

Particular, Universal, Spiritual: Understanding the Church by Drawing on Martin Luther

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The Neoplatonic burden

Traditionally, Lutheran theology has distinguished between the visible and invisible church. This distinction belongs to the tradition and not to the Holy Scripture and is therefore not strictly necessary. While we could do without, it is of course not merely random and may be helpful, but also misleading. It depends on what use we make of this difference.

The problem with distinguishing between the visible and invisible church is its inherited Neoplatonic burden: if it is understood as a separation of two "worlds," if the visible and the invisible are compared with one another (in the sense that the "really" real is invisible, like the highest idea) and if one asks how the visible is in the invisible. If the really real is invisible, then what is visible is a mere derivation or at best acceptable as a mirror image, and to be regarded as being ontologically inferior. For our understanding of the church, the Neoplatonic model poses a problem rather than providing a solution. It operates with a "world behind our world"—a model that can easily be criticized—and it provokes the unrealizable desire for a church behind the actual churches.

The Neoplatonic paradigm bewitches theological understanding in that it focuses on the question of how the invisible can be behind the visible, and how the eternal can be within time. The phenomena of churches—the actual churches we experience and live in—are then not relevant in their own right. They are perceived only as manifestations of a secret reality of the church which lies behind them.

For a clear understanding of the church we therefore need an hermeneutical shift in Protestant ecclesiology: We have to orient our understanding toward the phenomena, not a metaphysical and dual-

istic ontology of "the one church behind the many churches." Church is "phenomenal" and shows itself. It is with this insight that we must begin in ecclesiology. Assuming the invisible church to lie behind the phenomena would be to betray the churches, which are manifest. Even the invisible church "must appear," in whatever manner.

With reference to Luther's ecclesiology, this poses the question of how to relate the *ecclesia spiritualis*, *universalis*, and *particularis* (the spiritual, universal and particular church) to one another. The answer to this question reveals the soteriological and eschatological redefinition of the church in Protestant theology in contrast to the Roman tradition, and may offer new perspectives for the understanding of a "universal" ecumenism in a relationship to the *ecclesia spiritualis* and *ecclesiae particulares*.

A critique of Identity

In the face of claims to the contrary by the Bishop of Rome, who tended toward ecclesiological fantasies of omnipotence, for Luther it was fundamental to disempower the soteriological relevance of the church of his time. In itself, a church is impotent in respect of salvation so that no bishop (or any other office) can claim to represent the soteriological power of the church. Such a disempowerment of the church is theologically justified, because the church is not identical with Christ, nor with the Holy Spirit, or the kingdom of God, since human work cannot be identical with God's work. Christ and his salvific work are external to the church and the church is passive in respect to Christ's exclusive soteriological work. In traditional terms, we could formulate this as follows: the church is purely passive in respect to God (*mere passive coram Deo*) and what God is doing.

The church is neither analogous with Christ, nor Christ's representative and it does not bring forth salvation. In Reformation terms, the church is chiefly part of the world, a worldly institution. Moreover, as a body of believers, it is theologically qualified as a sinner.¹

We would produce a theological monstrosity or run into ecclesiological absolutism if we were to understand the so-called visible church

¹ "Non est tam magna peccatrix ut Christiana ecclesia. Quomodo haec est Sancta et peccatrix? Credit remissionem peccatorum et dicit: 'debita dimitte.' Hoc nemo dicit, nisi qui sit sanctus" (Martin Luther, "Sermon of 9 April 1531," WA 34/1, 276, 7-9).

as being identical with the invisible church—the visible representing the invisible. This would exaggerate the importance of the church as a necessary and indeed sufficient means of salvation, if not salvation itself. The church is neither the kingdom of God nor identical with God's presence on earth. This would not only constitute a Babylonian captivity of God, but also presuppose a representational theory of the church:² the church representing God and God's kingdom on earth. This would conform to a certain model of political theology, a model that sees the ruler and the nation state as God's representative. The representational model is strengthened by making use of the ecclesiological metaphor of the church as the "body of Christ" in the sense of claiming Christ and the church as being identical.³

To guard against these tendencies, Luther (and Lutheran tradition) use very different distinctions: the true and false church; the church and Christendom; the spiritual and physical church and the invisible and visible church; the hidden and manifest as well as the spiritual, universal and particular church.⁴ In order to avoid dwelling solely on attempts to explain these distinctions, we will reduce the level of complexity:

- The church is to be conceived of in a differentiated way along polemic, profane and pneumatological lines
- In my view, the distinction most relevant to ecumenism is that of the *ecclesia spiritualis*, *universalis* and *particularis*
- Finally, an eschatological distinction is necessary to justify the distinction between a spiritual, a universal and a particular church systematically.

