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MODULE 6

Ecclesiology: Church and churches

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Introduction

In general, there are two possible approaches to the understanding of the church. The **first** approach would be to give a more or less detailed description of the church in the history and the present time: starting with the very beginning of the church in the 1st century, moving onward with an outline of the developments of the church during the patristic era, then drawing the different paths of the church in the East and West up to the 21st century with its multitude and plurality of churches and confessions all over the world. This would be of course interesting and would provide a very global perspective. Nevertheless, in my lecture I prefer **another** approach, not a descriptive but a normative or a doctrinal one. Choosing this approach is not primarily caused by the fact that a descriptive approach would require much more time than this lecture can cover. The main reason lies in the understanding of the church itself – as an entity not only of our visible reality but also of our belief. Therefore, the aim of my lecture will be to give you an idea of what the church is meant to be or, in other words, is believed to be. In this way you'll get criteria to help you assess whether a particular example in history or in the present qualifies as the true church or is something else.

Part I: The basic understanding of the church as it is outlined in the Augsburg Confession (1530)

In January 1530, Emperor Charles V invited the Imperial Diet to meet in Augsburg in order to confer on some very important issues, not least the threat of a Turkish invasion. Among those issues was the burning question of religious unity in the whole Empire, raised by the case of Martin Luther and its consequences. Therefore, Elector John of Saxony called upon his reformers, among them Luther himself, to write a summary of the reformers' faith and to present it before the Emperor at the Diet. Since Luther was not

allowed to participate in the Diet because he was considered an outlaw according to the Diet of Worms (1521), the other reformers travelled without him to Augsburg. Due to certain circumstances – among them a malicious publication by the professor of theology Johann Eck – some alterations in the original confessions had to be made and thus Philip Melanchthon – though in constant correspondence with Luther – became the main author of the confession which was finally presented at the Diet on the 25th of June 1530.

This Augsburg Confession, also known as the »Augustana« from its Latin name »*Confessio Augustana*«, was presented in the German language at the Diet. At the same time Melanchthon worked out a Latin version of the confession for the world of scholars, which is theologically more precise. For that reason I'll refer to this version in my lecture (from »The Book of Concord. The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church«, ed. by Robert Kolb/Timothy Wengert, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000).

The Augsburg Confession consists of 28 articles which describe in very short theses (art. 1-21) the main principles of Lutheran faith along with the abuses (art. 22-28) that the Lutherans recognized in the Roman church of those times. As such the Augsburg Confession became one of the most important historical documents of the Reformation era and – along with the ancient creeds, that is the Apostolic Creed, the Nicene Creed and the »Athanasian« Creed – the primary confession of faith of Lutheran churches, which remains binding up to this very day.

Since the Augsburg Confession was supposed to give only an outline of the Lutheran faith one cannot expect it to contain a detailed description of Lutheran teaching. This is in any case true for the articles dealing with the understanding of the church, which comprise only a few sentences. Nevertheless, key words are mentioned and now we will take a closer look at them.

The main article, number VII, states:

»Likewise they teach that one holy church will remain forever. The church is the *assembly of saints* in which *the gospel is taught purely and the sacraments are administered rightly*.

And it is enough for the true unity of the church to agree concerning the teaching and the administration of the sacraments. It is not necessary that human traditions, rites or ceremonies, instituted by human beings be alike everywhere.«

The key word here is »assembly of saints«. This is the English translation of the Latin term »*congregatio sanctorum*« which is reminiscent of the Apostolic creed's »*communio sanctorum*« or communion of saints. Both terms, »*congregatio sanctorum*« and »*communio sanctorum*«, have a double meaning: First, they can stand for the congregation of those who participate in the »*sancta*« (neuter plural); second, they can also stand for the congregation of the »*sancti*« (masculine plural).

