

What Baptists have learned and still can learn from Luther in the doctrines of Justification and of the Church

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This article seeks to demonstrate how close Luther's teaching and Baptist convictions are. Especially in the doctrines of justification and ecclesiology Baptists have learnt and still can learn from Luther. For Luther justification is by no means only forgiveness but also spiritual renewal, so that justification and sanctification are closely linked together. The Baptist statements on the local congregation of believers and their being endowed with Christ's authority as well as the priesthood of all believers are based on Luther's teachings. Baptists attach more value to church discipline than Luther. They can nevertheless learn from his rationale of particular ministries among a community of believers.

Key Words

Martin Luther, Baptists, Justification, Church

Introduction

When a Baptist theologian is required to evaluate Luther's theology,¹ he could easily do this using the old ways of controversial theology. He would have to explain why a Baptist holds Luther's defence of infant baptism to be a mistake, perhaps even why Luther's overall understanding of the sacraments is erroneous, and also why Luther's adherence to the national church model of ecclesiology was a hindrance to a true reformation of the church and why his accusation against the Pope, that he was the antichrist,² rebounded on Luther himself, because Luther also persecuted the saints,

¹ This paper is a shortened translation of a study originally written in German; see 'Jenseits der Taufkontroverse – Wo sich Baptisten Luther anschließen könn(t)en', in: *Luther und die Reformation aus freikirchlicher Sicht*, ed. by Volker Spangenberg (Göttingen: V & R unipress, 2013), pp. 31-53. It has been presented in full length in English at the CEBTS Conference in Elstal (Germany) on 29 June 2016. For the present publication the third part of the study, treating Luther's doctrine of the two kingdoms, has been omitted on grounds of length. It will possibly be published later in an amplified version.

² See 'Passional Christi und Antichristi' (1521), in *D. Martin Luthers Werke. Kritische Gesamtausgabe* (Weimar, 1883 ff [= *WA*]) 9,676-715 and more often. For the antichrist as persecutor of Christians see especially 'Defense and Explanation of All the Articles of Dr. Martin Luther which were Unjustly Condemned by the Roman Bull' (1521), in *Luther's Works. American Edition* (St. Louis, 1955ff [= *LW*]), 32:87-88. Cf. Bernd Moeller, 'Luther und das Papsttum', in *Luther Handbuch*, ed. by Albrecht Beutel (Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 2005), pp. 106-15.

namely the Anabaptists (see Revelation 13.7). Happily, this kind of controversial theology was widely disposed of in the twentieth century, because the ecumenical dialogues have shown that meeting representatives of other confessions in the spirit of Christian love makes a more differentiated perception of each other possible, a common inquiry of biblical truth, mutual learning from one another, and the discovery of numerous areas of consensus.

In view of the ecumenical situation it is quite appropriate for a Baptist theologian to go beyond the controversy about baptism and the associated matters of dispute and to emphasise instead the areas that we have in common. Thereby it should not be denied that unsolved theological contradictions remain, but it should nevertheless be demonstrated that there are many points of agreement between Baptist and Lutheran theology, perhaps more than many on each side have recognised. A look at the common ground might help Lutherans and Baptists to appreciate better their belonging together within the Reformation tradition and to accept this firmly. This would have to be connected with the will to deepen further the areas of agreement already existing.

In this paper two doctrinal statements of Luther are to be presented. In my judgement, open-minded Baptists can and should be in theological agreement with these, without having to deny their own convictions – but rather from these statements they can learn to express their own convictions in a theologically well thought-out manner. I am going to talk about theological concepts which Baptists have received from Luther and which they can better understand and explain, if they continue to learn from and argue with Luther. Such a comparison between Lutheran and Baptist doctrinal statements is not easy, as there are no sources on the Baptist side – at least in German speaking countries – that could stand comparison with the thematic breadth and theological elaborateness of Luther's works. For this reason, I have to risk on occasion presenting the Baptist position from my own point of view, without wishing to speak only for myself, but rather to formulate what I perceive as being the oral tradition that has shaped the thought of Baptist theologians and church members in Germany up to the recent past.

