

God Is Our Father/The Church Is Our Mother

by Carl E. Braaten

Introduction

The title I have chosen for this address borders on plagiarism. The idea to which it points is not original with me. The unified voice of the early fathers -- the *consensus patrum* -- affirmed that if you don't have the church for your mother, you can't have God for your Father. This places a high premium on the role of the church in conveying the saving knowledge of God.

Twelve years ago I published a book of essays I had written over a course of many years on ecclesiology and ecumenism under the title, *Mother Church*.¹ Some of my friends winced and thought I was about to turn Catholic. A decade prior to that I published a book entitled, *Justification: The Article By Which The Church Stands Or Falls*.² That was a Lutheran thing to do, which goes to show that the doctrine of justification through faith alone can be combined with a high doctrine of the church. In Paul Tillich's felicitous terminology, the Protestant principle can and must be united with the Catholic substance of Christianity. But I do have to confess that being an evangelical catholic in today's Lutheranism the world over is swimming against the stream. For there are three types of Lutherans -- three paradigms, if you will -- for whom the catholic substance of church tradition is largely deprecated or at least depreciated. They are the non-

¹ Carl E. Braaten, *Mother Church. Ecclesiology and Ecumenism*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Publishers, 1998.

² Carl E. Braaten, *Justification. The Article By Which The Church Stands Or Falls*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Publishers, 1990.

confessional pietists, the anti-traditional liberals, and the radical Lutherans who in their different ways use Luther's theology to justify their own brands of anti-catholicism.

These three paradigms of Lutheran identity will need to be challenged by a different understanding of the essence of Lutheranism, one that stresses its spiritual and historical continuity with the classical Christian heritage and rediscovers long-neglected treasures from the shared tradition of the undivided church.

A decade ago David Yeago wrote an article entitled, "Why Ecclesiology Is So Hard For Lutherans." We know it must be hard because, as compared with Orthodox and Catholic theologians, what Lutherans have written *de ecclesia* is pretty thin stuff. Most often in writing on the church, Lutherans have devoted most of their time and space criticizing Roman Catholic teachings and practices. The reasons Lutheranism has had so much trouble dealing with ecclesiology lie deeply embedded in its origin, history, and theology. When the first Lutherans lost the support of the Catholic bishops, they placed church governance in the hands of the territorial princes. Subsequently, many Lutheran theologians attempted to justify this procedure by locating the structures of the visible church under the rule of God's left hand. The pietists shifted their focus of concern from the outward forms of the visible church to the inner spiritual disposition of like-minded individuals. We are all children of the pietists, and while the evangelical revival movements left us with a lot of gifts, ecclesiology was not one of them.

When the ELCA was formed, a Task Force on the Study of Ministry was created to deal with the ordering of the ministry. Seventeen members were appointed to the Task Force based on the quota system, one of these and one of those -- you know how it goes. I

was selected to serve on the Task Force because it was thought necessary to have one systematic theologian. Only in the ELCA could you have a Task Force constructed like that. This experience confirmed my conviction that Lutherans have no consensus on the doctrine of the ministry, because they are deeply divided on the nature of the church. This Task Force like every other Task Force of the ELCA laid an egg, a million dollar goose egg. Nothing was resolved. As a consequence the ELCA is muddling along with a defective doctrine of the church and the ordained ministry, and no good idea of who bishops are and what they supposed to do. Hence when the ELCA meets in solemn assembly every two years, none of its decisions can be declared as authoritative church teaching. The majority of the voting members arrive with no theological preparation to understand the issues, and they leave with no continuing responsibility. Everyone is free to disagree and follow their own lights, citing this canard about a “bound conscience.”

