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## Evangelical Review of Theology

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interpreting the Christian faith for contemporary  
living.*

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I have deliberately omitted discussing the role of white urban churches in South Africa for the following reasons: i) Most of these churches, while struggling with the challenge of the Christian gospel, are identified with the existing oppressive political structures. ii) From my observation they do not reflect a clear commitment to the transformation of our society. iii) On the whole their leadership reflects a state of political inertia and comfortability with the status quo. The other reason is that the revival of Christianity in South Africa will depend largely on the kind of creative initiative black Christians take. It is in this context that I believe there is a great potential for African urban churches to work towards the transformation of our society. I have not dealt with all aspects of the role of the African urban church, nor have I attempted to give a systematic treatment of various theological and sociological notions regarding the role of the church. What I have done is to give a rather general overview, a description of the nature of these churches as well as to offer a prescription of what they ought to be doing in the African urban situation, particularly in the context of the South African situation.

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# Luther and the One Church

Joachim Rogge

*Translated from German and printed with permission*

*This paper given by a Lutheran pastor from the German Democratic Republic at the European Evangelical Alliance Council meetings September 1983 in Bad Blankenburg, GDR seeks to show the whole Church p. indebtedness to Luther in defining the true as against the false Church and in making Christ alone the touchstone of all theology and of Church unity.*

(Editor)

Protestant Christians in the German Democratic Republic (GDR), and others too, have been and are being reminded by their marxist discussion partners of the attention that deserves to be given to Luther's understanding of the Church. That is astonishing. At this point we are right at the heart of the reformer's work, because we cannot interpret and discuss Luther's concept of the Church as just one doctrine among others. A working-party of social scientists from the GDR Academy of Sciences and from universities, set up on the instigation of the official state authorities, have published 'Theses on Martin Luther, on the occasion of the 500th anniversary of his birth'<sup>1</sup>, and in the very first thesis they write: In the late Middle Ages the Church could 'only be shaken from within, through a fundamental attack on its dogmatic foundations. The decisive thrust came therefore not, as educated contemporaries expected, from the humanists and their

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<sup>1</sup> *Theses on Luther*. Published by authority of the German Democratic Republic on the occasion of the Quincentenary of Luther's birth, 1983 by the Central Institute for History of the Academy of Sciences of the German Democratic Republic. 1981, 7.

world-famous leader Erasmus of Rotterdam, but from Martin Luther, until then an almost unknown monk. He led the attack and through his new understanding of the relationship between God and man—the justification of man before God by faith alone—set up a new concept of the Church, which intellectually overcame the foundations of the old Church and called into question its whole structure and exercise of power. He combined his criticism of the Church, which was based on the Bible, with political, social and economic demands.’

## DOCTRINAL FOUNDATIONS

However one may understand the words ‘from within’, it is certainly a correct perception, and worthy of continuing note for us today, that Luther started neither from questions of structure, nor from problems [p. 101](#) of the division of power, nor from a desire for sociopolitical renewal—all these things were secondary and only became important later. His starting-point was the key question of the attitude of God to man and the attitude of man towards God. This relationship, which Luther recognized as the most vital and important in human life, seemed to him in the whole of the late medieval Church to be distorted and disturbed. What seemed to him decisive was not man seeking the way to God but rather God seeking the way to man, and from that the way to God and to other men could be opened. It was this direction, this movement that mattered for Luther.

From this fundamental consideration it follows that the reformer who pointed towards God’s coming to man in Christ, did not then attach a series of requirements for the founding of churches, nor did he lay down structures or set out immutable regulations. Luther was not the man for ecclesiological patterns or forms of order that were to be obligatory for everyone. He regarded it as important that the free run of God’s liberating grace should not be hindered by a profusion of human rules and regulations. And in this connection he came up relatively quickly against hierarchical orderings, forms of confession, indulgences and an extensive church calendar of saints and festivals. Luther wanted the simple Church, that should be completely free of God’s activity in Christ, whose divine foundation and constant renewal should be based on adherence to God’s word. He expresses that in numerous ways, for example that the Church is ‘a creature of the Gospel’.<sup>2</sup> In the Smalcaldic Articles, the great private confession that later attained the status of a fundamental writing on the faith, Luther asserts that the Church is not something static, not an institution with an unalterable form of order, but rather a process, as it were a process of hearing, whereby the speech linked with it is just as decisive as the organ of perception. In the 1537 article ‘On the Church’ we read: ‘We do not admit that they (the “papists”) are the Church; they are not, whether or not they wish to hear it, whatever they permit or forbid in the name of the Church; for praise God, a 7-year old child (7 is the lower limit of responsibility) knows what the Church is, namely the holy believers and those “who hear the voice of their shepherd” ([In. 10:3](#)); for children pray thus: “I believe in the one holy Christian [p. 102](#)