The theme of this paper makes it necessary to undertake a particular interpretation of Luther's theological statements – which for one who is neither a specialist on Luther nor even a member of a Lutheran church, also presents a risk. I have looked for support from the literature of Lutheran experts, first of all from recent complete overviews of Luther's theology,³

³ Oswald Bayer, *Martin Luther's Theology. A Contemporary Interpretation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008); Bernhard Lohse, *Luthers Theologie in ihrer historischen Entwicklung und in ihrem systematischen Zusammenhang* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2007); Paul Althaus, *Die Theologie Martin Luthers*

but also from various individual studies. The view of Luther's theology, which I have gained from these readings, has of course been influenced by my own preconceptions, but which I nevertheless hope is broadly accurate and also acceptable for Lutherans.

In the available space I am not able to examine the whole of Luther's theology in order to find agreements with and/or differences from Baptist convictions, but must rather choose some particular themes. I shall do this by confining myself to the areas of the doctrine of justification and of ecclesiology, leaving the issue of political ethics, in particular the relationship between church and state, for a further publication. I do this, conscious of the fact that in these areas we shall speak about subjects that are also of particular interest to Baptists.

Justification as Forgiveness and Renewal

The term 'justification', which lies at the centre of Luther's theology, is only rarely used in Baptist theology and preaching in German speaking countries. We speak rather of reconciliation between God and mankind, of the redemption of the world through Jesus Christ, or of the conversion and new birth of humans. In substance the Lutheran teaching on justification is nevertheless present in Baptist confessions as well as in the Baptist preaching tradition.⁴ The redemption of mankind is based on the person and work of Christ alone and is given to the sinner through grace alone, and that by means of the preaching of the word, which is received in faith, so that humans become children of God through faith alone and not through their own works. The Lutheran exclusive formulae *sola fide, sola gratia, per Christum solum* are solid constituent parts of Baptist faith. Of course Baptists emphasise particularly the *unity* of faith and works, forgiveness of sins and new life, justification and sanctification, admittedly so that more weight is usually placed on the second of these paired terms, that is, on the new life, the works, and the sanctification. That is the reason why Luther's central term 'justification' is relatively seldom used by Baptists. They saw and see that in the Lutheran tradition a form of teaching and preaching often dominates, in which justification is understood merely as absolution from sins, as a divine judgement on humans, which in the humans themselves

(Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 1994); Paul Althaus, *Die Ethik Martin Luthers* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 1965).

⁴ Cf. Volker Spangenberg, 'Was ist uns wichtig? Grundlegende Identitätsmerkmale der Rechtfertigungslehre aus der Tradition für die heutige Situation (Baptismus)', in *Rechtfertigung in freikirchlicher und römisch-katholischer Sicht*, ed. by W. Klaiber and W. Thönnissen (Paderborn: Bonifatius, 2003), pp. 57-71; Uwe Swarat, 'Das baptistische Verständnis von Rechtfertigung und die "Gemeinsame Erklärung zur Rechtfertigungslehre" von Lutheranern und Katholiken', in *Von Gott angenommen – in Christus verwandelt*, ed. by U. Swarat and others, Beiheft zur Ökumenischen Rundschau Nr. 78 (Frankfurt am Main: Lembeck, 2006), pp. 177-197.

leaves everything as it was before, and which therefore requires the supplementary sanctification. This image corresponds on the one hand to the traditional Catholic critique of the Lutheran teaching, and on the other hand to the attitude of the Anabaptists, who regarded the Lutheran position as a neglect of discipleship of Christ, as well as to the leitmotif of the Pietists, who missed in the Lutheran churches the sanctified life of Christians living according to the Word of God and who attempted to redeem this shortcoming. The Baptists in Germany adopted the idea of the Anabaptists and the Pietists that the Lutheran teaching on justification, in a certain sense, had stalled half-way and did not progress from the forgiveness of sins to the ethical renewal of life. This is a reproach that one could perhaps direct against the post-Reformation Lutherans, but not against Luther himself.

Luther used the term 'justification' or 'justify' in a dual sense.⁵ On the one hand he used it to label the judgement with which God declares humans to be righteous, that is, the judicial act of calling a sinner righteous. But Luther uses the term also to describe the event by which the human gains a substantial share in the righteousness of Christ. This involves the human becoming factually righteous. For Luther the forensic, judicial act of declaring to be righteous is closely connected to the effective act of God by which the inner being of humans is changed.