I. Lutherans Are Catholics In Exile

When I left Luther Seminary for graduate school, I had a lot of courses on Bible, Church History, and Dogmatics under my belt, but not a single course on ecclesiology. Nor did I learn much about ecclesiology at Harvard, since the burning issues of the day dealt with hermeneutics and historical criticism. So when the Second Vatican Council was opened in 1962, I was ill-prepared to represent Lutheranism in ecumenical dialogue. It was expected of the young professor of systematic theology at the Lutheran School of Theology in Maywood, Illinois, following in the footsteps of Joseph Sittler and George Forell, to give the Lutheran take on the questions much disputed at the Council. Bishop Robert

Marshall invited me to address a conference of Lutheran pastors of the Northern Illinois Synod of the LCA in 1965, to offer an assessment of Lutheran identity and mission in light of the Second Vatican Council.

Then I realized how little I knew. So I did what I usually do whenever I need to cure a bad case of ignorance. I read a few new books. One was by Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Riddle of Roman Catholicism*, in which he devoted a chapter to “the tragic necessity of the Reformation.” The second was by Hans Küng, *The Council Reform and Reunion*,³ in which he debunked the traditional Roman Catholic concept of ecumenism as a call for Protestants to return to Rome, as though Rome is home. The third was an essay by George Lindbeck, “A Protestant View of the Ecclesiological Status of the Roman Catholic Church.” I entitled my address, “The Tragedy of the Reformation and the Return to Catholicity.”⁴ It was published in *Una Sancta* by its editor, Richard John Neuhaus, under the altered title of “Rome, Reformation and Reunion.”⁵ The altered version was drastically abridged, almost by half, omitting many necessary qualifications, presumably for reasons of length, but more probably, I suspected, to reflect more closely the editor’s ulterior motive.

The basic aim of my ecumenical talk was to answer the question of how to affirm Lutheran identity with integrity in an ecumenical age. Well, who are Lutherans anyway, some over sixty millions of us? The question cannot be answered in a vacuum, but only

³ Hans Küng, *The Council, Reform and Reunion*. New York: Sheed and Ward, 1961.

⁴ First printed in *The Record*, Lutheran School of Theology, Maywood Campus, Summer Issue, August, 1965, Vol. 70, No.3, 5-15.

⁵ Printed in *Una Sancta*, Vol. 23, No. 2, 3-8.

in the context of our origin, history, and envisioned future. My simple answer was then, and it still is: Lutherans are Catholics in exile. I argued that Lutherans, although living in exile, are evangelical, but without being Protestant, catholic without being Roman, and orthodox, without being Eastern. That is how I understand the theology of the Lutheran Confessions. To make my point I adapted a parable from Lindbeck's article that harked back to World War II. In June of 1940 Hitler's army invaded and conquered France. However, many loyal and patriotic Frenchmen protested against the puppet government of Marshal Pétain installed by Hitler. They left France and rallied around General Charles de Gaulle, and with all the Free French forces in exile they fought to liberate their beloved fatherland.

Now, what if the free French forgot the reason for their exile, and as ex-patriots became so accustomed to life outside of France that they forgot about returning and rejoining their French countrymen that they had left behind? What if they began to think and act as though what was meant to be only a temporary arrangement in an emergency situation had actually become for them a permanent home and established settlement? Suppose they ignored the cause of liberation for which they had left France to join the Free French forces of General de Gaulle, and instead set up a new government in some other colony, calling it France, with no intention of ever returning to the land of their birth. If that would have happened, one could call it a tragedy, akin to the tragedy of the Reformation.

The editor of the *Christian Century* wrote a scathing review of my article in an editorial with the headline, "Protestant Hara-Kiri." I was calling for Protestants to commit suicide.

The editor, Kyle Haselden, was angered and insulted by the suggestion that Protestants should “return to Rome.” The editor was a Protestant. In terms of the parable he was thinking of Protestants as émigrés, not as exiles. I responded in a letter to the editor that I was not writing as a Protestant but as a Lutheran and, thanks to him, he had helped to make clear the difference. Lutherans are not Protestant émigrés who have no desire to reconcile with those from whom they are separated. That may work for the sons and daughters of Calvin, Zwingli, and Müntzer but not of Luther and Melanchthon.