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<sup>2</sup> Hans Joachim Iwand: *Luthers Theologie* (The Theology of Luther). Edited by Johann Haar, Munich 1974, pp.241–249. In this connection see Karl Gerhard Steck: *Lehre und Kirche bei Luther*, (Doctrine and Church in Luther), Munich 1963 p.73 and throughout. Note Luther’s phrase: ‘The Church is daughter of the Word, born from the Word, and is not the mother of the Word’. W.A. 42.334. (*Weimarer Ausgabe*, the definitive edition of Luther’s Works, published Leipzig 1883—).

Church".<sup>3</sup> And in the light of the church situation of his time Luther immediately puts into concrete form one idea within that, in order to illustrate the interruption of the process of hearing by 'human regulation':<sup>4</sup> 'his holiness does not consist in choir robes, in tonsures, long vestments and their other ceremonies that they erected over and above the Holy Scriptures, but rather in God's word and in right belief.'<sup>5</sup>

## MARKS OF THE CHURCH

After the above mentioned quotation Luther lays down criteria for what the Church is, how it comes into existence and being and what hinders it. He does not reject and delimit with a view to setting up new groupings and layers; rather, they bring freedom and liberation for the essential, that is for the recognition of the Pauline assertion that faith comes from preaching.<sup>6</sup> So Luther does not narrow the space for the shaping of the Church, he opens it up, he releases a biblically obedient Christianity into the freedom of protestant tradition-forming without the claim to be laying down obligatory organizational, e.g. liturgical, requirements in the manner of the Wittenberg practice.<sup>7</sup> In Luther's understanding difficulties in forming the Church only arise where the emphasis is no longer on hearing but where instead decrees are laid down based on ecclesiastical, ethnic, economic or other considerations with the intention that they should be normative for all. The 'satis est' in *Confessio Augustana* VII (which Luther did not formulate but which he approved) defines the community of saints, the unity of the Church, in terms of extremely few but utterly decisive characteristics, namely first, the preaching of the Gospel according to a right understanding, and second, the administration of the sacraments in accordance with God's word.<sup>8</sup>

The vast sphere of human traditions has been established by men, and for the sake of the *unitas ecclesiae* it can be regarded as continually dispensable. An immobile Church that is constantly reaffirming p. 103 itself finds no affirmation in Luther's thinking. On the contrary: the Church must be shaped in such a way as to create the greatest possible freedom for the preaching and hearing of the word of God. There can therefore never be a church system that is in itself sacrosanct, but rather a steadfast and brotherly moving together of Christians from different structures for the sake of a unified witness to Christ before the world.

The above train of thought gives rise to a series of reflections that could be crucial for future endeavours towards the one Church and towards a more visible fellowship among churches. Without exception they are liberating rather than encumbering. The Roman Catholic theologian Otto Hermann Pesch from Hamburg in a paper on 'Luther and the Church' at the 6th International Congress on Luther Research held in Erfurt in 1983, pointed out unambiguously that the Lutheran (state) churches could hardly

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<sup>3</sup> *Die Bekenntnisschriften der evangelisch-lutherischen Kirche* (The Confessional Writings of the Evangelical Lutheran Church). Edited in the commemorative year of the Augsburg Confession 1930. Second improved edition, Göttingen 1955, 459f.

<sup>4</sup> *loc. cit.* (book just quoted) p.461

<sup>5</sup> *loc. cit.* p.460

<sup>6</sup> Romans. 10.17

<sup>7</sup> In this connection see The Preface to the German Mass, 1526, W.A. 19.73. 1–4.

<sup>8</sup> As note 3, *Confessional Writings* p.61

‘regard themselves as a direct realization of Luther’s vision of the Church.’<sup>9</sup> Luther cannot automatically be appealed to by a ‘“Lutheran” Church that arose juridically on the basis of Luther’s writings on the faith.’ Such a Church ‘bears the spiritual and theological stamp of Luther’s theology with, in addition, new theological influences from within the Reformation’. It has according to Pesch ‘transposed the medieval “Corpus Christianum” into the framework of a territorial Church’. It can be said that ‘theologically only since the Enlightenment and juridically (if at all) only since 1918’ has it been in a position ‘to structure itself on the basis of theological arguments alone without any political considerations’.<sup>10</sup> Here too Luther does not prescribe; he opens. Pesch takes account of this thought by means of a negative sentence, but one which can have a productive and activating effect: ‘It was not theological reasons or counter-reasons but rather constitutional, canonical and ecclesiopolitical realities that prevented Luther from bringing about a church reform according to his own understanding of it, and that means specifically bringing about the changes in the practice of piety which on the basis of his theological insights were necessary.’<sup>11</sup>

## TRUE AND FALSE CHURCH

Luther, the reformer, thus does not define the renewing of the Church; **P. 104** he had no firmly delineated pattern of church doctrine or church order, and so he allows us ourselves, as we reflect upon his criteria for the Church, to be church reformers.