In the first instance justification is for Luther actually a forensic event. The declaration of the sinner to be righteous occurs when God does not count his sins against him, and when God recognises a righteousness in the sinner, which the sinner does not have himself, but which is conferred to him from without and is recognised as an alien righteousness, namely the righteousness of Christ. The righteousness of the Christian is none other than the righteousness of Christ. Justification as a declaration of righteousness or as recognition of righteousness before God is, according to Luther, only available to us through faith. Believing means that we accept God's judgement over us: His judgement over us without Christ, that is the condemnation, but also His judgement over us for the sake of Christ, and that is acceptance by God. Faith does not justify in and of itself, but solely in that it apprehends Christ and allows Christ to dwell within the person. In this understanding of faith as an internal fellowship with Christ the two aspects in which Luther speaks of justification combine: justification as being

⁵ Regarding Luther's doctrine of justification see, in addition to the complete overviews of Luther's theology mentioned in note 2, also *Angeklagt und anerkannt. Luthers Rechtfertigungslehre in gegenwärtiger Verantwortung*, ed. by Hans Christian Knuth (Erlangen: Martin-Luther-Verlag, 2009); Dietrich Korsch, 'Glaube und Rechtfertigung', in *Luther Handbuch*, pp. 372-81; Albrecht Peters, *Rechtfertigung. Handbuch Systematischer Theologie*, vol. 12 (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 1990), pp. 27-62; Otto Hermann Pesch, *Theologie der Rechtfertigung bei Martin Luther und Thomas von Aquin* (Mainz: Matthias-Grünwald-Verlag, 1967 (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1985); Wilfried Joest, *Gesetz und Freiheit. Das Problem des Tertius usus legis bei Luther und die neutestamentliche Parainese* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1968).

declared righteous for the sake of Christ and justification as being made righteous through Christ.

The actual making a human righteous, that is his new, ontological righteousness, results out of Christ living in his heart through faith. Christ works as a power of God that transforms us sinners from within to become like Christ's being. Luther says that Christ fulfils God's law for us in a twofold manner: first through his own working for us outside us, then also through the Holy Spirit in us, whereby we follow Christ. Faith is thus fellowship with Christ and as such is at once the origin of a new obedience to God, the beginning of a new being. Receiving forgiveness in faith is likewise receiving the willingness to serve one's neighbour in love and to struggle against sin. Both aspects of the justification of the sinner belong intrinsically together, but remain nevertheless different. Righteousness arising from the imputation of Christ's righteousness differs from the substantial righteousness, in that the former is already completed in the present: We *are* righteous. Being made righteous is, however, not yet completed, but has just begun. Here we must say: We *shall become* righteous. There is therefore an 'already but not yet': We are already righteous in the sense that Christ's righteousness has already been imputed to us; we are not yet righteous in the sense of being substantially righteous.

Looking at the ontological righteousness of man does not cause Luther to lose sight of Christ. The new creation, which has begun in a Christian, does not change the fact that the Christian is still a sinner. The ontological righteousness has just begun, and what does not correspond to it in our lives is and remains guilt. We cannot reckon up our progress in sanctification against our failures, so what we still owe God can only be forgiven for the sake of Christ. As long as we live, our obedience and our love remain mixed with sin, and for this reason the works, which we do in faith, cannot justify us before God; they remain half-hearted, half-complete and stained by sin and can only for Christ's sake not be accounted to us as guilt.

Martin Luther's understanding of justification thus involves forgiveness and renewal, acquittal and transformation, the end of the old and the beginning of the new man, and these are closely connected. Sanctification as a process of growth of the unfolding new life belongs for him to the term justification. In this respect, Luther's theology of sanctification is much more closely connected with justification than with Philipp Melancthon or even John Calvin.⁶ For Melancthon forgiveness

⁶ See Philipp Melancthon, *Loci communes 1543*, transl. by J. A. O. Preus (St. Louis: Concordia Publ. House, 1992), pp. 85-96 and John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. by J. T. McNeill, trans. by F. L. Battles, The Library of Christian Classics, vol. XX (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), III. 11. Compare Albrecht Peters, *Rechtfertigung* with his book, written as a Lutheran theologian together with

and renewal also belong together, but he reserves the term justification for forgiveness, for the liberation from the *guilt* of sin. The renewal or the liberation from the *power* of sin is seen as a necessary consequence of justification, but cannot be considered as an element of justification itself. This restriction of the term justification to the imputation of the alien righteousness of Christ has probably contributed a lot to the fact that Lutheran theology after the Reformation increasingly placed the aspect of making righteous – the effective element of the process of justification – behind the aspect of imputing righteousness. Calvin, too, distinguished between justification and sanctification, or forgiveness of sins and the new birth. Justification is for him also not a making righteous, but rather the validation of righteousness, to which the spiritual renewal, which stretches out over the whole Christian life, must be added. Although for Calvin the actual inner renewal of the justified is so important that in his *Institutio Christianae Religionis* (Institutes of the Christian Religion) he even placed this aspect before the aspect of forgiveness; he did not retain Luther's accomplished integration of forgiveness and renewal.