The reformers surely had both in mind but primarily the first meaning, as is seen in the clause of article VII which defines the »assembly of saints«. Accordingly to this, the church is the congregation of those who participate in the »*sancta*«, that is in word and sacrament, who through word and sacrament participate in Jesus Christ and through the revelation of Christ in the triune God. Church is therefore first and foremost to be understood as a worshipping communion. As a result, as article VII states, »it is enough for the true unity of the church to agree concerning the teaching and the administration of the sacraments. It is not necessary that human traditions, rites or ceremonies, instituted by human beings be alike everywhere.«

Concerning the last sentence, it is important to keep in mind that the reformers didn't want to devalue human traditions, rites or ceremonies at all. On the contrary, various articles of the Augsburg Confession and also the multitude of later »church orders« demonstrate that the reformers did not want to destroy the organizational structure of the church. Rather, they were eager to preserve and even build up a new church order. But they wanted to emphasize indeed that church order is just an order – it's not necessary for salvation. Therefore article XV states: »Concerning church rites they teach that those rites should be observed that can be observed without sins and that contribute to peace and good order in the church, for example, certain holy days, festivals and the like. However, people are reminded not to burden consciences, as if such worship were necessary for salvation.«

In addition to the understanding of »assembly of saints« in the sense of participating in the »*sancta*«, the reformers understood the term »assembly of saints« also as the congregation of the »*sancti*«. The opponents of the Reformers right away criticized the authors of the Augsburg Confession for using this term, arguing that the church cannot be understood as a pure assembly of saints. Melancthon answered in his Apology, defending the Augsburg Confession, that the reformers of course did not imagine the church in a broader sense as a pure assembly of saints and, in order to prove it, he pointed to article VIII of the Augsburg Confession which states: »Although the church is, properly speaking, the assembly of saints and those who truly believe, nevertheless, because in this life many hypocrites and evil people are mixed in with them, a person may use the sacraments even when they are administered by evil people.« But at the same time Melancthon argued that the church in its essence, the holy, catholic church, is indeed the assembly of saints that is of all those who truly believe in Christ.

It is interesting to note that Melancthon chose in the Augsburg Confession the term »*congregatio*« instead of the term »*communio*«. Why did he do so? Probably he wanted to stress with this term the reformers' understanding of the church as communion of those who are *concretely gathered* (or »congregated«) to serve God. Likewise Luther avoided in his writings the term »*ecclesia*«, preferring the term »congregation«.

In article VII the gospel and the sacraments are mentioned, and in the following articles IX to XIII the understanding of the sacraments is unfolded. Contrary to the tradition of the Roman church, the Augsburg Confession lists not seven but three sacraments: baptism, the Lord's Supper and confession. Again, these articles are very short. Concerning baptism the Augsburg Confession declares baptism necessary for salvation and that therefore children should be baptized. To quote article IX: Children »are received into the grace of God when they are offered to God through baptism«. Concerning the Lord's Supper the Augsburg Confession emphasizes in article X that »the body and blood of Christ are truly present and are distributed to those who eat the Lord's Supper«. Beyond the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's supper the Augsburg Confession recommends retaining private absolution in the churches, though it states that an »enumeration of all faults in confession is not necessary.« Finally, the Augsburg Confession makes some general remarks about the use of the sacraments in article XIII, underlining the importance of the sacraments: Sacraments, so the article states, »were instituted not only to be marks of profession among human beings but much more to be signs and testimonies of God's will towards us, intended to arouse and strengthen faith in those who use them. Accordingly, sacraments are to be used so that faith, which believes the promises offered and displayed through the sacraments, may increase.«

In sum, the articles of the Augsburg Confession show that for the reformers church is to be understood as the place where the word of God is present – either in the preaching of the gospel or in the sacraments – and leads people to believe in Christ. Therefore, the church itself is very much dependent on the word, the church is in other words a »creation of the word« (*»creatura verbi«*).

This understanding of course raises the question of the relationship between the Holy Scripture, which reveals the word, and the church – the question of the »sola scriptura«. Due to our limited time we cannot treat this question in detail. We just can state here that on the one hand the reformers were convinced that nothing should happen in the church contrary to the Holy Scripture: that the Holy Scripture is the norm of all norms (*»norma normans«*) and the church and its traditions rely on the Holy Scripture (*»norma normata«*). On the other hand, the reformers admitted that the church helps people understand the Holy Scripture in the proper way: that the church is a kind of hermeneutical key for the Holy Scripture. In that sense the understanding of the Holy Scripture is also dependent on the church and for that reason both – the Holy Scripture and the church – are indissolubly interrelated. One cannot have the Holy Scripture without the church.