² Cf. Stephan Schaebe, *Stellvertretung: Begriffsgeschichtliche Studien zur Soteriologie* (Tübingen: Mohr/Siebeck, 2004).

³ At best, this leads to an ecclesiological version of anhypostasia and enhypostasia: the church is anhypostatic with regard to the external provider of its identity. But does the church enhypostatize in the identity of Christ? Is it in Christ as we are in it? Indeed not, otherwise the relationship between the church and Christ would be understood as a *unio hypostatica*—thus insinuating the incarnation of Christ in the church—as if Christ and the church were one ("supernatural") person. This identification of the church with Christ would be a theological monstrosity. Cf. a much more differentiated view, Hans-Peter Grosshans, *Die Kirche—Irdischer Raum der Wahrheit des Evangeliums* (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2003), pp. 70-84.

⁴ Cf. Gudrun Neebe, *Apostolische Kirche: Grundunterscheidungen an Luthers Kirchenbegriff unter besonderer Berücksichtigung seiner Lehre von den notae ecclesiae* (Berlin/New York: De Gruyter, 1997).

According to Luther, what is the church and how does it show itself?

Polemics: Antichrist and beast

"The church is a Babylonian beast," remarked Martin Luther with regard to the pre-Reformation Western church; this phrase applies to any church understanding itself in this manner. The beast is "Babylonian" in that the sinner is touted as a savior, the fallible church is touted as a necessary (or even sufficient) mode of salvation. The result would not be a legitimate analogy of the church as Jesus Christ, but rather an "anti-Christian," illegitimate analogy in which the church—if not substituted for Christ—competes with him, as if the church were salvific and without sin—and not Christ alone.

A church that claims for its own the "visible unity" of the "invisible and visible" church is stricken with hamartiological blindness and represents a glorious ecclesiology, not recognizing that, as human work, the church is at best *simul iustus et peccator*, i.e., at the same time righteous and a sinner.

Whether human work (or institutions) can be justified is questionable. Can means (to an end) be justified in this soteriological sense? In other words, can institutions such as churches, banks, states, etc. be justified? Since they are certainly able to sin, they are surely in need of justification. But, if one transposes the joyful exchange (*admirabile commercium*) onto the relationship between Christ and the church, things begin to be problematic. The church, as a collective, could then become an intermediary agency of salvation between Christ and Christians. The joyous exchange could then turn into an unholy alliance.

It follows from the difference between Christ and church and between salvation and church that the celebration of mass cannot be a "redemptive or salvific work."⁶ Thus the celebration of mass does not bring about salvation by itself. In accordance with the critique of a soteriological over-interpretation of the church's actions, this difference between Christ and church means that worship cannot be sacrificial, and that the Lord's Supper can therefore not be a eucharistic sacrifice.

⁶ In contrast to the view of mass as a good work, with which one understands oneself as providing a great service to the almighty God while in reality, we give Christ nothing in mass so that nobody gives God anything or does God any good, but instead takes and profits from the sermon and sacraments. Cf. Martin Luther, "Eyn sermon von dem newen Testament, das ist von der heyligen Messe (1520)," WA 6, 364, 14–27. Cf. Martin Luther, "Das Magnificat verdeutschet und ausgelegt (1521)," WA 7, 696, 34–36: For "no one yet serves God, but he lets him be his God who performs his work in him" (*niemand dienet aber got, denn wer yhn lessit setn got sein und seins werck in yhm wiroken*).

In correlation to this, the activity of the church is not a prolonged incarnation, just as its passivity is not a prolonged passion. Both of these interpretations would skew the difference between Christ and church. Eberhard Jüngel states that "the Christian worship lives from the death of Jesus Christ."⁶ In other words, it cannot itself repeatedly execute Christ's death as a sacrifice without dispersing its own basis of life. If one follows the metaphor of sacrifice in interpreting Jesus' death, this sacrifice is the end of all sacrifice "once and for all." That there are no further sacrifices to be made remains the Christological objection to any repetition or reenactment of the sacrifice, whether through martyrdom, the suffering of mystical life, or the life of the church.

Once the misunderstandings of theological absolutism and a glorious ecclesiology are excluded, the next step in the tradition of Luther's *theologia crucis* is to understand the church with reference to the theology of the cross—as a sort of *ecclesiologia crucis*. How can this be possible without implying a new problematical identification, in this case that of the crucified Christ with the similarly "suffering" church. The *ecce homo* would turn into an *ecce ecclesia*, as if the church as a body of martyred bodies were the prolongation of the passion of the crucified. The church's suffering is, however, not Christ's suffering.

