

From Private Faiths to Public Church: 10 Theses with an Excursus on Ecclesiology

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1. To describe the United States as a multi-religious society is not only to recognize the growth in adherents of the many world religions. Even more so, it is to recognize the rampant individualism characteristic of American religious life today, described most memorably as “Sheilaism” in Robert Bellah et al, in *Habits of the Heart*. Given our self-centeredness, it is perhaps not too much of an exaggeration to say that there are over 300,000,000 religions being practiced in the United States today.
2. The problem is thus not that American society has become secularized in recent generations but that American religiosity has become privatized. It is the corporate nature of American religious life, more than religion itself, which is at risk.
3. Lutheran theological shorthand has inadvertently fed this privatization. Those of us gathered here recognize “justification by faith” as “the article by which the church [!] stands or falls” precisely because “faith” is understood as faith in God’s promise enacted in the life, death, and resurrection of Christ Jesus. But “justification by faith” is all-too-easily misunderstood as an affirmation of the value of my believing, as if justification results from the strength or sincerity of one’s personal faith (fideism) rather than from faith’s object.
4. The doctrine of “the priesthood of believers” has met a similar fate. Abstracted from its historical and theological context, Luther’s radical understanding of the corporate priesthood of all believers has been widely mis-heard and mis-appropriated as the individualized priesthood of each believer. Popularly the priesthood of believers has come to signify the belief that each person has a direct line to God; no priest or intermediary is necessary, and, as a consequence, no community is necessary either.
5. Luther himself is clear, however, that to be a priest is not at all about me and my (perceived) spiritual access or benefit. In *The Freedom of a Christian*, Luther explains that the proper work of a priest is to teach and to pray for others. Moreover, Luther is clear that this priesthood is not an innate personal characteristic, even for Christians. Christians are priests because and insofar as they share in the priesthood of Christ. This priesthood, according to Luther, is initiated at baptism and can only be exercised by those who are first on the receiving end of Christ’s high priestly ministry. Thus, Christians are not simply “priests” in a generically religious way but are fellow-priests with Christ and so also with each other.
6. The privatized understanding of Christian faith and life has unfortunate ramifications for our identity as church, since many of those who hold these misunderstandings are our own members. One common form this privatization takes is viewing churches as voluntary associations of the like-minded. Another more subtle form is the tendency of individuals to project their religious beliefs, experiences, and

worldviews back onto the collective entity, so that what's "Lutheran" or what's "Christian" is defined by generalizing my own particularities. Although the church may still be described with the biblical language of "the body of Christ," these individually-chosen and self-referenced communities fall far short of the vision of the church and its members as sharing the mind of Christ.

7. But the church is more than just the sum of its parts; the body is more than just a collection of members. The reality of our current context – the privatization of faith, and the projection of privatized understandings of faith back on the church itself – calls for a renewal and reassertion of the church's corporate identity not only in the lives of the faithful but in society as well.

Excursus: A Two Kingdoms Ecclesiology

When I introduce two kingdoms thinking in my Lutheran Heritage course, I emphasize that two kingdoms is not at all the same thing as the modern western separation of church and state, since the latter intends to limit God to the church side of the so-called wall of separation while the former insists stridently that both kingdoms belong to God. Ironically, I believe that the church makes a similar error when it attempts to locate itself, as church, only within the realm of spiritual authority (sometimes called "the kingdom of the right"). Certainly the church is the assembly of believers constituted by the proclamation of the Gospel and the administration of the sacraments (AC VII). But it is also true that "we have this treasure in earthen vessels" (2 Cor. 4:7), i.e., actual, albeit penultimate, structures. A two kingdoms perspective suggests an ecclesiology that acknowledges church *both* as the assembly constituted through Word and sacrament *and* as an earthly institution among other institutions within God's created and ordered world. When we neglect or disparage the church as institution, we are left with an ecclesiology that is basically docetic, in which the church appears to be human, but isn't really.

Temporal authority exists, according to Luther, to restrain sin and to promote the general welfare. Certainly, insofar as the church's members remain both saints and sinners, the church would seem to have need of temporal authority to restrain sinners from taking sinful advantage of each other, within the church as much as within the world. But is the presence of sinners and sin in the church the only reason to say that the church has need of temporal authority? If the Christian, precisely as Christian, is subjected to temporal authority, can one say that the church, precisely as church, is subjected to temporal authority? Let's test a few claims.

According to Luther's treatise "On Temporal Authority," temporal authority has jurisdiction over body and property while spiritual authority has jurisdiction over conscience and faith.