Part II: The attributes of the church according to the Nicene Creed

In Part I we dealt with the Augsburg Confession and its understanding of the church as the »assembly of saints«. In the Augsburg Confession not much more is said about the church but we can find further reflections on the qualities of the church in other writings of the reformers. There they describe the church generally in line with one of the oldest and main creeds of Christianity, the Nicene Creed, which is shared by almost all churches in the world. In its third article the Nicene Creed states: »We believe... in the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church«.

Very often unity, holiness, catholicity and apostolicity are referred to as the marks of the church (*»notae ecclesiae«*). This is nevertheless a problematic terminology since it is difficult to identify the church by its unity, holiness, catholicity and apostolicity. Hence, for Luther they are not marks but essential qualities (*»Wesenseigenschaften«*) or theological attributes of the hidden (*»verborgene«*) church. They are not visible and therefore cannot function as criteria to prove if the true church is present. The marks (*»notae«*) in the essential sense, which Luther also calls *»tesserae«*, *»symbola«*, *»signa«*, and *»characteres«*, are according to him first of all the preaching of the gospel and the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's supper. Later he expanded the list of marks, adding the Ten Commandments, the Lord's Prayer, the ministry, the cross, the creed and hymns (see the third part of his writing »On the Councils and the Church« [1539]) and later on even more (see his writing »Against Hans Wurst« [1541]). The most certain and outstanding mark of the church (*»certissimum et nobilissimum Ecclesiae symbolum«*) though remained for him the preaching of the gospel. Likewise, Melancthon in his »Apology« of article VII of the Augsburg Confession characterizes the pure teaching of the gospel and the administration of the sacraments according to the gospel as the decisive external marks of the church (*»externae notae ecclesiae«*).

How can we describe the theological attributes of the church? What is their meaning? To get a better understanding I'll treat them successively.

Apostolicity

Apostolicity is a very meaningful quality of the church – and by the way one of the most controversial ecumenical issues and a remaining obstacle for the mutual recognition of churches up to this very day. Apostolicity signifies that the church is committed to its historic origins, i.e. the time of the apostles, to their message and task. The apostles were sent to preach the gospel, to baptize (see Matth. 28:19-20) and to continue the celebration of the Lord's Supper »until he comes« (see 1 Cor 11:23-26). According to this, the church as an apostolic church is also called to preach the gospel and administer the sacraments.

In opposition to the Roman church of his time Luther understood apostolicity primarily with regard to the apostolic *message*: The church remains apostolic by proclaiming the gospel of Christ. The council of Trent responded immediately to this understanding »by developing an apologetical treatment of apostolicity, that is, a presentation of evidence to prove that the Roman Church is alone the *vera ecclesia* (»true church«) with rightful authority in teaching and a legitimate corps of bishops and presbyters« (The Apostolicity of the Church, n. 104). From this historical controversy during the Reformation era derived a typical and to this day widespread opinion concerning the Lutheran and Roman Catholic understandings of apostolicity: »One often hears that Lutherans see the church legitimated as being in apostolic succession *only by* its preaching and teaching of the gospel, with ministry playing no essential role. Catholics, on their side, are thought to hold that the unbroken line of rightful episcopal succession is *of itself* a guarantee of the apostolicity of the church« (The Apostolicity of the Church, n. 67).

That it is far too simplistic and misleading to claim such a difference between the Lutheran and Roman Catholic understanding of apostolicity, can be seen in important ecumenical documents like »The Apostolicity of the Church. Study Document of the Lutheran-Roman Catholic Commission on Unity« (2006) and also the recently published »Declaration on the Way« (2015) of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. In this lecture I can just point to these documents and can recommend them for further studies but cannot go deeper in them. But I'll touch here at least shortly on the crucial question of ministry from a Lutheran point of view, or more precisely, the question of the common priesthood of all the baptized in relation to the ordained ministry.