You can readily see what that the parable is suggesting. Lutherans are Catholics in exile, if they remain true to their founding principles. The editor of the *Christian Century* had missed the point of my address. The exiles are still living in exile and cannot return, until there is a change of government back in their fatherland. Their struggle is to overcome a false government -- an authoritarian regime -- in control of their homeland -- and their intention is not to found a new nation. Ever since the Reformation, Rome is a symbol that has stood for false government. The Catholics in exile are not opposed to the papal office *per se*, but they are not able to acknowledge Rome as their final authority nor the inflated status it claims for itself.

We are living in strange times. There are two things I never expected to witness in the kind of Lutheranism in which I was raised and which I have served for over half a century as pastor and teacher. I never expected that Lutheran pastors sexually united with members of their same gender would be approved for the ordained ministry of Christ's church. And, secondly, I never expected that so many Lutheran pastors and theologians would find life within Lutheranism so intolerable that they would bail out to become

Roman Catholics or Orthodox. Those two realities, different as they are, have been a huge shock to me in my twilight years of service. The friends of mine who have jumped ship, or as they prefer to say, swum the Tiber, reached the conclusion that Rome is indeed okay now to be their home. They do not accept the implications of my parable. For them there is no “false government” in Rome, and hence no need to call for changes in the way the church is governed from the top down. After one of my friends joined the Roman Catholic Church, I asked him, “Do you really accept as true the doctrine of papal infallibility along with its claim to universal jurisdiction?” He replied, “I do not look upon doctrine as you do, as something propositionally true or false.” “Well,” I responded, “how do you understand doctrine, if not true or false?” His answer was, “Doctrines are only the rules of the game.” Admittedly, there is nothing true or false about a rule in a game. A rule is a purely arbitrary convention. A field goal in football could just as well be worth five points as three. I absolutely do not agree with such a view of doctrine. Moreover, Rome does not believe its doctrines are mere rules of the game. Ask Cardinal Ratzinger, now Pope Benedict XVI. Doctrines are cognitive propositions that claim to be true. And if they are false, they should be rejected.

As an aside, I like something my Anglican friend, Geoffrey Wainwright, said. He quipped, “Since the Pope was declared infallible at Vatican I, he has spoken only twice *ex cathedra*, and both times he was wrong.”

In my view there is no *ecumenical* benefit to be gained when individuals for personal reasons accept the regime that excommunicated the Lutheran reformers and drove them into exile in the first place. Conversion may be an appropriate decision for an in-

dividual, but it is not the solution to the ecumenical problem of church division. The number one issue that stands in the way between Lutherans and Catholics has nothing to do with incense and candles and rosaries and saints and all the rest. It has to do with the dogma of papal infallibility and its claim to universal jurisdiction, something the Orthodox Churches also reject.

But lo and behold, out of the blue came the papal encyclical, *Ut Unum Sint* (That All May Be One). It claims to have heard the lamentations of the exiles. That's us. The Pope expressed confidence that if we would take Christ's call to unity to heart, "every factor of division can be transcended and overcome. . . ." In this statement John Paul II echoed the words of Pope Paul VI who said in 1967: "We are aware that the pope is undoubtedly the greatest obstacle in the path of the *Oecumene*." I wish that Pope Benedict XVI would follow through on that confession to advance the ecumenical quest for church unity. But that seems to be an initiative that has since been quashed and silenced.