So ... Does the church have employees? Does the church own property? Does it carry insurance?

Temporal authority is enforced by "the sword," as Luther called it, or (we would say today) through political, legal and even military power, while spiritual authority is exercised solely through the Word of God. Spiritual authority is persuasive, rather than coercive; but, because of human sinfulness, temporal authority is authorized to use coercive measures to protect those who rely on it.

So ... Does the church rely only on Bibles and hymnals to do its work? Or does it also have constitutions, documents of incorporation, deeds of property, elected officers? Does it have established processes of discipline that it relies on when persuasion does not suffice?

Article VII of the Augsburg Confession defines the church as “the assembly of saints in which the Gospel is taught purely and the sacraments are administered rightly.” The Gospel and sacraments are what constitute the church as church. But again, is this all that can be said?

The Apology of the Augsburg Confession notes:

The church is not merely an association of outward ties and rites like other civic governments, however, but it is mainly an association of faith and of the Holy Spirit in men’s hearts (Apology VII and VIII, 5).

If we were to define the church as only an outward organization embracing both the good and the wicked ... (Apology VII and VIII, 13)

So ... the church, in the Lutheran Confessional writings, is not merely an outward association, not only an outward organization, but *it is not less than this, either*. Just as the sacrament of baptism requires water as well as God’s Word, just as the sacrament of communion requires bread and wine as well as God’s Word, so the church requires some earthly “element,” some structure, some tangible and recognizable expression. And just as the bread of holy communion can come in various forms – leavened or unleavened loaves as well as wafers – so too the structures and policies of the church may vary.

This argument that the church rightly exists under and participates in temporal authority as well as spiritual authority is reinforced by an understanding of what has traditionally been referred to as “the orders of creation”: family, state, and church. In Luther’s own understanding, if not in the understanding of later Lutheran orthodoxy, these orders are not static. “Orders of creation” refers not to some fixed original pattern but to certain kinds of structures through which created life is ordered, that is, sustained and preserved.

In “On the Councils and the Church” (1539), Luther describes these ordering structures:

The first government is that of the home, from which the people come; the second is that of the city, meaning the country, the people, princes and lords, which we call the secular government. These embrace everything—children, property, money, animals, etc. The home must produce, whereas the city must guard, protect, and defend. Then follows the third, God’s own home and city, that is, the church, which must obtain people from the home and protection and defense from the city (LW 41:177).

It’s nothing short of striking that Luther places the church within this broad category of government. Family, secular government, and the church are specific forms in which temporal authority is embodied. This does not at all undermine Luther’s definition of the church as “holy believers, and the sheep who hear the voice of their Shepherd” (Smalcald Articles, Part 3, Article XII). Just as the Christian is simultaneously saint and sinner, so too is the church simultaneously a means of God’s (right-handed) grace and a structure through which God’s (left-handed) authority is at work in the world.

It is my contention that this is not only an accurate claim about the dual reality of the church but that it is also a good and useful thing. An ambidextrous God requires – and calls forth – an ambidextrous church.

8. Congruent with this two-fold ecclesiology, the church has a legitimate two-fold function: it exists not only as an instrument of the Gospel but also as an agent in – and steward of – God’s created, ordered world. Consequently, Christian ethics includes not only the church’s work of forming the consciences and vocations of

individual Christians but also the church's own corporate, public (even political)¹ work. This latter function retains its legitimacy even when the church's members criticize its involvement in the political realm as inappropriate for a religious institution.

9. In a context of excessive individualism, the institutional church has a special responsibility to be a public advocate for the common good. The challenge before us is how to determine which particular structures, policies, and actions will best serve God's people and God's created world. Because these are (left-handed) matters of justice governed by reason, we can and will disagree about specifics. Consequently, the church's corporate actions in the public realm must be undertaken in a spirit of humility.²
10. The Triune God is at work in the church, for us, in us, and through us for the sake of the world. God wills both justification and justice, but these are not to be confused. As Christians, our work for justice is an opportunity to give an account of the hope that it is in us, but it is not, in and of itself, that hope. The church is one of the several structures through which God orders and sustains God's creation, but it is the unique locus wherein God's people are called and gathered to hear God's saving Word and to be nurtured by the sacraments.

¹ "Political" pertains to the *polis*, another of the structures God has established for the preservation of God's good creation.

² In this respect, the ELCA's constitutional distinction between "the church" (the universal body of Christ) and "this church" (the ELCA as one particular historical expression of the body of Christ) is a helpful reminder of our contingency.