Luther believed in the Church. The Church finds expression in the preaching of the Gospel and the administration of the sacraments. As a credal Church it is to that extent also a visible Church that needs structures, structures however that do not have their own autonomous existence but are always flexible in order to do justice to the work of the Church in changing situations. Pesch is totally right in his interpretation of Luther’s understanding of the unity of the Church when he says: ‘For Luther the unity of the Church was always the given unity of the community of faith, which could neither be contrived nor destroyed nor recreated. In the light of Luther, therefore, the fragmentation that has arisen can also be seen today for what it was then: canonical and ecclesiopolitical division on the basis of theological propositions that for the present were irreconcilable but that did not nullify the fundamental unity of the body, albeit at the cost of the thesis relating to the intermingling of the true and false Church.’<sup>12</sup>

The last thought does, to be sure, need an addition as far as the papal Church at the time of the Reformation is concerned. Luther was very certain that he could here distinguish clearly between the true and the false Church. In ‘*Against Hanswurst*’, written in 1541, he calls the old papal Church the new false Church.<sup>13</sup> Luther is firmly convinced that he neither introduced nor taught anything new. He believed himself to be in the old true Church on the basis of the list of criteria set out in his introduction. He is consistent,

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<sup>9</sup> Unpublished paper p.8

<sup>10</sup> As Note 9. Unpublished paper.

<sup>11</sup> As quoted [p.11](#)

<sup>12</sup> As quoted [p.17](#)

<sup>13</sup> W.A. 51.477.24. In this connection compare J. Rogge: *Reformation als Problem und bleibende Aufgabe der Kirchen*, (Reformation as the Problem and continuing Task of the Church), in *Erbe und Verpflichtung. Reformationsgedenkenbuch* (Inheritance and Obligation. A Commemorative Book of the Reformation). Edited by F. Lau, Berlin. 1967. pp.98–105.

if not harsh, in denying the papal Church the title 'Church'.<sup>14</sup> 'When Luther hears that *he* has fallen away from the Church, he can only understand that in the sense that he has fallen "from the non-true Church".<sup>15</sup> It all hinges on the point where one can show which is the true Church. As long as nothing can be shown, it would be futile for one part of the Church to pride itself and to dismiss another as heretical. At a time of attempted ecumenical dialogue one may regret the sharpness of Luther's statements. However, we are not [p. 105](#) primarily concerned with the historical rectification of reproaches that were being exchanged between both sides, but rather of examining the yardstick from which Luther came to his damnations. Whether or not he was unjust in applying his criteria to the condition of the Roman Church of his time is only of secondary interest for a definition of the reforming elements themselves.'<sup>16</sup>

## CONCEALMENT AND VISIBILITY

From the foregoing we can see that only in a very limited sense is Luther a forerunner of the ecumenical movement as we understand it today. However, from his understanding of the Church based on the Word of God there arose in stark contrast to the Roman Church throughout the preceding centuries a multiplicity of churches, of territorial and minority churches, whose paths for the most part later led them to the position of Free Churches. Basically the separating churches derive their various paths from different interpretations of the Word of God. The Baptist churches have an understanding of baptism that differs from that of the larger churches, the Methodist churches have their long history with the larger churches in relation to divergent views on the practice of piety incorporating a number of individual theological implications.

So far Free Churches throughout the world are only very loosely amalgamated, and like the territorial churches they must ask themselves whether traditional non-theological factors have proved more decisive in their separation than real and genuine controversies over the understanding on the Word. If it is true that a differing understanding of the Word of God divided protestant churches for over half a millennium, then there is no other way than for the Way of God to bring them together again. The scope for church-dividing diastasis has now shrunk, particularly as, for instance, there is much baptist thought contending for adult baptism present within the doctrinal forms of the larger churches.