The church does not carry out works of salvation. This phrase could be contradictory since the church does administer the sacraments. It is thus to be expected that the church is misunderstood as being sacramental: if the sacraments bring about salvation and the church administers the sacraments, is the church not (or even the church "administration") also contributing to salvation by its very nature?

Yet these works of the church are not its own works. The church is only an indispensable condition for God's presence in these works.⁷ Or, phrased differently, the church provides the elements that only become sacramental through God's Word, and not through the church's own word and administration.

The church's activity and passivity are thus double coded: as the work and suffering of the church, it is human work with all its weaknesses and suffering, but both are places for God's presence and work. The

⁶ Eberhard Jüngel, "Der evangelisch verstandene Gottesdienst," in Eberhard Jüngel, *Wertlose Wahrheit. Zur Identität und Relevanz des christlichen Glaubens. Theologische Erörterungen III* (Tübingen: Mohr/Siebeck, 2003), pp. 283–310, here p. 306.

⁷ This necessity is questionable. Is God's work dependent on a necessary condition, and could it be the church's agency?

church's activities and the passions lead to salvation only inasmuch as God is active in them. These church's works and sufferings are thus not "actions," but events that go beyond the logic of action; no one involved is an "autonomous subject" of an action, but is a participating, responding individual within the framework of an event.

Profane: Church as means to an end

The church is merely a responsible means to an end, a means to the administration of Word and sacrament. It is thus not a means unto itself, but the end is *extra ecclesiam*, beyond the church. It is and always has been a fallible human creation. Its activity was thus functionally reduced in the Reformation—without the end sanctifying the means and without the end declaring all means to be "unholy" and thus doing without all means or declaring it to be a false form of institutionalization. In contrast to the Roman interpretation of the church, the end does not sanctify the means and in contrast to a spiritualistic interpretation of the church, the end does not render the means "unholy."

The church is thus to be critiqued from a theological point of view with regard to its aim and end, and from a profane point of view with regard to its humanity, service to life and the "professionalism" of its means and forms. This seemingly marginal and "external" dimension is its "core function." The church must ensure the best order possible for the extraordinary in the world, the administration of Word and sacrament.

This is the true place of the church's own activity, a place whose profane nature and professionalism are defined from the perspective of theology: to be as worldly, efficient and supportive of life as possible "for the sake of God." The entire institutional spectrum, from ecclesial architecture to ecclesial politics, is to be assessed from a profane perspective (in which profane organizational development is appropriate, but not a neoliberal market model). This aspect of the church is indeed human in origin and must therefore not be given a "higher" meaning. At best, this can serve as an example for other institutions inasmuch as the life of a community can be formed as efficiently and humanely as possible on the basis of faith. In this sense, the church can be thought of as the "light of this world."

The question that must be addressed is to what extent spiritual criteria apply here. Or, to paraphrase the words of the Austrian poet Karl Kraus, it certainly is not alone a question of the outer appearance of the

church. The lingerie also is important.⁸ Is the institutional order to be conceived of as an equivalent or as an analogy to faith? Should worldly appearance be the equivalent of the eschatological end and hope?

If one were to claim this, this analogy could have serious consequences. In political as well as theological terms one could then support a monarchical church order in the name of the kingdom of God, and vice-versa. The worldly can then be overestimated and exaggerated in theological terms. This could even lead to a state of *morbus oecumenicus* (ecumenical sickness) when, in spiritual terms, one attributes too much relevance to the office of bishop and misunderstands it with regard to historical succession. In the end, one could erroneously conclude that the invisible church has to be represented in visible unity through an *episcopus maximus*.

Nonetheless, the phenomenal appearance cannot completely depart from the "content," the aim of the means. Although the kingdom of God does not come to the world as the church institution, the profane means cannot be indifferent to or contradict their end. The end does not sanctify the means; but not all means are appropriate to the end.

The kingdom of God will surely not come about through force (although not without power); and surely not through injustice; and surely not "as a market in a market"; etc. Certain commonalities of the profane order are inappropriate for the institutional manifestations of faith. A life of faith is thus work within the forms of life of this world and work on these forms of life. Naively adopting the market model within the church (and the desire for spiritual success) can and should thus be open to profane and theological critique.

All of these indispensable yet ambivalent externalities are open to criticism, not in the name of a purely internal world but in that of another external one, the whence and whither of the church: from Christ to the fulfillment of the world in the kingdom of God. Christ and the fulfillment of the world in the kingdom of God are the eschatologically defined points where the church comes from and where it goes; they are the basis and the final limitation of the church.

