



Theological Perspective

Lutheranism in Its Sixth Century: D.O.A.?

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The question is sometimes raised, especially by former Lutherans who have found their way back to Rome, whether the Lutheran church is here to stay or whether, having fulfilled its obligation as an evangelical movement within the church catholic, it may now pass into oblivion, a learned footnote in modern histories of Christianity. The question is trickier to answer than may appear at first blush, in large part because beneath it lurks a far more difficult question for twenty-first-century heirs of Martin Luther to grapple with: What is church?

When posed as a question of ecclesiology rather than doctrine, we soon discover that the issue was already a lively one among the second generation of sixteenth-century Lutherans, who—if David Chytraeus (1530–1600) is any indication—could boldly assert that the church was a visible assembly.¹ It would seem that later debates over Luther’s understanding of a “hidden” (if not invisible) church had passed Chytraeus by. And yet, despite this insistence on a visible church, it would seem that Chytraeus was operating well within the boundaries set for him by his teachers: Martin Luther and Philipp Melanchthon.

In 1520, Luther’s opponents roundly criticized him for defining the church as the assembly of the faithful.² This, they argued, would lead to complete uncertainty since faith (especially as Luther defined it) was hidden in the heart and, hence, no one would know whether they were in the church or not. Luther’s response provided the most important ecclesiological contribution of Lutheran theology to the church catholic. He insisted that the church could be identified through outward

¹David Chytraeus, *Catechesis in Academia Rostochiana* (Wittenberg: J. Krafft, 1555), F 6v: “The Church of God in this life is a visible assembly of all people who esteem the pure teaching of the Gospel and rightly use the sacraments. In this assembly God is efficacious through the ministry of the Gospel and regenerates and sanctifies many unto eternal life....”

²For specifics, see Gordon Lathrop and Timothy J. Wengert, *Christian Assembly: The Marks of the Church in a Pluralistic Age* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2004).

signs or characteristic markings (it was Melanchthon who first applied the term *notae*, marks), namely, the gospel and sacraments. By 1539, in *On the Councils and the Churches*, Luther's list had expanded to include catechesis, ministry, worship, and the cross, but already in 1520 he had set a trajectory for understanding church in a far more dynamic, less institutional way than not only his opponents but also many of his heirs.

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The church happens to the believer, with the Holy Spirit making believers through the assembly's visible signs. Thus, when Melanchthon came to defining church in the Augsburg Confession, Luther's central argument remained: the church is believers assembled around word and sacraments. Even Reformed confessions managed to say somewhat the same thing (but always mixing in a special mark of ministry—which led [in this country at least] to denominations named after their polities). For these early Lutherans, then, church is not simply an institution but an event, a “happening” as one was fond of saying in the 1960s. Yet this definition has little or nothing to do with later debates over ontology versus function. When believers assemble around word and sacraments, *something* happens, but that *something* can never be divorced or analyzed apart from the actual happening. Thus, as Luther once said, the church is not tied to a person (the pope or Wittenberg's head pastor, Bugenhagen) or to a place (Rome or Wittenberg) but to the gospel itself.

Put in this perspective, the question of the survival of Lutheranism shows itself to be the wrong question altogether, or at least a question of such secondary importance that Lutherans will never really answer it in a very satisfactory manner. If the institutions that surround Lutheranism—congregations, synods or districts, churches, worldwide communions—suddenly passed out of existence, this would not finally affect church, the gathering around word and sacraments by all believers. Indeed, these institutions fall instead under what might be called an ecclesiastical first use of the law—there to restrain evil teaching and practice and keep order for the gospel but not to be confused with the gospel itself.

Since God is the sole proprietor and protector of the gospel, institutions may come and go, change and adapt, wither and die, or flourish, and God will always see to the gospel and sacraments, the event of church against which the gates of hell cannot prevail. This dynamic definition of church also prevents us from saying that Lutheranism is a witness *to* the church catholic, as if the witness and church were two separable entities. Instead, one must realize that Lutherans bear witness

to the gospel and, *mirabile dictu*, there is church. In the final analysis, church, gospel, and sacraments are not in our hands at all—no more than this or that historical institution is in our hands. Instead, as the heart of the Lutheran witness makes clear, we are always and only recipients of God’s mercy. There can never be an “If we [the Lutheran churches] do this, then we will survive.” There can only finally be faith-filled thanksgiving—not for the survival of an institution but for the gospel and sacraments. Then, instead of worrying about survival, we can simply go out and proclaim the gospel visibly and verbally—and see to it that the institutions, through which all human beings must operate, continue to enhance that very proclamation. ⊕

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