It remains to be seen whether the indirect initiator of so many different protestant denominations must continue to be the author of different paths and the divider of the Church. The decisive criteria in and for Luther's understanding of the Church bind together and permit the umbrella for a common existence as the Church to be both broad and wide. A common understanding of the Church is endangered by a [p. 106](#) spiritualism that departs from the Word of God with its outward dimension, or by a concern with ecclesiastical structures in a Church that seeks to affirm the autonomy of its own offices. If the spirits or offices thus departing from the Word of God claim their own unique validity, then they must be contradicted not only from Luther but from the very Word of God itself. The Church umbrella cannot be so wide that it has no borders at all. The constant struggle for the right criteria here will go hand in hand with the unceasing and indispensable process of interpreting the Holy Scriptures. The tension

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<sup>14</sup> As above [p.105](#)

<sup>15</sup> W.A. 51.477.24.

<sup>16</sup> J. Rogge. Work quoted, p.105



between the visibility and the concealment of the Church must, with Luther, continue to be affirmed. He declared quite succinctly: The Church is concealed, the saints are concealed ('abscondita est ecclesia, latent sancti').<sup>17</sup> In perhaps his most significant later writing on the question of the Church Luther can talk of the blind word Church, but this is only after he had spoken in 1539 of a child's belief in the holy people of God. He writes: 'And if in the Children's Creed such words were used as: I believe in one holy Christian people, then all the misery that has spread through this blind, obscure word (Church) could easily have been avoided. For the words "holy Christian people" would clearly and powerfully have brought with them both understanding and discernment as to what is the Church and what is not the Church. For whoever would have heard these words, holy Church people, would quickly have been able to discern: The Pope is no people, much less a holy Christian people'.<sup>18</sup>

## CHURCH AS THE PEOPLE OF GOD

Luther understood the Church as people of God 'in whom Christ lives, works and reigns through redemption, through grace and the forgiveness of sins, through the daily cleansing of sins and renewal of life, that should not remain in sins but should lead a new life in all good works, and not in old evil works, as the Ten Commandments or two tables of Moses demand.'<sup>19</sup> Here is everything together: a right distinction between Law and Gospel, the sanctification of the Christian as a gift of the Holy Spirit and justification as a gift of God. All this happens in the place where Christ works and reigns, that is the Church, which might better be called the people of God. There are not two people of God, in the one Church both justification and sanctification take place! **P. 107**

Luther speaks a great deal about sanctification or sanctity; for the Holy Spirit is active, primarily in 'giving people faith in Christ and sanctifying them thereby, [Acts 15](#),<sup>20</sup> that is, he renews our heart, soul, body, work and being, and he writes God's commandments not on tables of stone but on hearts of flesh ...'<sup>21</sup>

So both becoming and being the Church is a God-given, all-embracing, life-giving activity which at best tolerates regulations in so far as they are of service, but naturally subjects them to constant scrutiny. The same applies to persons who serve the life-giving activity among the people of God, that they should not have a hampering effect by assuming a self-affirming office as 'those who wish to remain',<sup>22</sup> as Luther affirmed in his exegesis of the Psalms as early as 1519–21. Church pomp, fasts, worldly affairs must be dissolved, to make space in the Church for the office of the Word and for prayer in accordance with the example of the apostles. 'Offices and sacraments always remain in the Church, though the people may change daily. Only such persons should be called and installed who can administer them, thus they will most certainly continue to be

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<sup>17</sup> W.A. 18.652.23

<sup>18</sup> *On the Councils and the Churches*, W.A. 50.625. 3–10. On the whole problem see: Joseph Vercruysse *Fidelis Populus* (The Faithful People) Wiesbaden. 1968.

<sup>19</sup> As above [24–29](#)

<sup>20</sup> Acts. 15.9

<sup>21</sup> W.A. 50.626. 16–18

<sup>22</sup> W.A. 5.337. 2–7; W.A. 50.516. 1–5

exercised ...'<sup>23</sup> Faith and sacrament should not 'be based on the person, be he godly or evil, consecrated or unconsecrated, called or an impostor, the devil or his mother, but rather on Christ, on his word, on his office, on his command and ordinance ...' The aim and intention of these robust formulations is evident: Church activity is the working of the Word, all orders of office and service are subordinate to that. The preaching of the Gospel and baptism are entrusted to man but are not in his gift.