II. The Squabble Over *Satis Est* and The Historic Episcopacy

Where do we go with our confessional Lutheran self-understanding, ecclesologically speaking, in an ecumenical age? George Lindbeck has said that Lutherans divide into two camps on how to read Luther and the Confessions. The approach of the one camp he calls "constitutive," the approach of the other "corrective." Since he wrote that, we would need to add a third, "revisionist." The constitutive approach sees the Reformation as the beginning of Protestantism, and Martin Luther as the founder of the Lutheran denomination. Alongside, there are other Protestant denominations with roots in the Ref-

ormation era, most notably the Reformed and the Anabaptists. Denominational Lutherans liken the Lutheran Confessions to the Declaration of Independence. They seem to believe that Luther and the first Lutherans conceived all the answers we need today. Whatever the problem, a good dose of Luther will fix it. Such a view provides little or no incentive for ecumenical dialogues and agreements. The opposition to CCM (Called to Common Mission) and JDDJ (Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification) was even pushed to the point of declaring a *status confessionis*. Incidentally, the three types or paradigms of Lutheran identity I referred to earlier -- the pietist, liberal, and radical Lutherans -- are all members of the same denomination who wrangle with each other but share a common bond of opposition to the ecumenism goal of full visible unity of churches now divided. They may say, "Some of my best friends are Catholics," but that is not ecumenism.

The "corrective" approach sees Luther and the Confessions in continuity with the mainstream of the catholic tradition. Its aim is to renew the church in line with the Scriptures, the Ecumenical Creeds, and the Fathers and Doctors of the Great Tradition. The claim of the confessors was that they were true catholics, in no way teaching anything new or different from classical Christian doctrine. Article 14 of the *Apology* states: "Our consciences are not in danger, because we know that our Confession is true, godly, and catholic."

The difference between the constitutive and corrective interpretations of the Reformation lies at the base of the controversy concerning the ecumenical decisions of the ELCA. Lutherans who understand themselves as evangelical and catholic do not read

the *Augsburg Confession* as a Declaration of Independence. The founding fathers of the United States of America who signed the Declaration of Independence had no intention of returning to the old country. They were not exiles but émigrés. Evangelical Catholics challenge the Protestant self-understanding of Lutheranism as being one denomination among many. The sociological concept of denomination is completely foreign to the *Augsburg Confession* and the *Apology*. These confessions were written as public testimonies to the truth of the gospel on the basis of Holy Scripture and the Creeds of the Church and to correct erroneous teachings and practices that endangered the unity of the church. But history played a dirty trick on the intentions of the Lutheran confessors. After the Reformation Lutheranism underwent a series of transformations that betrayed its original purpose to be a gospel-centered reform movement within the Catholic Church of the West. Consider its journey through almost five centuries, shaped by one ism after another -- scholasticism, pietism, rationalism, romanticism, revivalism, idealism, modernism, historicism, biblicism, fundamentalism, each one occasioning a new quest for Lutheran identity. And now historical destiny has given to Lutherans a new ism -- ecumenism -- one that ineluctably calls for a response. We certainly do live in an ecumenical age. We may receive it as an opportunity for new self-understanding and as a gift of the Holy Spirit to the churches of today, or we may run from it as from the smell of a skunk. In either case we will be defined -- positively or negatively -- by our response to the ecumenical dialogues and by the decisions made or not made by our various Lutheran church bodies.

Lutherans today are engaged in a kind of civil war concerning Lutheran identity in an ecumenical age. Another ism has taken segments of world Lutheranism by the throat

and threatens to strangle it. That is revisionism. This ism affects all the churches. It is fueled by the most ancient of heresies, gnosticism. When gnosticism wins, the ball game is over. All the anti-gnostic fathers agreed that gnosticism produces an amalgamated religion with a different gospel. They fought a life-and-death battle for the preservation and perpetuation of the apostolic tradition in the church. The apostolic tradition consists of three essentials: Scripture, Creed, and Office. Historic Lutheranism has generally held fast to the first two as essential, Scripture and Creed, but has fumbled the ball on the third -- succession in the apostolic office that oversees the faithful transmission of the orthodox catholic truth. Without the effective ministry of such an office in the ancient church, there would have been no Creed of Nicaea and gnosticism would have won out. Unless such an office is reconstituted in Lutheranism today, the revisionist option will gradually erode whatever remains of the catholic substance in our ecclesial bailiwicks.