The critique against giving too much soteriological relevance to the church as a supposed medium of salvation (*sacramentum*, as if it were

⁸ Cf. Karl Kraus, "Aphorismen. Sprüche und Widersprüche: Pro domo et mundo, Nachts," In Christian Wagenknecht, *Schriften*, vol. 8 (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1986), p. 24: "Es kommt gewiß nicht bloß auf das Äußere einer Frau an. Auch die Dessous sind wichtig." [It certainly is not alone a question of the outer appearance of a woman. The lingerie also is important]. Cf. Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (Paris: Carrington, 1908), pp. 34–36: "It is only shallow people who do not judge by appearances. The true mystery of the world is the visible, not the invisible."

or represented Christ) as well the diminishing of the sinful dimension of the church in claiming its being immaculate and sinless is rooted in this functional, non-sacramental definition of the church.

The church is not identical with that for which it is the means. The church is not the end. If, nevertheless, it (mis)understands itself as being identical with the end, if it claims to be that for which it is only a means to an end, then it becomes a pseudo-church—a poor illusion with a mere claim to true being.⁹ This exaggerates the importance of the church and plays down the importance of Christ, if it does not in fact compete with him.

The particular church (ecclesia particularis)

Even before the Reformation, the church existed as particular churches, in other words, the particular churches were not identical with the universal church. This non-identity of particular churches and the universal church is fundamental and irreducible. An identity (of the particular with the universal) would neither be possible nor desirable.

In Western Europe, twelfth- and thirteenth-century interpreters of Gratian, the fourth-century founder of Roman Catholic church law, saw the Roman church only as a particular church; only the universal church was infallible.¹⁰ The law of love (*lex caritatis*) was valid only for the universal church (*Res publica ... ecclesiastica una lege caritatis instituta*).¹¹ Claiming this universal Christian law for one's own legislation meant promoting oneself to be the director of and judge over all church bodies (*rector et iudex omnium ecclesiarum*), something that nobody—not even the highest bishop (*episcopus maximus*)—should or may do.¹²

How does one assess particularity from a theological perspective? Is it a sign of deficiency, or a mere lack of universality? A lack of spirit in contradiction to the unity of the Easter creed and Pentecost? The

⁹ Cf. Grosshans, *op. cit.* (note 3), p. 194. Grosshans refers to Karl Barth in another sense than expressed here.

¹⁰ Cf. Wilhelm Maurer, "Der ekklesiologische Ansatz der abendländischen Kirchenspaltung nach dem Verständnis Luthers," in *Fuldaer Hefte* 18 (Berlin/Hamburg: Lutherisches Verlagshaus, 1968), pp. 30-69, here p. 36.

¹¹ Cf. Johannes Heckel, *Lex caritatis, Eine juristische Untersuchung über das Recht in der Theologie Martin Luthers*, Heft 36 (Bayerische Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1953), p. 139; referring to WA 2, 617, 1ff.

¹² From comparative linguistics we can learn, that a universal language is neither possible nor desirable. In a similar way, it is impossible and undesirable to give up particular churches in favor of a universal church.

sickness of the church (*morbus ecclesiasticus*)? When a Protestant bishop declares that the division of the church is theologically not a point of pride and that it must be remedied, then this indicates a tendency toward institutional unity and visible identity. Does this indicate a "Vaticanization" of Protestantism?

The position referred to implies that the church's actual phenomenality in its plurality is perceived as an evil; phenomenality would then be held in low esteem in the name of higher unity. This seems to be a consequence of the Platonic paradigm, from unity through the ontologically inferior plurality back to the final unity. This judgment would be more of a theological Platonic sickness (*morbus platonicus*) than its Protestant upshot. Why and to which end should one bring together the particular churches into one universal church? In order to turn the universal church into the kingdom of God? Or because globalization is now fashionable also in ecclesiological terms? This would indicate a shift towards church fusion as was the economic ideal during the 1990s.

If one believes that the unity of the so-called invisible church must become visible in oneness, the danger is that one renders the invisible visible. Should this only apply to Christianity or does it extend to a unity with Judaism, or with all monotheistic religions or, in the end, with all religions? This would end in a religious Esperanto.

The universality of the ecclesia universalis in contrast to the ecclesia spiritualis

In contrast to the legally organized community (as a community of love)¹³ of the *ecclesia universalis*, the *ecclesia spiritualis* is the community of the faithful (*communio fidelium*). All those who are baptized are members of the legal community of the *ecclesia universalis*, while the *ecclesia spiritualis* "only" includes those who have baptismal grace "received in faith."¹⁴ This spiritual body¹⁵ appears in the order of worship as it otherwise would be a defunct particular church.

¹³ Cf. Maurer, *op. cit.* (note 10), p. 37.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Cf. Martin Luther, "To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation Concerning the Reform of the Christian Estate (1520)," in Helmut T. Lehmann, *Luther's Works*, vol. 44 (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1966), pp. 116ff., according to Maurer, *ibid.*, pp. 37f.

