ELCA, April 2004)

The elegantly simple definition of the church found in the Augsburg Confession and the Lutheran pragmatism regarding practical ecclesiology does not mean that Lutherans have not thought deeply about the way the church works in the world. Perhaps the most concise collection of thought on these matters is found in Luther's own *On Councils and the Church* written in 1539. In this treatise, Luther identifies seven "marks of the church." These marks offer broader exposition of what was said in Article VII of the Augsburg Confession.

The first mark of the church Luther identifies is a gift of God: The Word. Luther declares, "wherever you hear or see this word preached, believed, professed, and lived, do not doubt that the true *ecclesia sancta catholica*, 'a Christian holy people' must be there..."⁸ In similar fashion, Luther presents the sacraments of Baptism and Eucharist as gifts of God for the people of God. Where they are found practiced and administered properly, one finds the church.

The fourth mark of the church Luther offers is the Power of the Keys. This includes the practice of confession and absolution. It is not offered as a sacrament at this stage of Luther's thought because it had gradually been unified as an extension of the sacrament of baptism. Pushing beyond Luther's discussion, this makes forgiveness a sign of the church. Where it is a real and life-giving reality, the church exists. This is a fertile and hopeful area of further study and reflection in the world we inhabit.

The fifth mark of the church arises from the prior four marks. The proclamation of the Word, the right administration of the sacraments and the announcement of forgiveness in the name of Christ give rise to the need for the office of ministry. Lutheran ecclesiology, for all its diversity about the nomenclature for ministry, holds firm to a conviction that there is a place for apostolic ministry – those who are sent in the name of Christ; as well as a diakonal expression of ministry – those who are called to a ministry of Word and service. In fact, the Lutheran convictions about vocation, which expanded the calling to ministry into a "priesthood of all believers," should always give rise to a strengthening of the laity's role and a deep partnership in the mission of the church. The concern for apostolicity of the church is primarily addressed in the confessional identity of the church, and may be further served by the "laying on of hands."

The sixth mark of the church is the prayer of the people and their public worship. There is little room in the Confessions for a notion of "private faith." The practice of faith is public and communal. While Luther is sometimes accused of being the source of individualized faith, one needs to see how the embrace of inner conviction is lived out in the communal nature of the public church. The church is present when, in response to the encounter with the Living God through Word and sacrament it responds with prayer and praise.

Finally, Luther offers the mark of the church that gives the unique and saving character of the church – the cross. Taking this cue from Luther, Douglas John Hall explains: "...the (theology of the cross) gives rise to a (church of the cross). Indeed it could be said that the whole purpose of the theology of the cross is to engender a movement – a people – that exists in the world under the sign of the cross of Jesus Christ: a movement of people called into being by his Spirit and being conformed to his person and furthering

⁸ Martin Luther, "On the Councils and the Church" in *Martin Luther's Basic Theological Writings*, Timothy Lull, ed., (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989), 547

his work. A cruciform people.”⁹ And perhaps “a cruciform people” is the best way to think of the church from a Lutheran perspective. Encountered by the living Word of God, the people of God are shaped by the cross and bear it to the world. The church may wrestle with various means of organization and ministry that reflect this encounter. In the end, the church is the people of the Cross.

⁹ Douglas John Hall, *The Cross in Our Context*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003) 137