Here was my dream, which may be turning into a nightmare. I supported the proposal of the original Concordat of Agreement between the ELCA and the Episcopal Church USA as well as the adoption of its revision, Called To Common Mission, as a move in the right direction to reinstitute the historic episcopacy in American Lutheranism. I have a few scars to show for it and lost some friends along the way. The Word Alone movement was organized to defeat the Concordat and finally to defeat the CCM. The arguments pro and con flared over the meaning and relevance of two little Latin words in Article VII of the *Augsburg Confession*: *satis est*. In German the words are "*ist genug*" and in English "it is enough." Article VII reads: "For the true unity of the church it is enough

to agree concerning the teaching of the gospel and the administration of the sacraments.”

There are two opposing interpretations of the *satis est* principle, yielding different ecumenical implications. The one reads it as a sufficient basis for ecclesiology. Only the Word and the Sacraments are needed for churches to be in altar and pulpit fellowship. Everything else is supposedly *adiaphora*, including all matters that apply to the ordering of the church, including the sacrament of ordination.⁶ Other churches, by requiring a particular church order or polity, whether congregational, presbyterial, episcopal, or papal, impose non-essentials and thereby create obstacles to church unity. If all these churches would reduce their claims to agree with the Lutheran *satis est*, the ecumenical goal of church unity with full communion would be reached. Only the articles of faith, not structures of order, are of the essence (*esse*) of the church. Those on the other side of the aisle call this “*satis-est* reductionism,”⁷ something akin to its close relative, gospel-reductionism, resulting in a minimalistic ecclesiology.

Ecclesiological minimalism does not work ecumenically, nor has it ever worked within Lutheranism, since Lutherans always appeal to certain creeds and confessions as normative doctrines in negotiating matters of church fellowship. The point of these creeds and confessions is to test whether the gospel is preached in its purity and the sacraments are rightly administered. The sixteenth century context was very different from our own. For the Lutheran confessors the *satis est* principle was affirmed to prevent the

⁶ Article XIII, *Apology of the Augsburg Confession*.

⁷ Maxwell Johnson, “‘*Satis Est*’: Ecumenical Catalyst or Narrow Reductionism?” *Institute of Liturgical Studies Occasional Papers #11: Liturgy in a New Millennium, 2000-2003*, ed. Rhoda Schuler (Valparaiso: Institute of Liturgical Studies, 2006): 158-172.

breaking up of church unity that already existed. By itself the *satis est* principle is not sufficient to restore church unity where it has been lost. In the present situation of church division it is realistic to say: “*satis est non satis est.*” In 1530 pastors and congregations joining Luther’s call for reform were still Catholic, but they were being accused of ignoring traditional rites and ceremonies. So they pleaded their case: “Do not treat us as heretics; we are true catholics. For regarding rites and ceremonies, we have retained what is essential -- the true preaching of the Word and the right administration of the Sacraments. Other rites and ceremonies may be useful for edification and discipline, but they are not necessary to produce the righteousness of faith that counts before God on account of Christ alone.”

It is clear that the Lutheran concern at the time was soteriology -- what is essential for salvation, the means of grace. The *satis est* principle is not addressing matters of ecclesiology, such as the structures of continuity and succession that the apostolic church began to develop already by the end of the first century, something Ernst Käsemann identifies as “early catholicism.”⁸ The target of the *sat est* principle was neither that of episcopacy in particular nor that of ordained ministry in general, but only the rites and ceremonies imposed on believers having to do with food, fasting, and feast days. Article VII simply states that the observance of such ceremonies is not essential for fellowship in the faith. Please, they said, let us not base the unity of the church on such ceremonies, although they might have their place in cultivating piety and discipline. It is necessary to take context into account when interpreting historical documents. The context of Article VII, I repeat, was about church ceremonies and not the offices of min-

⁸ Frühkatholizismus

istry. The concern had to do with the practices of piety and not structures of the church. The Reformers did not set out to invent a new church or a new way of salvation. They claimed to be good catholics. The concluding words of the *Augsburg Confession* state: “We have introduced nothing, neither in doctrine nor in ceremonies, that is contrary to Scripture or to the church catholic.” They could not have said that truthfully if they were really trying to get rid of the episcopal office.