## CHRIST ALONE—KEY TO UNITY

The Norwegian Reformation historian Inge Lonning, in a contribution prepared for the 6th International Congress on Luther Research, draws the following conclusion from the above considerations: 'This approach should not be taken to mean that the essential unity of the Church is an uncontested fact or a basically unassailable ideal. The Church is not a platonic state. Unity would rather be seen (so too should the Gospel that brings it about) as a unity that is constantly under threat from the Church's enemies. Danger does not threaten so **P. 108** much from without, e.g. from the multiplicity of organizationally fragmented denominational groupings—the Church's unity was in any case never of an organizational kind—but rather from an intrusion arising from within, or other elements into the truth of the Gospel. There lies the permanent ecumenical problem, that is the Church's problem with its own identity.'<sup>24</sup>

Much remains controversial. There will never be some satisfying description of the Church that will find universal acceptance. Luther knows that, but nevertheless he is hopeful, indeed full of confidence, in regard to the marks of the Church, the maintenance and continuity of the Church. In a sermon in 1537 on [John 1:8](#) Luther concentrates on the centrality of Christ, from whom everything derives and to whom all is directed. He affirms what unites us prior to any individual reflection and also what can continue to bring us together in a greater outworking of common fellowship than heretofore: 'Although the Christian Church be dispersed among all the peoples of the world, from east to west and from north to south, she must be firmly united in this point, that she acknowledges and adheres to Christ alone as her light and that she knows and preaches Christ alone, as we, praise God, are doing here, conforming our whole teaching, writings and sermons to that. Reason may raise high its light and boast of it, and it may indeed be learned in worldly and temporal matters. But let it under no circumstances thus climb into heaven, nor should one seek reason's counsel in matters pertaining to salvation. For in this respect the world and reason are totally blind. They will always remain in darkness and in all eternity will never shed light. The sole light is Christ alone, he can and will counsel and help us.'

'If that were to happen, and we were to adhere steadfastly to that belief in Christ alone, then (all) Christians everywhere in the world would have this same perception, doctrine and faith and would teach and preach the same. As we here are thus minded, so too would our brethren be who live in the Orient. If someone were to come here from Babylon and were to hear our lectures or sermons, he would say: I too believe as you teach; I adhere to the only light, Christ. And he would acknowledge that we preach of the one light, Christ. And if I were to go to Turkey and heard a Christian speaking from Scripture about Christian doctrine and belief, I too would then say: That is also my firm

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<sup>23</sup> W.A. 38.241. 6–21

<sup>24</sup> *Das blinde Wort und die verborgene Wirklichkeit* (Blind Word and Hidden Reality). Suggestions on the Theme Luther and the Church. Unpublished paper p.7



belief. So we are all named Christians after our Lord Christ, so [p. 109](#) that, in accordance with our name, we should know that he alone is our light, life, path, hope and salvation etc. Others can be called what they like: they are no light, they are nothing but darkness. If I were to put into one heap all those who like to call themselves lights, they would be revealed as nothing but will-o'-the-wisps or sprites, who are only seen at night and so lead a person that he finally falls into water and drowns or otherwise perishes in stone-quarries or lime-pits.'<sup>25</sup>

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## Counsel for Christ's Under-Shepherds: An Exposition of 1 Peter 5:1-4

D. Edmond Hiebert

*Reprinted from Bibliotheca Sacra, Oct-Dec 1982 with permission.*

*This exposition is a good example of western biblical scholarship and is a model in exegesis for all preachers. However, no attempt is made to interpret the passage for the contemporary Church witnessing under the pressure of secular materialism or oppression and persecution from hostile political and religious powers. Preachers in the Third World would want to insist that identification and obedience in relating the text to their context is fundamental to the Word preached.*

(Editor)

Therefore, I exhort the elders among you, as your fellow-elder and witness of the sufferings of Christ, and a partaker also of the glory that is to be revealed, shepherd the flock of God among you, not under compulsion, but voluntarily, according to the will of God; and not for sordid gain, but with eagerness; nor yet as lording it over those allotted to your charge, but proving to be examples to the flock. And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory ([1 Pet. 5:1-4](#), NASB).

In these four verses Peter offers loving counsel to the leaders of the afflicted believers living in five Roman provinces in what is today called Asia Minor. They constitute the first section of the concluding paragraph ([5:1-11](#)) of this practical epistle.

The opening "Therefore" () indicates a logical thought connection with what has gone before. This particle is omitted in the Textus Receptus, perhaps because this concluding paragraph of the epistle proper does not seem to be an obvious deduction from what has just been said, as "therefore" seemingly suggests. If it is omitted, [5:1-11](#) may be viewed as an appropriate summary of the author's ethical appeals to his readers.

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<sup>25</sup> W.A. 46.587. 8-37. With many texts on the theme of Luther's theology of the Church, collated and translated into modern German by Hermann Kunst, with notes. *Martin Luther und die Kirche*, (Martin Luther and the Church). Stuttgart 1971. p.125f.