In contrast to (the former) Roman ecclesiology, in Protestant ecclesiology the legal order of the *ecclesia universalis* does not rule but serves the *ecclesia spiritualis*. The bishop of Rome, or any other office, therefore has no jurisdiction over Christendom; he does not rule, and would only turn himself into a *monstrum* should he wish to be *pontifex* and *imperator*.¹⁶ As the Roman bishop does not rule, the administrators of Word and sacrament are servants of the Word (*ministerium verbi*) and not "priests who are servants of sacrifice."¹⁷ The universal church has no earthly head, but its head is Christ alone.¹⁸ One consequence of this metaphor becomes clear in that all Christians are servants to an equal degree (in the sacrifice of prayer and in their work), and thus in a priesthood of all.¹⁹

No individual therefore has control over "central power" but the *ecclesia universalis* alone.²⁰ The church as a legal community is an historical figure, which includes (for example) the Greek, Russian, Indian and Hussite churches (as Luther used to say).²¹ This reveals a differentiated structure of the legal community, which can be divided into segments according to territory and class—during the Reformation through the *landesherrliche Kirchenregiment*, the state leadership of the church—but which derives its orientation, foundation and teleological structure from service to the Word and the community of love. Its unity is anchored in the unity of the true creed and its vitality in its service and its character as a community of love.

The church is thus differentiated as *ecclesia universalis* and *spiritualis* but is not "spiritualized" since the spiritual church must appear within the particular churches and show them to be part of the

¹⁶ Cf. Martin Luther, "Ad dialogum Silvestri Prieratis de potestate papae responsio (1518)," WA 1, 677, 29ff. and 678, 1ff.

¹⁷ "Concilium Tridentinum, Sess. XXII, Doctrina de ss. Missae sacrificio, 1562, Caput 2," in Heinrich Denzinger/Peter Hünermann, *Enchiridion symbolorum definitionum et declarationum de rebus fidei et morum: Kompendium der Glaubensbekenntnisse und kirchlichen Lehrentscheidungen*, Lateinisch-Deutsch (Freiburg i.Br.: Herder, 1991), no. 1743: "Una enim eademque est hostia, idem nunc offerens sacerdotum ministerio, qui se ipsum tunc in cruce obtulit, sola offerendi ratione diversa" [For the victim is one and the same, the same now offering by the ministry of priests, who then offered Himself on the cross, the manner alone of offering being different]. For an English translation of the "Doctrine on the Sacrifice of the Mass of the Council of Trent (1562)," see <http://history.hanover.edu/texts/trent/ct22.html>.

¹⁸ This head/body metaphor remains problematic.

¹⁹ Cf. Martin Luther, "Resolutio Lutheriana super propositione XIII. de potestate papae (1519)," WA 2, p. 223, 34ff. Cf. Jüngel, *op. cit.* (note 6), p. 43.

²⁰ Cf. Maurer, *op. cit.* (note 10), pp. 40-41.

²¹ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 42.

universal church—otherwise these segments would be dead (in opposition to spiritualists). On the other hand, the *ecclesia universalis* is never identical with an *ecclesia particularis*—there appears a clear non-identity. During the Reformation this also stood in opposition to the so-called spiritualists who identified the *ecclesia spiritualis* with one *ecclesia particularis*.

The real presence of the *ecclesia spiritualis* in the proclaimed Word and the sacraments in the particular churches may possibly be defined similar to Christ's presence in the Lord's Supper: *non extra usum*. This means that only in the use of the Word (*usus verbi*) and the sacraments the particular church can hope, with certainty, to be filled with the real presence of the Spirit. This has the critical flip side that churches that do not make use of the Word wilt away and can only expect a real absence of the Spirit. When, for example, a church applies its means chiefly to preserve itself and therefore eliminates pastoral positions until as few as feasibly possible remain, the church then faces the threat of breaking apart.²²

The ecclesia spiritualis in contrast to the ecclesia universalis

Is the spiritually existing church (*ecclesia spiritualis*)²³ the essence of the universal church (*ecclesia universalis*) as articulated in article III of the Apostles' Creed that defines the church as the "communion of saints"?²⁴

"This communion and congregation includes all those who live in true faith, hope and love, so that the essence, life and nature of Christianity are not a physical congregation, but a congregation of the hearts in one faith."²⁵ It is clear

²² Furthermore, if a church believes that it can deem the *usus verbi* as useless or even dispensable (and maintains a strict doctrine or reduces it to a Bible school), this will also result in the dissolution of the particular church.