Therefore, I assert that the *satis est* principle cannot be stretched to preclude Lutherans from re-instituting an episcopal form of church government. The Reformers had no intention of getting rid of the then existing bishops. They offered no vision of a new church minus the ministry of bishops. This is what they said: “It is our greatest wish to maintain church-polity and the grades in the church (old church-regulations and the government of bishops), even though they have been made by human authority (provided the bishops allow our doctrine and receive our priests). For we know that church discipline was instituted by the Fathers, in the manner laid down in the ancient canons, with a good and useful intention.” And they further said: “We wish here and again to testify that we will gladly maintain ecclesiastical and canonical government, provided only that the bishops cease to rage against our churches.” In the opinion of the Reformers the office of bishop is “good and useful.” Luther in his preface to Melanchthon’s “Instructions for the Visitors” of 1528 said that “we would like to have seen the true episcopal office and practice of visitation re-established as something utterly necessary.” And Heinrich Bornkamm, the Heidelberg Reformation scholar, wrote: “The idea of an episcopal leadership of the church can be maintained as Luther’s ‘true idea concerning church constitution.’” I possess no sufficient scholarly credentials to contradict that.

What happened is that the Lutherans lost the support of all bishops. In Lutheran territories the princes became emergency bishops. In Nordic countries the secular heads of state -- kings or queens -- became the top church officials. Nevertheless, some Lutheran Churches retained the office of bishop, especially in Finland and Sweden. Meanwhile, others have recovered some version of the office, say, in Africa, Europe, and North America. The recovery of episcopacy is now a *fait accompli* in world Lutheranism, except for a few pockets of resistance here and there.

Now the question is whether Lutherans in the United States and Canada have recovered only the purple rabat and the pectoral cross, only the outer appearance, or whether the new bishops who bear that title act like they are supposed to, according to Article XXVIII of the *Apology*. It reads: "According to the Gospel, or, as they say, by divine right (*ius divinum*), there belongs to bishops as bishops, that is, those to whom has been committed the ministry of Word and the Sacraments, no jurisdiction except to forgive sins, to judge doctrine, to reject doctrines contrary to the Gospel, and to exclude from the communion of the church wicked men, whose wickedness is known, and this without human force, simply by the Word." Now you be the judge. Do the bishops in North American Lutheranism live up to that confessional job description? Are they not largely marginalized? Does anyone pay much attention to what they say? When was the last time that they named and condemned any heresy circulating in the church from top to bottom? Does their silence mean that there are no heresies to condemn, or might it be rather that they cannot tell the difference between heresy and orthodoxy? Have they become mere conflict managers, fund raisers, and cheer leaders? How many of them stand up to be counted when traditional church teaching on sex, marriage, and the fam-

ily is being flushed down the toilet? Has my dream of re-instituting the historic episcopacy in American Lutheranism turned into a nightmare?

III. The Marks Of The Church

Just as you can tell a leopard by its spots, so you can also tell a church by its marks.

But there is no consensus in the history of Christian theology on just which marks are essential to distinguish a true church from a false one. The *Nicene Creed* lists four marks; the church is one, holy, catholic, and apostolic. Martin Luther composed a different sort of list in his writing, "On the Councils and the Church." Without negating the traditional four marks, Luther identified seven marks of the church: The Word of God, the sacrament of baptism, the sacrament of the altar, the office of the keys, the offices of ministry, public worship, and the cross of suffering. Without much trouble you could add to the list. Robert Bellarmine, the 17th century Jesuit theologian, made up a list of fifteen marks of the church. In addition to all of Luther's seven marks Bellarmine added a bunch more, two that might be relevant today: 1. An unhappy end -- that is, hell -- for the bad guys who fight against church teaching. 2. Temporal happiness -- that is, heaven on earth -- for the good guys who live by the teachings of the church. There is no biblical limit to the list, as long as it doesn't include things like lutefisk and lefse or potluck suppers.