Luther's well-known formula *simul iustus et peccator* (sinner and saint at the same time) depicts the dual character of Christian righteousness as imputed and substantial. For Luther the Christian is both a saint and a sinner. Both are true at the same time, because each is spoken of in a different manner. We are sinners with regard to God's stringent judgement; we are righteous with regard to His great mercy. In ourselves we are sinners in our reality on earth; we are righteous through God's judgement that reckons us as righteous for Christ's sake. Both are always true at the same time for the same person and this throughout his whole life; and it applies to him totally. As a Christian I am not part-sinner and part-righteous, but rather wholly sinner and wholly righteous, according to whether I look at myself or look to Christ.

Nevertheless, Luther's 'sinner and saint at the same time' does not just describe two total aspects of the Christian, but also partial aspects, that is, there is also a 'partly-partly'. In this partial aspect, the Christian is righteous because he struggles against himself as the old man, through the power of Christ that dwells in his heart by faith. He is therefore righteous, insofar as the substantial righteousness in his life is being unfolded. But he is at the same time a sinner, because in his whole life he has to struggle against sin and commit the old Adam to death.

This simultaneous being a sinner and a saint holds here because we shall never fully overcome the sinful flesh in this life. The established

the Catholic Otto Hermann Pesch, *Einführung in die Lehre von Gnade und Rechtfertigung* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1994).

wording *simul iustus et peccator* is understood by Luther in a twofold sense, as a statement about the totality and about the parts, and correspondingly our behaviour as Christians is to be understood in a twofold sense. In consequence of the total aspect we have to commit ourselves daily to God's judgement over us, in that we need to look away from ourselves daily and establish ourselves in Christ. From the partial aspect it emerges that we experience a dying of the old man and a gradual growing of the new man: I *am* fully righteous and yet I must still *become* fully righteous.

My impression is that this twofold understanding of the sinner-saint paradigm has been hardly recognised in Baptist theology until now. When Baptists (at least in the German speaking countries) do employ this term, it is usually used as evidence that holiness has not been given sufficient space in Luther's teaching on justification. The partial aspect of the term has not been recognised, only the total aspect, and thus the term has been interpreted as though it means no spiritual growth and no overcoming of sin, but only a continual swing between sin and forgiveness. On the other hand, I perceive that Lutheran theologians too seldom teach sanctification as a growth process, as Luther did. I often hear and read Luther's statement that 'to make progress is nothing else than always to begin'.⁷ The sentence that immediately follows is usually ignored: 'To begin without making progress is to fail.' Luther recognises growth and advancement in righteousness.⁸

The subject matter touches of course on the exposition of the seventh chapter of the Epistle of Paul to the Romans and the question whether Romans 7 describes the situation of Christians, of which Luther himself was certain, or if the not yet regenerated human is being described there and the Christian is not yet the subject until chapter eight, of which modern exegetes are convinced. Linked to this is the thorny question that above all divides Catholics and Lutherans: whether the remaining desire (Greek *epithymia*, Latin *concupiscentia*) should be regarded as sin and the Christian precisely for that reason is both a saint and a sinner, or if the evil lusts in Christians denote only a potential for sinning, so that the Christian is substantially no longer a sinner, but rather a righteous being. Here a wide field is opened for us, into which we must not enter, to avoid wandering from our topic.

Nevertheless, I do not wish to close the section on the doctrine of justification without having drawn attention to the fact that Luther had such a high regard toward good works, which arise from faith, that we can find in him even an early form of the *sylogismus practicus* (English *practical*

⁷ 'Dictata super Psalterium' (1513-16), *LW* 11:477.