²³ Cf. Martin Luther, "Sermo de virtute excommunicationis," WA 1, 639, 2-6: "*Est autem fidelium communio duplex: una interna et spiritualis, aliena externa et corporalis. Spiritualis est una fides, spes, charitas in deum. Corporalis est participatio eorum sacramentorum, id est signorum fidei, spei charitatis, quas tamen ulterius extenditur usque ad communionem rerum, usus, colloqui, habitationis aliarumque corporaliu[m] conversationum.*" Cf. Neebe, *op. cit.* (note 4), pp. 34ff. Cf. Martin Luther, "Von dem Papsithum zu Rom wider den hochberühmten Romanisten zu Leipzig (1520)," WA 6, 296, 7-11: "*die natürlich, eygentlich, rechte, wesentliche Christenheit siehe ym geiste, unnd in keinem eusserlichenn ding, wie das mag genennet werdenn. Dan alle ander ding mag haben etn unchristen, die yhn auch nyimmer mehr einen Christenn machen, aussagenommen den rechten glauben, der allein Christenn macht.*" Cf. Neebe, *op. cit.* (note 4), p. 44.

²⁴ Cf. Maurer, *op. cit.* (note 10), p. 37.

²⁵ Martin Luther, "Von dem Papsithum," WA 6, 292, 37ff. (ad Eph 4:6): "*Dies Gemeine oder Sammlung heißet aller der, die im rechten Glauben, Hoffnung und Liebe leben, also daß der*

that the territorially, nationally and linguistically diverse particular churches are united in the Spirit and, as a result, in faith. "The *ecclesia universalis*' spiritual life is in the *ecclesia spiritualis*," as Maurer phrased it.²⁶

The universal church consists of an invariably plural legal and creedal community of all particular churches. This could be an ecumenical council of churches while at the same time being a critical regulator with which the World Council of Churches (WCC) can never be identical. The spiritual church is the community of faith which is to be distinguished from any given institution. The spiritual church is not "anti-institutional" but has its own particular appearance in the world: it appears in the fulfillment of Word and sacrament.

The life of the universal church is the community of love, which is formed through the spirit of the community of faith (*ecclesia spiritualis*). This could be a useful model. Is the plurality of particular churches identical with the universal church and the WCC thus an excellent candidate to administer the universal church, or does the WCC even represent the universal church? Would this imply identifying the spiritual church with a worldly institution? One can avoid such identification if one understands the particular churches and the universal church as thresholds within the possibilities for being church on earth, which together contrast with the spiritual church as a pneumatological reality, just as God's work contrasts with human achievement.

This explanation is, however, debatable. Luther himself states that "Where faith is, there is the church; where the church is, there is the bride of Christ; where the bride of Christ is, there is everything, which belongs to him. This faith has everything that follows out of faith: the office of keys, the sacraments, the power and everything else."²⁷ Would this not transfer the *communio* of the "joyful exchange" between Christ and the faithful Christian to the church, and the church to the mystical bride of Christ?

An explanation is thus needed for how to maintain the Christological and pneumatological difference between the *ecclesia universalis* and *ecclesia spiritualis*. If the church is misunderstood as today's figure of the crucified and risen Christ and, if at the same time, it is misunderstood

Christenheit Wesen, Leben und Natur sei nit leiblich Versammlung, sondern ein Versammlung der Herzen in einem Glauben." Cf. *ibid.*, p. 46.

²⁶ Maurer, *op. cit.* (note 10), pp. 46f.

²⁷ Martin Luther, "Resolutio Lutheriana," WA 1, 208, 26ff.: "Ubi autem fides, ibi ecclesia; ubi ecclesia, ibi sponsa Christi; ubi sponsa Christi, ibi omnia, quae sunt sponsi. Haec fides omnia secum habet, quae ad fidem sequuntur, claves, sacramenta, potestatem et omnia alia."

as a means of salvation, as if the church were the eucharistic bread, it would seem that we confuse it with the Holy Spirit.

In this regard, we must recall that the church (as *ecclesia spiritualis*) is also a creature of the Word (*creatura verbi*), and is not itself the Word (let alone the first Word), nor is the Word "internal" to the church. The Word (as Spirit) in the church comes from outside us (*extra nos*) and we are totally passive to it (*mere passive*).²⁸

An eschatological difference

The tendency towards indifference (and false identity) between the church as a spiritual body on the one hand, and the particular churches and the universal church on the other, can be countered with an eschatological distinction anchored in the *ecclesia spiritualis*.