Traditionally Lutherans have settled on just two marks of the church, Word and Sacrament. That in part explains why Lutherans have had such a hard time developing a full doctrine of the church with its threefold ordering of the holy ministry -- bishops, pastors, and deacons. It is not possible to build the doctrine of the church founded by Christ and

the apostles on the Word and the Sacraments, as though their performance could materialize of themselves on the spot. Ironically, that would be a kind of Lutheran version of *ex opere operato* with a vengeance. Word and Sacraments are essential marks of the church, to be sure, but the habit of isolating them from others has led to what we have called ecclesiological minimalism or reductionism.

IV. Apostolicity: The Neglected Mark of the Church

I would like to conclude with some further reflections on what in my estimation tends to be the most neglected mark of the church, its apostolicity. The apostolic church and its tradition are the historical end-product of Jesus' life, death, resurrection, and ascension. The apostolic church gave us the New Testament and everything we know about Jesus, who he was and what he did. Every church since the first century must measure itself with reference to the apostolic church that Jesus founded. Jesus said, "I will build my church,"⁹ and he built it on the foundation of the apostles, with himself its chief cornerstone. The apostolic church handed on down to us six inalienable characteristics that have belonged to the church from the beginning until now. As we identify them using Greek words, you will notice that they compare favorably with Luther's list of seven. They are *kerygma*, *martyria*, *didache*, *koinonia*, *diakonia*, and *leiturgia*. From the apostles we have received the *kerygma*, the message of and about Jesus the Christ. The apostles gave us their testimony, their witness to Christ, their *martyria*. They were martyrs for Christ, because of the witness they bore to him. We have received their *didache*, the teaching of the apostles. We have been included in their *koinonia*, the fel-

⁹ Matthew 16: 18

lowship of the apostles through prayer and the breaking of bread. And for the apostles *diakonia* is a fundamental part of the Christian life, the caring ministry to the poor and oppressed. And finally the apostles gathered the believers in Christ together for *leiturgia*, for public acts of prayer, praise, and thanksgiving. It's the work of the people of God, their liturgy. We have received all these things from the apostolic church.

But did you notice that an important feature of the apostolic church is missing on that list? That is *exousia* -- the authority invested in the person of Christ and then given by him to his disciples and then the apostles. This authority did not end with the death of the last apostle. It is imparted to the community through a succession of apostolic leaders by means of prayer and the laying on of hands. There was teaching authority in the early church. The writings of the apostles possessed authority. The decrees of the councils of the church possessed authority. Presbyters and bishops possessed authority to lead their churches and congregations. According to the apostolic tradition the authority of Christ is bestowed on those called by the Spirit into the service of the church by means of the sacrament of ordination through the imposition of hands and prayer. This is not merely the doing of human beings. It is not merely a beautiful church ceremony. It is an act of God, either that or it is not worth doing at all.

Apostolicity is a mark of continuity with the apostolic origins of the church. For continuity to succeed, there must be concrete signs of succession. The core of apostolicity is the witness of the apostles to Christ, given to us in the New Testament. The apostolic church led by the Spirit developed links to the future of the church in history until the end of time -- signs and structures that ensure faithful continuity with the apostolic foun-

dations of the church. To confess the apostolicity of the church without concrete visible signs and instruments of continuity is docetic. Its home base is gnosticism. Gnosticism believes that you can dredge up the knowledge of Christ out of your own spiritual experiences.

During the debate over CCM I was frequently asked the question: Why do our Lutheran bishops require episcopal ordination? Why can't they simply get the key to the office and walk right in? This was a bitter pill that stuck in the throat of so many Lutherans. It seemed to suggest that "they got something we don't have." Well, the fact is that they do. I agreed that it is a hard pill to swallow, to acknowledge that others might have something we don't. It is hard to eat humble pie. I had to remind myself that humility is not a deadly sin; it is one of the cardinal virtues. However, if I had had my druthers, I would have preferred to recover the sign of apostolic succession from our ecclesial kinfolk in Scandinavia. But that proposition was not on the table at the time. We had to play with the cards we were dealt.