⁸ That Luther's phrase 'always to begin' certainly does not describe being a Christian as a Sisyphean challenge, in which we are continually being thrown back to the starting point, but rather as a continuous progression, was clearly elaborated by Theodor Dieter, *Der junge Luther und Aristoteles* (Berlin / New York: W. de Gruyter, 2001), pp. 317-25.

sylogism), which is usually considered to be typically Calvinistic, that is, we see evidence of faith through good works. According to Luther, works cannot bring about our salvation, for they become good works only through faith. The good works arise from faith. But there is also a converse relationship between faith and works, namely on the level of knowledge. Luther also says: From the works I can recognise if true faith is present in me and in others, or if it is merely a feigned or dead faith. When a human being lives at ease with his gross sins, then it is clear that God has not given him any forgiveness. However, when we can see good works, works of love, when we can perceive struggle against sin and new obedience, then we can be certain that real faith is present. As scriptural warrant for this order of knowledge, Luther gives above all the proof texts 2 Peter 1.10 and Matthew 6.14ff; he also takes up the message of James' Epistle in a positive manner. Luther sticks with the notion that works can neither attain salvation nor guarantee it, but they can give us assurance of salvation, because they are fruits of faith.

Let us now proceed from the teaching on justification to that on ecclesiology.

The Christian Church as a Community of Priests

From its beginnings Baptist ecclesiology has held three central assertions:⁹ firstly, that the Christian church is a community of believers who voluntarily come together at a place in the name of Jesus; secondly, that the gathered congregation has all authority, which Jesus conferred upon the Christian church; and thirdly, that the members of the church are all 'priests' in the sense that they are all endowed with spiritual gifts and are called to participate in the life of the church, and all have the basic right to take part in the public preaching of the Word and to lead in baptism and the Lord's Supper. This ecclesiology would be historically inconceivable without the ecclesiology of Martin Luther and it corresponds in individual points more closely to Luther's understanding of the Church than many Baptists

⁹ See Karen E. Smith, 'Kirche als Gemeinschaft der Gläubigen. Der Bundesgedanke in der Ekklesiologie des frühen Baptismus', in *Baptismus. Geschichte und Gegenwart*, ed. by Andrea Strübind and Martin Rothkegel (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2012), pp. 23-43; Paul Beasley-Murray and Hans Guderician, *Miteinander Gemeinde bauen. Ein anderer Weg, Kirche zu sein* (Wuppertal und Kassel: Oncken-Verlag, 1995); Wiard Popkes, *Gemeinde – Raum des Vertrauens. Neutestamentliche Beobachtungen und freikirchliche Perspektiven* (Wuppertal und Kassel: Oncken Verlag, 1984); Edwin Brandt, 'Vom Bekenntnis der Baptisten', in *Ein Herr, ein Glaube, eine Taufe. Festschrift 150 Jahre Baptistengemeinden in Deutschland*, ed. by Günter Balders (Wuppertal und Kassel: Oncken Verlag, 1984), pp. 175-232 (pp. 191-224); Hans Luckey, 'Die Gemeinde der Gläubigen', in *Die Baptisten*, ed. by J. D. Hughey, *Die Kirchen der Welt*, vol. 11 (Stuttgart: Evang. Verlags-Werk, 1964), pp. 58-72; Ernest A. Payne, *The Fellowship of Believers. Baptist thought and practice yesterday and today* (London: Kingsgate Press, 1952).

recognise. In order to show this, I shall briefly sketch Luther's ecclesiology.¹⁰

Luther finds the Christian Church concisely and clearly defined in the Apostles' Creed. He understands the term *communio sanctorum* (communion of the saints) in the third article as an explanation of the term immediately preceding it, *sancta ecclesia catholica* (the holy, Catholic Church). The holy Catholic Church should therefore be understood as a communion of the saints, or, as Luther preferred to say, a 'community of saints'.¹¹ In his Large Catechism he described the term *communio sanctorum* with the words 'a congregation composed only of saints', or a 'holy community'. Thus Luther's definition of the church does not start with the institution, nor from the hierarchy or the church as an institution for salvation, as it has long been seen by the Roman Catholic Church. He understands the Church to be primarily a congregation, a fellowship of people, a 'community of pure saints'. For this reason, he disliked the word 'church', as he mistakenly derived it from the Latin word 'curia', that is, from the papal administration in Rome, and because he observed that the Germans thought of church first of all as a stone building. Luther in contrast understood 'church' to be the believing people and therefore translated in the New Testament throughout the Greek word *ekklesia* with 'Gemeine', that is 'congregation/community', or 'Christianity'.