The critique of the Roman Catholic Church from the perspective of positivity brought a dynamic into Luther's ecclesiology that was not only later retracted but also duly criticized in Lutheranism. Werner Elert explained that Luther "spiritualized" the definition of the church as *ecclesia spiritualis* to such an extent that, in the end, it was no longer effective as a formative "energy of history."²⁹

Just as no particular church is identical with the universal church (not even as a generalization) the spiritual reality of the church remains external to the universal church. In its temporal relation to the universal church and the particular churches the spiritual reality of the church withdraws from identification while approaching them to realize itself in them.³⁰

The spiritually existing church is the church from an eschatological perspective and therefore promise and hope for the communion of saints or a "matter of faith" in the one holy, catholic and apostolic church. As a pneumatologically defined concept of church it is neither institutional nor anti-institutional, but the dynamics and the critical criterion for all ecclesial institutions. One can refer to the stabilization of the universal

²⁸ This confusion is not surprising when the church "administers" Word and sacrament, thus representing the order and fulfillment of Word and sacrament.

²⁹ Cf. Werner Elert, *Morphologie des Luthertums*, vol. 1 (Munich: Beck, 1965), pp. 226-227; cf. Paul Althaus, *Die Theologie Martin Luthers* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 1980), p. 254. Cf. for the entire discussion, Konrad Hammann, *Ecclesia spiritualis. Luthers Kirchenverständnis in den Kontroversen mit Augustin von Alveldt und Ambrosius Catharinus* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1989).

³⁰ Cf. Grosshans, *op. cit.* (note 3), p. 80: "Das Sein der Kirche ist ein ihr selbst entzogenes Geschehen, das an ihr geschieht und für das sie sich immer offen halten muß, wenn sie Kirche sein will."

church through the legal community as a counterpart to the labilization through the faith community of the spiritually existing church.

To what extent does the *ecclesia spiritualis* exist as a (visible) phenomenon? How does it appear and depict itself in the world? Does the community of the faithful actually appear at all as a form within the world? If it does, it appears in, with and under the auspices of the church in the simple sense of a "means to an end." The particular churches are thus the earthly form in which the church as a spiritual reality appears and becomes earthly real *sub contrario*. This happens precisely at the moment they achieve their end in proclaiming the Word and administering the sacraments. The church appears and becomes an earthly phenomenon and reality in people listening to the gospel, receiving the sacraments and in answering to this in creeds, songs, prayers, diakonia, etc.

In Word and sacrament the invisible becomes visible. The visible and audible is God's presence in Word and sacraments: "to hear and treat of God's Word, and then to praise God, to sing and pray."³¹ It is worth noting that the proclamation of the gospel or the songs of the Christian community do not obviously make the spiritual church evident. Yet this does not mean that the *ecclesia spiritualis* is invisible, but that it is hidden: God is present in God *sub contrario*, in other words, God is present in worldly elements and forms. The visible phenomena are signs of the invisible, or more precisely: without being identical they are media of the present Divine.

Word and sacraments are not the only phenomena of the church. Visual media such as images are viewed more critically. Are images (of God, Christ, Mary, the saints) possible forms of the spiritual reality of the church corresponding to creeds or songs? Or, is the visibility of the altar bread the cardinal medium?

The life of the justified sinner is evident in the community. In contrast, however, with this (hopefully) exemplary phenomenon (of daily worship), Word and sacrament are constitutive aspects (of liturgical worship), and thus sacramental and not only exemplary of how the life of a Christian should be.

³¹ Martin Luther, *Large Catechism* (Third Commandment), see <http://bookofconcord.org/lc-3-tencommandments.php>. So that in the church which takes place in worship "nothing else ... happens but our beloved Lord himself is speaking to us by means of his holy Word, and we are in turn speaking to him by means of prayer and doxology." (Martin Luther, "Predigt am 17. Sonntag nach Trinitatis, bei der Einweihung der Schloßkirche zur Torgau gehalten (1544)," WA 49, 588, 16-18: *nichts anders ... geschehe, denn das unser lieber Herr selbs mit uns rede durch sein heiliges Wort, und wir widerumb mit jm reden durch Gebet und Lobgesang.*

This excludes the possibility of the liturgical worship being the means to an end in daily life. This would be a reduction of the actual end (that of the kingdom of God or the community of God) to a derivative medium: everyday life.

Therefore, the church as a spiritual body (*ecclesia spiritualis*) appears in the world in terms of a true worship. This is expressed in the Apology of the Confessio Augustana: "*praecipuus cultus Dei est docere evangelium*: the chief worship of God is to teach the Gospel,"³² just as Luther said, "from the highest worship, whose name is faith."³³

This is shown symbolically in word and image, just as in the creed of faith or in the iconic communion of saints, and shown indirectly in the constructive criticism of the ecclesial institutions, the forms and figures. It would, however, also invite misunderstanding if we were to confuse such constructive criticism with a permanent critique in form of anti-institutionalism and a phobia against all ecclesial forms. This holds true with regard to both institutional and anti-institutional identification. The motto, no salvation outside the church (*extra ecclesiam nullus salus*), thus fits with the equally false spiritualistic antithesis of salvation only without the church (e.g., Joachim de Fiore). Both identify the Spirit either with a certain form or with formlessness and therefore mistakenly conceive of the church and the Spirit as being in a distinctive relation to each other, which is characterized by the Spirit being external to the church and the church being passive with regard to the Spirit. Consequently, the communal spirit (*Gemeingeist*) of the church cannot be identical with the Holy Spirit.³⁴

³² "Apology of the Augsburg Confession," in Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (eds), *The Book of Concord. The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Press, 2000), pp. 107ff, here p. 229.

