

# THE COMMUNION OF SAINTS

A Study of the Origin and Development of Luther's  
Doctrine of the Church



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*A Study of the Origin and Development of Luther's  
Doctrine of the Church*

by

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TO THE GLORY OF GOD  
IN THE  
BODY OF CHRIST



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## ABBREVIATIONS

The following abbreviations have been used throughout this work in referring to the various editions of Luther's works:

W.—D. Martin Luther's Werke. Kritische Gesamtausgabe. Weimar, H. Böhlau, 1883-

Holman—Works of Martin Luther . . . Philadelphia, Pa., A. J. Holman Co., 1915-32.

Op. var. arg.—D. Martini Lutheri Opera latina varii argumenti ad reformationis historiam imprimis pertinentia. Curavit dr. Henricus Schmidt . . . Francofurti et Erlangae, Heyder et Zimmer, 1865-73.

Walch—D. Martin Luthers . . . Sämmtliche Schriften . . . hrsg. von Johann Georg Walch . . . Halle, J. J. Gebauer, 1740-53.

Erlangen—Dr. Martin Luther's Sämmtliche Werke . . . Erlangen, Carl Heyder, 1826-57.

Lenker—The Precious and Sacred Writings of Martin Luther . . . edited by John Nicholas Lenker. Minneapolis, Minn., Lutherans in all Lands Co., 1903-

The frequent references to Luther's *Dictata super Psalterium* have been abbreviated by using "Ps." plus the number of the Psalm, followed by the reference to the Weimar edition of his works.



# *Part One*

## **LUTHER AND THE DOCTRINE OF THE CHURCH IN HISTORY**



# *Luther* **AND THE PROBLEM OF THE CHURCH**

"Protestantism has no church, in the full Christian sense." Either that is a rank libel that demands an answer from Protestantism, or it is a fact that compels us to do something about it. The man who said it<sup>1</sup> is himself, like Harnack who said it before him, a Protestant. And as if to chide his faltering Church he continues, "Not only so, but the spirit of Protestantism is afraid of the church, afraid to be a church. It has recoiled so far and so intensely from the Roman conception of the Church that it is unable to envisage any realization of the Church Catholic which is not Roman."

If we are thinking in terms of Protestantism as a whole, we shall find it difficult to answer that charge. Look at the Edinburgh Conference of 1937, how it wrestled with the doctrine of the Church! The Report, with its frank statement of divergent opinions on this doctrine, is a partial, but hardly an adequate, answer to the charge that "Protestantism has no church."

In so far as Protestantism has preserved its catholicity and sense of continuity with the Church of the centuries it has an adequate doctrine of the Church, defined by

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<sup>1</sup>Editorial in *The Christian Century*, LV (Nov. 2, 1938) 1321

Luther himself on the basis of the Scriptures. In so far as it has yielded to sectarianism, it "has no church."

This uncomfortable situation in which Protestantism finds itself, compels it to recover for itself the doctrine of the Church, and with it that priceless possession, a consciousness of the holy, Christian Church, the Communion of Saints, the Body of Christ. Pity the poor sectarian individualist who does not know the comfort of the Church, the "glory of the communion of saints," as Luther refers to it!

For the sake of that scattered army of Christian "lone wolves" in the world, the rediscovery of the Scriptural doctrine of the Church is important. For the sake of saving Protestantism from the disintegrating ravages of sectarianism, it must be reiterated that there is one holy Church. For the sake of a Protestantism which has been flirting with deviating tendencies till its fingers are dripping with sentimental subjectivism in life and worship, we must confront it with the reality of the Church and the riches of its inheritance.