Here we can see that Lutherans on the one hand stress that by baptism and in faith we are united with Christ and thus participate in his priesthood. Therefore, all the baptized are called to proclaim the gospel. On the other hand Lutherans – though with some exceptions – argue that the reformers were convinced that the ordained ministry is of divine origin. In fact, Luther himself often spoke of the ministry, which God has instituted, and as early as 1535 ordination became obligatory for Lutheran pastors in Wittenberg. Hence, the »Declaration on the way« can state: »Lutherans and Catholics affirm together that ordained ministry is of divine origin and that it is necessary for the being of the Church. Ministry is not simply a delegation ›from below‹, but is instituted by Christ« (p. 12). The task of the ordained ministry is thereby to proclaim the gospel, not

only like a father or mother teaching their children the catechism at home, but in and for the whole congregation, that is, *publicly* (see art. XIV of the Augsburg Confession). The difference between the priesthood of all baptized and the ordained ministry is therefore not a difference of individual responsibility to proclaim the gospel but rather a difference of authority on the side of the ordained ministry »with the commission to serve in the community and for the community« (Declaration on the way, p. 13).

Catholicity

The Reformation started as a reform movement within the medieval Roman church. In no way Luther should be considered a radical individualist defying authority on principle. On the contrary, he wanted to reform the contemporary church so that it would more clearly manifest the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church. Following this line, Lutheran churches up to this very day confess together with other Christian churches the catholicity of the church. They themselves want to be catholic – a true and universal manifestation of the church of Christ. This global understanding of the church and its mission leads to a positive attitude toward constructive ecumenical dialogue and convergence. One implication of this is the Lutheran World Federation growing into a global communion of churches; another implication is the set of dialogues with different churches and confessions in which the Lutheran World Federation is involved and could achieve remarkable results (remember especially the joint Catholic-Lutheran Commemoration of the Reformation in Lund and Malmö, Sweden, on 31 October 2016). For this reason, too, it is not appropriate to reserve catholicity as a denominational attribute solely for the Roman-Catholic church.

»Catholicity« itself is a complex term, with different meanings. Thus, »catholicity« is very often interpreted as the »universality« of the church which is comprised of all generations of Christians in the past and in the future. In that sense catholicity can be understood as the most comprehensive aspect of the unity of the church, as the community of the Christians of all previous periods and all present churches as well as openness toward the future of Christianity in light of the arrival of the reign of God. Secondly, »catholicity« is explained as an imperative in the sense that the church *should* be »universal«: reaching out to all people at all times and in all places, going beyond the borders of gender, age, profession, education etc. A »catholic« church though remaining a local church should be present in different spaces, different times and different cultures, transcending the borders of the single local congregation, going beyond a merely national church. While the first and second interpretations are focused on a more quantitative or extensive understanding, the third understanding is a qualitative one, which we can find already in bishop Ignatius's letter to the Smyrnaens (8.2) in the 2nd century where he writes: »Wherever Jesus Christ is, there is the catholic church.«

The Lutheran understanding of »catholicity« combines all three understandings of the term, even if the most important and the criterion for the first and second understanding is the qualitative understanding. Hence, the church's catholicity is first of all not be understood as the church's universal, ubiquitous presence (as indicative or imperative) but as the concentration of the church on Jesus Christ. In concentrating on Jesus Christ as the saviour of the world the church is universally the same. The church's catholicity is in other words and in line with article VII of the Augsburg Confession realized in and through worship.

Holiness

The attribute of »holiness« leads us to a problem the church had to wrestle with from the very beginning: The church as God's chosen people, as those who are called out of the masses of the condemned, this very church has had to realize that there was no pure space on earth, no immaculate community, no ministry carried out only by worthy servants. In other words, the church couldn't be proved as holy empirically. The church as holy had and has to be believed, not proven. The deepest reflection on this problem in the ancient church can be found by Augustine of Hippo, who taught that one must distinguish between the visible and the invisible church. Lutheran ecclesiology followed this teaching. The Apology of article VII of the Augsburg Confession speaks of the church as not only an association of external ties and rites, but also and principally as an association of faith in the Holy Spirit.