His best-known formulation of the term for Church is found in the *LW* Articles and reads: 'God be praised, a seven-year-old child knows what the church is: holy believers and "the little sheep who hear the voice of their shepherd"'.¹² The church is therefore the body of believers who are called into the congregation by the voice of their shepherd Jesus Christ. Faith, which makes people members of the Christian congregation, comes from hearing the voice of the Good Shepherd. Because faith comes from hearing (Romans 10.17), not only the believers but also the Word of God belong to the concept of church. As believing people of God, the Church is created by the Word of God. The Church is therefore in essence an assembly of believers and for that reason a *creatura verbi* (creation of the Word).

Up to this point most Baptists will be able to follow Luther and possibly even perceive that Baptist ecclesiology has often stood and still

¹⁰ Cf. in particular Dorothea Wendebourg, 'Kirche', in *Luther Handbuch*, pp. 403-14; Ulrich Kühn, *Kirche. Handbuch Systematischer Theologie*, vol. 10 (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagsaus, 1980); Karl Holl, 'Die Entstehung von Luthers Kirchenbegriff', and 'Luther und das landesherrliche Kirchenregiment', in idem, *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Kirchengeschichte, vol. I: Luther* (Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck 1932 and 1948), pp. 238-325 and pp. 326-80 as well as my article 'Die Kennzeichen der wahren Kirche (notae ecclesiae)', *Theologisches Gespräch* 24 (2000), 4-19.

¹¹ See Luther's Large Catechism, in *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, ed. by Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (Minneapolis, 2000) (= *BoC*), pp. 435-38 (p.437).

¹² See *Book of Concord*, pp. 324-25.

stands in danger of building the church on the basis of fellowship-engendering actions of believers, and not letting it be grounded in the Word of God that creates faith.¹³ The mutual relationship between Word and faith in Luther's theology should actually serve as an incentive and corrective for Baptist ecclesiology.

Another point made by Luther's ecclesiology has often led to critical questioning from the Baptist side, and that is his belief in the invisibility or hiddenness of the church. For Luther, the hiddenness of the Church results from the fact that the Church is a community of believers, because the faith of a person cannot be identified by others. Christ as Head of the Church is likewise invisible, and the Church, as a spiritual community, is a work of God that is not manifest to everyone, but can only be recognised as a work of God through an illumination wrought by the Holy Spirit. The hiddenness of the Church of Christ was especially important for Luther in order to oppose the Roman Catholic claim to power. The Pope does rule over the visible church body on earth, but not over the hidden church, for her members are not known by any man, not even by the Pope. The papal ban can excommunicate someone from the visible church, but not from the invisible church.

Luther, however, did not consider the hiddenness of the Church to be absolute, but understood it rather as an essential secret of the Christian church, which is hidden from the eyes of the world. The true church is for him both invisible as well as visible, hidden and revealed, depending on the starting point. The invisible church always possesses visible signs, by which one can recognise that the true people of God are present. Luther holds such visible signs of the church to be first of all the preaching of the gospel and the administration of the sacraments according to the gospel; in some later statements he included confession, the calling of ministers, prayer, afflictions and persecution. He described it most aptly when along the lines of Romans 10.10 he differentiated between the faith of the heart and the confession of the tongue. One cannot see the faith of the heart, but the believers can be recognised on account of their confession. It is therefore valid that 'the congregation is visible because of the confession'.¹⁴ Thus Baptists will also be able to say with Luther that the church is in her nature both hidden and nevertheless recognisable by means of the Word and her confession.

We have to return to the key term 'communion of the saints', because Luther gives this term a deeper significance than that the church is simply a

¹³ Cf. my article 'Der Gemeindebund - mehr als ein Zweckverband?' In *Theologisches Gespräch Beiheft 2* (2001), 3-32.

¹⁴ 'The doctoral disputation of Johannes Macchabäus Scotus' (1542), *WA* 39 II, 161, 8. This text has not yet been included in *LW*.

gathering of holy people. By 'communion of the saints' Luther also understands the giving and taking of the believers with one another and the working for each other. Communion of the saints means for him joint property and a joyful exchange, as it is prefigured in the relationship of the individual to Christ. Christ put off His glory in order to take on our misery, sin and condemnation, and we may be rid of our misery and receive the glory and the life of Christ. It is also thus, according to Luther, in the life of the church. Nobody lives for himself alone; rather, each always lives for the other. The faith of other Christians, their obedience and prayer are a help to me in my doubts, in my poverty, and in my lack of power. This happens in a hidden way, in ways that only God knows, but it also happens recognisably through the petitionary prayers of the church and 'mutual conversation and consolation of brothers and sisters' – *per mutuum colloquium et consolatio fratrum*.¹⁵ Communion of the saints means for Luther, above all, applying one's own righteousness for other sinners, not distancing oneself from fallen and weak fellow Christians, but rather placing oneself at their side and in this solidarity trying to help them out of their sin.