Some folks see something sinister in this kind of language. Is it not a first step back into that deadly Roman ecclesiasticism from which the Reformation once set us free? Four hundred years of history would rather indicate that the Lutheran Church, with the whole of Protestantism, has as much to fear from sectarian individualism and rattle-brained subjectivism as it has from Romanism. And when I say this I say it with due regard and gratitude for the spiritual quickening that sound piety and evangelistic fervor in many quarters have brought to the Lutheran Church in our own day. Apart from this, however, we have been witnessing something of that unbalanced emotional "Schwärmerei," which

brought Luther headlong out of the Wartburg to halt the destruction of the Church as Church. It is quite possible that Luther would again "burst out of Wartburg" if he saw the way history is repeating itself in some quarters of his Church. Lutheran hymns gone with the wind in favor of jolly jingles, liturgy and worship desiccated by clerical individualists, confessional theology giving way to a sectarian "Biblicism" which some are calling the "sweet Jesus theology."

Is it too far-fetched to tie these things up with the fact that we have lost the sense of the Church? We have taken the Reformation principle of individual liberty and carried it to the extremes of license. Have we forgotten, perhaps, that there is a holy Christian Church in which we believe? Or do we not believe in it any more?

If the idea of the Church has become to us a lifeless theory for theologians to debate, we need a lesson from the suffering churches of Europe and Asia. The cries of persecuted millions have been ringing in our ears ever since the Russian Revolution. It was a cry to the Church from Christians who had learned by bitter experience the wonderful reality of the Communion of Saints. "Whether one member suffer, all the members suffer with it." But how shall we account for the apathy of the American Church to that agonizing cry? Does not the answer lie in our narrow denominational unconsciousness of the greater fact of the Communion of Saints? Proud and satisfied with our Americanized Church, which had at last cut loose from our foreign mother's apron strings, we became oblivious and calloused to the sufferings of other members of the body of Christ, forgetting that we were by the grace of God members of His Body. We had become unworthy successors of the

great Reformer who said, "To no one is any grace given only for himself, but for the benefit of the Church."<sup>2</sup>

But then happily things began to change. A wave of Luther research swept the European continent, starting in Germany. And as the true Luther emerged, a revitalized Lutheran theology began to appear. Men were driven back to the Word of God. The accretions picked up in the successive movements of dead orthodoxy, subjective pietism, and rationalism, were thrown off, one at a time. The paralyzing influence of the Prussian Union became unbearable. Then the Lutheran theologians threw themselves into an intensive study of the doctrine of the Church. The persecution of Hitler and Rosenberg and Goebbels spurred them on in this study. Now it was no longer a can of dry theology to be opened in the theologian's study and subjected to microscopic examination. Now it was a matter of life and death for every Christian in Germany. Literature began to pour off the press, probing deeply into the doctrine of the Church. Out of that strife there came to those Christians again the comforting consciousness of the Communion of Saints. Their outward intercourse with Christendom cut off by the laws of extreme nationalism, they reached out in faith and in prayer to clasp hands in spirit with the saints of all lands and to confess anew, "*Credo in sanctam ecclesiam catholicam; sanctorum communionem.*"

Like the cry out of Russia came the cry of German Christians longing for the comfort of the Communion of Saints. With the fighting voices of the Niemöllers came the steadying voices of other leaders in the suffering Church. Men like Bishop Lilje call on fellow-Christians to be strong in faith. Let them consider the trials of

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<sup>2</sup>Ps. 112. W. IV, 256, L. 35.



the Church of the Reformation in the days of Luther. In a great speech delivered in Hannover in August, 1935, he reminds them that "the Reformers bore up under the battle, because they were not so short-sighted as to think that the Church would cease to exist tomorrow. They clung to the word of their Confession, '*quod una sancta ecclesia perpetuo mansura sit*,' 'that the one holy Church is to continue forever.' Human institutions could be condemned to death by the storms of revolution sweeping over them. But of the work of God, we confess that it abides; 'Thy work can no man hinder, thy labor must not rest.' That applies also to the Church."<sup>3</sup>

Under the pressure of suffering, the glorious consciousness of the Communion of Saints began to spread across the Continent, through Scandinavia, and across the sea to America. The Lutheran churches were finally becoming aware that there is a Lutheran Church of the world, and that far beyond that there is *one* holy Christian Church, the Communion of Saints.