There is a widespread misunderstanding of the distinction between the visible and the invisible church which Melancthon already addressed in his Apology: that there is an inner dimension that has to do with God (= invisible church) and an outer dimension that has to do with the world (= visible church). In other words, the true invisible church is said to be a kind of Platonic idea within the manifest, visible church. In contrary to this, Lutherans underline that the visible and the invisible or – like Luther himself preferred to say – the visible and the »hidden« church are one. There is no essential church behind or beyond the existing church but only within it.

To get a better understanding we can draw here an analogy to the doctrine of justification as Luther himself did. Very often Luther emphasized that we are justified by grace and still remain sinners, that we are justified *and* sinners at the same time or, to use the famous Latin formula, that we are »*simul iustus et peccator*«. Likewise, the church is invisible and visible at the same time which means that God's grace is present even in a church existing in the midst of the world. Like human beings the church cannot become holy by itself. Holiness has to be given to the church. So the church's holiness comes from Christ, the head of the church. Christ has made the church holy and therefore God reckons the church as holy.

This understanding of the church permits on the one hand a wide range of different institutional structures of the church, as long as they make the invisible accessible through the visible. So Luther himself always recognized that the true church existed within the Roman church because in the Roman church the gospel was preached and the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper have been administered. On the other hand, the question of institutional structure matters a lot and will lead to a critique of those structures if they obscure the gospel. On this basis the reformers critiqued the Roman church of their time. So if the church fails to enact its essence in its existence, which has very often happened in the church history and will happen again, then this is a case for thoughtful reflection and struggle of its members because it affects the church's holiness as believable – its very credibility. Hence, the attribute of the holiness is for Lutherans a permanent call to reform the church, like another famous Latin formula puts it: »*ecclesia semper reformanda*«, that is, that the church always has to undergo a reformation.

Unity

In general, it is possible to distinguish between three main models of unity: a) cooperative action, b) intercommunion, c) corporate union. The **first** model means a kind of federation in which each church keeps its own structure and independence while the churches aim to work together in the social sphere and on practical issues.

The **second** model of intercommunion goes one step further than the first model: The churches remain here different in their organizations with their own structure and character, but share in Eucharistic communion.

The **third** model of corporate union, also called »organic union«, aims at one single body or one organization. The idea is the unity of a living organism with the diversity of the members of a healthy body.

Looking closer to the Lutheran understanding of unity, from what already have been said it should be clear that unity, in line with article VII of the Augsburg Confession, is regarded as the unity of a common understanding of the gospel. Priority is given to doctrine in the sense of a shared understanding of the Scripture and faith which should express, form and live out the unity of the church. As a result, for the unity of churches it is sufficient to agree concerning the teaching and the administration of the sacraments but not to have necessarily all the same traditions, the same liturgy, a common organizational structure, a sharing of finances and responsibilities.

This understanding was very helpful in gathering together the family of Lutheran churches, i.e., for inner-Lutheran discussion. In the beginning of the ecumenical movement there was no Lutheran world church or anything like this. But it became soon apparent that there existed a common understanding of the gospel among the Lutheran churches involved. Thus, the doctrinal basis for the unity was given. The members of the Lutheran World Federation had then a long debate about how this unity could be visibly expressed. They concluded that the Lutheran World Federation is a communion of churches, that is a »koinonia« of churches, recognizing each other's preaching and sacraments. Members of the Lutheran World Federation enjoy therefore today full communion even if their church order remains differently.

The Lutheran understanding of unity, though, turned out to be difficult in the relationship with non-Lutheran churches, i.e., in ecumenical discussions. Since there have been churches or church organizations like the World Federation of Churches, which do not consider a consensus on doctrinal issues at all or mainly as a precondition for unity, the question arose how to bring together confessional commitments and ecumenism. In the context of those ecumenical discussions the Lutheran World Federation developed together with other Christian World Communions the concept of a »unity in reconciled diversity«. According to this understanding, confessional differences do not simply disappear but are rather transformed in such a way that historical opposition becomes a relationship of reconciliation in which the traditions enrich each other.