³³ "Apologie der Confession," in *Bekennnisschriften der evangelisch-lutherischen Kirche* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1992), p. 300, here pp. 8f.: "*vom höchsten Gottesdienste, dar da heißt Glaube.*" Cf. Martin Luther, "Von der Beicht, ob die der Bapst macht habe zu gepieten. Der Hundertt und achtzehnd Psalm (1521)," WA 8, 172, 3: "*Der glaubt ist der recht gottis dienst*" (Faith is true worship).

³⁴ I state this in opposition to Schleiermacher and probably in opposition to Johannes Fischer as well. On Schleiermacher cf. Grosshans, *op. cit.* (note 3), pp. 95ff, here p. 100: "Obwohl der Heilige Geist in der irdischen Form des Gemeingeistes sich mitteilt und wirkt, ist er doch nicht mit ihm identisch. Viel mehr bleibt er das bestimmende und kritische Moment des Gemeingeistes der Kirche."

The passivity of the church

The church's passivities are signs of its non-identity. Christ and the kingdom of God in the fulfillment of the world are external to the church and given by God alone. Therefore the church is passive in respect to them. The church can be referred to as holy only inasmuch as it serves as a means to this end of the kingdom of God.³⁶ In an indirect sense, however, it is sanctified by the one who alone is to be called holy; and the church is only holy inasmuch as this characteristic is communicative: it sanctifies to the extent that it forms the living space for this "sanctification," i.e., of the life of the justified sinner.

This passivity is the reason for the Reformation's critique of all inappropriate claims of particular churches to be identical with the universal or even the spiritual church and therefore to be of immense soteriological relevance. It is the reason for its profanity as a means to the kingdom of God and the reason for preserving the eschatological distinction between the church and its purpose: the realization of the eschaton.

In accordance with the passivity of the sinner in the process of justification, the church's passivities can be divided into the creation theological, hamartiological, soteriological and eschatological passivities of the church: the church is a creature just like all human works. It is and has always been a fallible creature, and thus a sinner. It is not forever left to its Babylonian confusion but is sanctified if used correctly as a creature of the Word (*creatura verbi*).³⁶ And it is oriented *ad extra* toward its purpose (the kingdom of God), with which it is never identical.

For this reason, we have looked at the church especially in respect to its non-identity. We have dispensed with all theories of mediation and have resisted the temptation to exaggerate the role of the church as a mediator, sacraments as means of mediation, and the order of the church as the integration of the extraordinary. Whether this is to be criticized as "ecclesioclasm" or is an appropriate Protestant ecclesiological exercise in disillusionment remains a matter for further discussion.

³⁶ Cf. Martin Luther, "Großer Galaterkommentar[1531] (1535)," WA 40/1, 70,20: "*non sua sed aliena, non activa sed passiva sanctitate.*"

³⁶ *Tanquam creatura verbi*. Cf. Martin Luther, "De captivitate Babylonica ecclesiae praeludium (1520)," WA 6, 560, 36-561, 1.

IV. Analyzing Ecclesial Realities in Select Lutheran Churches



Bestell-Nr: A116527897 PPN: 601054644
 lok.Nr:
 Bestelldatum 15-06-2012:13:21

ONLINE-BESTELLUNG GBV

**Dieser Beleg muss bis zur
Rücksendung im Buch bleiben**

Stoellger, Philipp (Lief.: BB2 Container)
 Theologische Fakultät
 Schwaansche Str. 5
 18055 Rostock

21 Juni 2012

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Unter Anerkennung der Benutzungsbedingungen wird bestellt:

Verfasser: Stoellger, Philipp
 (Aufsatz)

Standort:

! B-Magazin ! 4753-895 9

Titel: The Ecclesiology of Non-Identity
 (Aufsatz)

Seiten: 129-144

Band Heft

Jahr

Titel (Monographie/ Zeitschrift)

One holy, catholic and apostolic church : some Lutheran and
 ecumenical perspe
 2009
 Minneapolis, Minn
 Lutheran University Press

Lieferform:

Lieferart:

Kopie

POST

Lieferung erwünscht bis:
 13-08-2012

Bemerkungen: 8 € max-cost -

A116527897