Was it all a mistake? Was it an act of desperation? We do face a crisis of teaching authority in the Protestant churches today, and Lutherans are in the same fix. They do not know how to deal with heresy. Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote: "The concept of heresy has been lost today because there is no teaching authority." He did not mean that we no longer accept the authority of the Bible. Of course, we say we do. He did not mean that we reject the Ecumenical Creeds and the Book of Concord. They are acknowledged as normative in the Confession of Faith of our Church's Constitutions. So we must be in good shape. What Bonhoeffer possibly had in mind was that these are pa-

per authorities. They can be ignored or twisted to mean whatever one pleases. We have no living *magisterium*, no concrete official and public locus of authority whose task is to implement the normative sources of the Christian faith. Where does the buck stop when it comes to matters of interpretation and discipline?

The mark of apostolicity is the weak link in Lutheran ecclesiology. We have the apostolic canon, the apostolic creed, ministers and congregations where the word is preached and the sacraments are administered. Some may think that is good enough. It was not good enough for the ancient church. Nor was it enough for the first Lutherans, otherwise they would not have turned princes into emergency bishops. Traditionally, Lutherans have rightly stressed orthodox faith; Catholics have stressed episcopal order. I believe -- to paraphrase Immanuel Kant -- that orthodoxy without episcopacy is blind; and episcopacy without orthodoxy is empty. Someone is bound to ask at this point, if episcopacy is so important, why is the Episcopal Church USA teetering on the brink of apostasy. The answer is simple -- lack of orthodoxy. The Episcopal Church is not a confessional church, and proud of it.

The ELCA boasts of its ecumenical achievement of having entered into full communion with most of the decadent and dying churches of modern liberal Protestantism. I do not share that enthusiasm. In my view that is an ecclesiological dead-end. Nothing much will come of it. I live in a retirement community with a lot of old people. I would liken the ELCA and its full communion partners to seven old men standing in a circle, leaning on each other to keep from falling down. They are all becoming feeble, losing their muscle, memory, and influence.

But this is what I believe and pray for. Our best hope as Lutherans faithful to our founding principles will be to work toward rapprochement with Roman Catholic and Orthodox Churches, leading eventually -- God willing -- to a eucharistic fellowship in a communion of churches. Pope John Paul II stated the “the church must once again learn to breathe with its two lungs -- the Eastern and the Western one.” When the schism of 1054 A.D. is overcome between the Roman Catholic Church and the Orthodox Churches, the road will have been paved for Lutherans to follow suit. The Orthodox do not reject the papal office *per se*, but they cannot accept its present mode of governance. And neither do Lutherans. A reunited church of the future will include the primatial ministry of the papacy, but inevitably under new conditions. If Lutherans choose to remain cut off from the Catholic and Orthodox traditions of doctrine, worship, spirituality, and church life, they will eventually be engulfed by the surrounding neo-pagan culture now over-taking both the Liberal and Evangelical forms of Protestantism. The “Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification” accepted by the Lutheran World Federation and the Vatican Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith is a step in the right direction.

The 2009 actions of the ELCA on human sexuality constitute an ecumenical reversal, to what extent we do not yet know. Those actions are causing Orthodox and Catholic Christians to have second thoughts about continuing their ecumenical engagement with Lutherans. And many other Lutherans around the world are wondering how the doctrine of justification by faith can be understood in a manner so ethically twisted or vacuous as to warrant the endorsement of a homosexual life-style for its ordained ministers.

St. Augustine once said, "The church may be a whore, but she is still my mother." That encapsulates the feeling of many life-long Lutherans who must soldier on in a morally corrupt church. I end on this sad note because, my friends, there is not a lot going on in Lutheranism to make one feel otherwise.

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