While this concept seems to give a satisfying answer on the question of confessional commitment and ecumenism on an abstract level, there still remain a lot of questions on a more practical level. I cannot go in detail here but would like to mention that Lutheran churches, though members of the Lutheran World Federation, participate in different communions like the Community of Protestant Churches in Europe (formerly the Leuenberg Communion between Lutherans and Reformed) and the Porvoo Communion (between Lutheran and Anglicans) which in some ways exclude each other. So the

Lutheran Church in Germany did not join the Porvoo Communion because of their communion with United and Reformed churches in the Evangelical Church in Germany. The question here arises what the participation of Lutheran churches in different communions means for the relation of those Lutheran churches among each other and especially for the communion within the Lutheran World Federation. What ecclesial quality do those communions have? How do they affect the worldwide communion of churches? Here is still much ecumenical work to be done.

This is by the way also true for a new challenge that has risen in the last decades which threatens Christian unity, not only between but also within the churches. I'm thinking of ethical issues, for example, the question of homosexuality or the question of the use of stem cells. Since there exists a wide range of opinions concerning such questions and some consider them to be church dividing issues the Lutheran churches are confronted with a problem which they have to deal with but which at the same time seems to be very difficult for them since they have traditionally *not* defined unity with respect to ethical issues.

Part III: Diaconal ministry in the life of the church

I have put the main emphasis in this lecture on the church as a worshipping communion and on the attributes of the church, since from a Lutheran point of view those features describe the church essentially. But this does not mean, of course, that the church is only a worshipping communion. On the contrary, the worship releases much effort to take care of the needs of people and to advocate for the change of destructive political or social conditions. Therefore, Lutheran churches have always been very much engaged in diaconal work, like for instance the Lutheran churches in Germany as members of the Evangelical Church in Germany. In Germany there exists a huge diaconal institution, »Protestant Diakonia and Development«. Its members are the »Diaconal Work« of the national churches, nine free churches and their diaconal institutions, and about 90 professional associations of various work fields. These members work in more than 27.000 independent institutions of various sizes and different legal forms, offering more than one million care places. There are more than 450.000 full-time or partially employed members of staff. Furthermore, there are about 3.600 diaconal self-help groups and other aid groups. The diaconal work is supported by approximately 18.000 parishes of the national and free churches. There are about 400.000 active voluntary Diakonia workers.

For the Lutheran World Federation diaconal work is most important. As a statement of a global consultation on the »Diaconal Ministry in the Lutheran Churches« in São Leopoldo in Brazil in 2005 put it: »Diakonia has always been at the heart of the LWF's identity«. This statement reaffirms not only diaconal ministry »as the humble service to those in need, carried out in a spirit of self-denial« and »as the prophetic critique of economic, political and cultural structures that produce and perpetuate suffering and violence, and as advocating for societal conditions conducive to a life of respect and dignity«. It goes even further when it defines diaconal ministry in light of today's challenges as essential to the church's being and mission and proposes to include – as some Lutheran churches already do – the diaconal ministry in the one, public ministry of the church. The future will show if such considerations will be received by the majority of the Lutheran churches.

At any rate, they do underline the importance of the diaconal ministry for the Lutheran understanding of the church.

Further reading:

- *The Book of Concord. The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, art.1-21, R. Kolb/T.J.Wengert (eds.), Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000.
- *The Church as Communion. Lutheran Contributions to Ecclesiology*, H. Holze (ed.), LWF Documentation No 42, Lutheran World Federation, Geneva, 1997.
- *The Apostolicity of the Church. Study document of the Lutheran-Roman Catholic Commission on Unity*, The Lutheran World Federation/Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, Lutheran University Press, Minneapolis, Minnesota, 2006.

Questions for reflection:

1. The Lutheran World Federation is a communion of an astonishing variety of churches.

How would you describe your church? What makes your church special? It is possible to talk about a “Lutheran identity” of your church? What do you think about the future of your church? Where do you see the most challenging tasks?

2. In article VII of the Augsburg Confession the church is defined as “the assembly of saints in which the gospel is taught purely and the sacraments are administered rightly.”

Is this definition helpful for your understanding of the church? Do you think that this definition is sufficient? Should be added something (the office of preaching, diaconal works etc.)?

3. Unity, holiness, catholicity and apostolicity are referred to as essential qualities or theological attributes of the church.

What do you think about those qualities in ecumenical respect? Where do you see a common ecumenical understanding, where are differences? Might this be different with different ecumenical partners?