



Church of Aaron or Church of Moses?

Whither denominations? It is not news that many local congregations have dropped the name “Lutheran” from their signs—just as congregations in other denominations, too, have dropped their traditional identifiers. Is this a good thing or a bad thing?

Those once “Lutheran” and now often “Community” churches could perhaps cite Martin Luther himself for support, since, as we know, he remained always uneasy with the name “Lutheran”:

I ask that [people] make no reference to my name; let them call themselves Christians, not Lutherans. What is Luther? After all, the teaching is not mine [John 7:16]. Neither was I crucified for anyone [I Cor. 1:13]....[L]et us abolish all party names and call ourselves Christians, after him whose teaching we hold.¹

But the “Community” churches ought not declare victory too quickly. If the issue becomes fidelity to the gospel, then, said Luther, “[Y]ou should not discard Luther so completely, lest with him you discard also his teaching.”²

So, both “Community” churches and “Lutheran” churches need to consider the significance of their names. If “Lutheran” (or any other denominational title) means simply an identification with ethnic or historical tradition rather than with confession, then the name designates not much more than a kind of nostalgia for the Christendom of a bygone era. On the other hand, if “Community” betrays an identification with culture that trumps an identity with confession, then we seem to be faced with just a new variety of Christendom. And all Christendoms get in the way of Luther’s preferred identification: “Christian.” Luther again: “Luther himself

¹Martin Luther, “A Sincere Admonition by Martin Luther to All Christians to Guard against Insurrection and Rebellion” (1522), in *Luther’s Works*, 55 vols., ed. Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut Lehmann (Philadelphia and St. Louis: Fortress and Concordia, 1955–1986) 45:70–71 [hereafter *LW*].

²Martin Luther, “Receiving Both Kinds in the Sacrament” (1522), in *LW* 36:265.

has no desire to be Lutheran except insofar as he teaches the Holy Scripture in purity.”³ The name is finally not the issue; but the confession is.

Perhaps the creation of churches too closely linked to culture is inevitable. In my more cynical moments, I figure that the much-vaunted post-Constantinian missional church—that is, the church no longer tied to an imperial state and culture, but set free at last to bear true witness to the gospel—I figure that that post-Constantinian church lasted about an hour and a half. That was the interval between the time we shed the trappings of our European colonial heritage and adopted full-blown the trappings of what my African friends would call a new and much more dangerous colonialism: the media-saturated, marketing-oriented, entertainment-based, consumer-driven culture of Western materialism and economic globalization. Neither the Roman empire nor a later European hegemony was able to dominate the world as successfully as Coca Cola and McDonalds; and have we not simply jettisoned our former bondage only to embrace a new one, where super-sized is better, success is measurable, and corporation-modeled strategic mission statements replace substantial and confessional creeds? A cynical reading of the times, no doubt. Exaggerated, probably. But true, sometimes?

Dietrich Bonhoeffer names a similar reality in his sermon on Exod 32 (“These are your gods, O Israel”), preached on May 28, 1933, in the early days of the struggles of the Confessing Church, just five months after Hitler was appointed chancellor of Germany.⁴ Would the German church identify itself with culture and world (*Weltkirche*) or would it identify itself with God’s word (*Wortkirche*)? Would it be the church of Aaron the priest or the church of Moses the prophet? The “church of the word,” says Bonhoeffer, is called in times of crisis to patience and to faith (just as Israel was called to wait for Moses to return from the mountain with the divine word); but the “church of the world” is impatient and cannot wait. Needing something to do, something visible, something now, it compels Aaron to construct gods that they can see in place of the God whom they cannot.

No, our church ought to have something. We want to see something in our church. We will not wait....Up Aaron, the priest, do your duty. We need religions. If you cannot prevail with the Living God, make us gods yourself.⁵

This demand for action, for programs, for progress, for present visibility, for cheerleaders, even for religion, is certainly in tune with the values of our culture. And, it seems that, like Israel, we will do anything to support that mission:

³Martin Luther, “Luther und Bugenhagen an Spalatin mit Bedenken an die Gebrüder von Einsiedel,” in *D. Martin Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe, Briefwechsel*, vol. 4 (Weimar: Herman Böhlhaus Nachfolger, 1933) 375; translation from *What Luther Says*, compiled by Ewald M. Plass, vol. 2 (Saint Louis: Concordia, 1959) 858.

⁴Dietrich Bonhoeffer, “A Church of the World or a Church of the Word? *Sermon preached in the Kaiser Wilhelm Memorial Church, Exaudi, 28th May 1933. Exodus 32.1–7, 15, 19f, 30–4*,” in Bonhoeffer, *No Rusty Swords*, ed. Edwin H. Robertson, trans. Edwin H. Robertson and John Bowdan (New York: Harper & Row, 1965) 243–248.

⁵*Ibid.*, 245.

We hear it said [said Bonhoeffer] that the people are not so ready for sacrifice. But those who talk like this do not know the world. The human race is ready for any sacrifice in which it may celebrate itself and worship its own work. The worldly church (*Weltkirche*), the church of Aaron, is ready for any sacrifice if it is to be allowed to make its own God. The human race and the world church fall on their knees joyfully, and with smiles, before the god whom we make as it pleases us.⁶

So what gods shall we serve? Bonhoeffer's fear (alas, well founded) was that people would go with the visible program of the German Christians, embracing the exciting promises of the National Socialist culture, rather than waiting in faith for the true and sustaining word of God. And what about us? What gods will we serve?

The issue of church and culture endures, since it is inherent in our incarnational faith. If God truly becomes human, if we truly have this treasure in earthen vessels, then we will never avoid the compromise of Christ in culture. This can hardly be termed a disadvantage, since it derives from the very heart of Christian faith. God really does enter the real world; God really does get his hands dirty in the daily Palestinian life of Jesus of Nazareth. Thus, when God enters our more recent cultures, it is probably inevitable that church will get all tied up in the European power structures of the past and the American marketing structures of the present. But Bonhoeffer reminds us to be ever mindful of the danger, and calls us to avoid the triumphalism of any form of Christendom as we wait faithfully for the life-giving word of God, to avoid succumbing to the human yearning for religion as we do the dangerous work of naming the gods of our own culture.

Bonhoeffer was too good a theologian to see word and world, prophet and priest as an either/or. Finally, Christ comes "as priest and prophet in one," and in his cross "the whole human race, the whole church, is judged and forgiven." As the church of Christ, in whom the word fully enters the world, the church "is always at the same time the church of Moses and the church of Aaron."⁷

With this, my own cynicism is judged as well (and, I hope, forgiven), along with the various too comfortable weddings of church and culture that have plagued us through the ages and that we continue to reinvent. I need to appreciate, no doubt, that the contemporary church's need for effective management and decisive leadership is real and that much can be learned about those things from the "world"—including the culture of modern American business (where, our First Article faith reminds us, God remains at work). At the same time, the church needs continually to remind itself of the difference between strategy and mission, as well as the difference between fidelity and success. Together, one hopes, the whole church—for the church of the word exists only in a church of

⁶Ibid., 245–246.

⁷Ibid., 247–248.

the world—can find its way, with Bonhoeffer, to the cross and confess, “This is your God, O Israel, who brought you out of slavery and will lead you evermore. Come, believe, worship!’ Amen.”⁸

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⁸Ibid., 248.