This resurgence of a sense of the Church which has come to Lutheranism has struck Protestantism as a whole. A restudy of Luther, Calvin, and St. Augustine, together with the world crisis, has driven all Protestantism back to the Scriptures. There they have seen again the great fact of the unity of the Church. Some of them have not yet seen that it is a *spiritual* unity which our Lord is calling for, a unity in "one Lord, one faith, one baptism." When the Ecumenical Movement sees that clearly a new day will dawn in the history of the movement. There are many within the movement who see it. But the principle has not yet fully captured the leadership.

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<sup>3</sup>"Die Reformatorische Lehre von der Kirche," Eberhard Müller, ed. *Wahrheit und Wirklichkeit der Kirche*, p. 122, Berlin: Furche-verlag, 1935.

As we find ourselves in the midst of great financial campaigns to gather millions for the relief of fellow-Christians in war-torn Europe, is it not also the great opportunity for our leaders to drive home to American Protestants this great truth which Luther revived, that the Church is *one*, that it is the fellowship of all believers, that it is the Body of Christ?

The Church continues to look at herself and makes another discovery. She seems to be losing her identity. Instead of being a holy people of God, apart from the world, she has become all too much a part of the world. Is that, too, because she has forgotten what the Church is and what Christ meant it to be? Is it true, as Dr. Pauck has so shockingly said, that the time has come for a secularized church to ask herself, "What must we do to be saved?"<sup>4</sup> It would seem logical that the Church's first step in answering that question should be to rediscover what the Church is. If the progress of the ecumenical movement is a criterion, we may believe that the Protestant churches have begun to face the problem.

Bernhard Iddings Bell has put the issue squarely up to the union movement and asks, "What is the Church? That is the crucial question. . . . Until there is unity about the nature and function of the Church itself, it is impossible that there shall be any real agreement upon minor and derivative matters."<sup>5</sup>

Protestantism, stinging under this flood of indictments, and made conscious finally of what it has lost, has begun to bestir itself. It has begun to scratch beneath the surface of superficial "churchiology" to rediscover

<sup>4</sup>Niebuhr, H. R., Miller, F. P., Pauck, Wilhelm, *The Church Against the World*, p. 4. N. Y.: Willett, Clark & Co., 1935.

<sup>5</sup>*A Catholic Looks at His World*, p. 124. N. Y.: Morehouse, 1936.

again the doctrine of the Church and the reality of the Communion of Saints. The Report of the Edinburgh Conference and the documents preparing for Amsterdam show how concerned it is. The very conflict of opinions awakens a dull fear that it may be again, in true Protestant style, every man for himself—every group and every theologian formulating definitions of the Church without regard for what the Church, through the centuries, has already said in the matter on the basis of the Word.

Has the Church no adequate definition of herself? Surely she has, in the New Testament, with the background of the Old. But who is to tell us what the New Testament doctrine of the Church is? Can we let Rome do it? No, because she dares to identify the "Body of Christ" with an organized human machine, which she herself admits has often been seething with corruption. Shall we let Calvin tell us? Hardly, because his idea of the Church as the communion of the predestined is not in harmony with the Scriptural doctrine of the Body of Christ. Can Luther tell us? Yes, because he begins with Scripture and ends with the Creed of the Church, which gives the answer when she confesses, "I believe in the holy Christian Church, the Communion of Saints." It took the Lutheran Reformation to give back to the Church the glorious doctrine of the Communion of Saints, a truth which she had confessed since the time of the apostles, but whose reality and comfort had been lost to the Christians for a thousand years.

Luther revived the doctrine of the Church. But history repeated itself. Came Pietism, came Rationalism, came Schleiermacher, came the sectarian deluge. And when the Church came to herself she rubbed her eyes and asked, "Where is the Church?"