This is a deep understanding of what the Church is, because it is a deep understanding of what Christ does for us. At the same time, it takes seriously the awareness that the communion of the *saints* is always also a communion of *sinners*, who are not only in need of divine forgiveness but also of human representation. Nevertheless, Luther understood the solidarity with sinners, which belongs to the nature of the church, in the manner that it also includes solidarity with a degenerate church, and for this reason sharply repudiated and indeed opposed building visible congregations of saints and believers. For him the true Church practically can arise only in the framework of a national, established church that is, within an institution, which as *corpus permixtum*, 'mixed body', includes good and evil people. As free-church people we must at this point critically argue that Luther distorts the difference between the forms of an established church and a free church, when he discredits the fundamental principle of the free churches from the outset as an expression of spiritual pride. Even a church of voluntary members, which exercises church discipline, will – if it understands itself correctly – not claim to be without sin, but will understand the holiness of the congregation as well as the effective justification of the individual as a process of growth, which is never completed in this life and which nevertheless may not be abandoned. Apart from that, we may not limit the confession of Christ in word and deed, which Luther names as an outward sign of the Church,¹⁶ to a 'core congregation', lest the hidden and the visible church should become two churches.

¹⁵ Smalcald Articles, *BoC*, 319.

¹⁶ See 'On the Councils and the Church' (1539), *LW* 41:149-150.

In the introduction to his *German Mass and Order of Service* of 1526, Luther let it be known that he considered an alternative form to the national church to be possible. He states here that those 'who want to be Christians in earnest and who profess the gospel with hand and mouth should sign their names and meet alone in a house somewhere'.¹⁷ That would be a voluntary congregation of confessing Christians who came together to celebrate their own service of worship, and who would, according to Luther, also celebrate baptism and the Lord's supper, do Christian works and practise church discipline according to the rule in Matthew 18. 15ff. Here we have one of the few instances where Luther develops a church model which is not based on a national church. However, he develops this model only theoretically. He wrote: 'I neither can nor desire to begin such a congregation or assembly or to make rules for it. For I have not yet the people or persons for it.' You may historically judge as you wish this explanation of why he did not actively build such a congregation. The fact that Luther considered a voluntary church of seriously-minded Christians as a fundamentally legitimate expression of protestant churchdom, is not at all diminished by his reluctance to put this into practice. The Anabaptists first and then the free churches arising from the Puritans and Evangelicals did indeed put into practice what Luther was not yet willing to venture.

Luther was the first to give theological reasons for the spiritual authority of every local congregation. This arises out of his concept of church, which lets the hidden Church of Jesus Christ become visible where God's Word is preached, where it is believed and confessed in word and deed.¹⁸ The congregation of believers gathered at one place around the sermon and the sacraments is for him the basic form of the Christian Church. Such a local church has both the right and the power to assess all teaching and teachers, that is, to call preachers and pastors, to commission them in their ministry and to dismiss them. It thus possesses all those rights that in the Roman Church had been reserved for the bishops, the councils, and the Pope.¹⁹ The office of bishop is for Luther identical with the office of the local church pastor. Nevertheless, Luther did not champion a purely Congregationalist church constitution, because he wanted the trans-local unity of Christendom to gain a visible form too. This is a way of understanding the church that has received too little attention in Baptist teaching and practice in general.²⁰ As the hidden, universal Church is made

¹⁷ LW 53:64.

¹⁸ See 'On the Councils and the Church' (1539), LW 41:149-150.

¹⁹ See 'That a Christian Assembly or Congregation Has the Right and Power to Judge All Teaching and to Call, Appoint, and Dismiss Teachers, Established and Proven by Scripture' (1523), LW 39:305-314.

²⁰ Cf. my article 'Ortsgemeinden und überörtliche Strukturen im Baptismus aus der Perspektive reformatorischer Ekklesiologie', in Die "Autonomie" der Ortsgemeinden und ihre Gemeinschaft, Ein Lehrgespräch des Baptistischen Weltbundes, Theologisches Gespräch *Beiheft* 10 (2009), 103-116.

visible in every local congregation, every local church is from the outset dependent on the others and is linked to them in a unity – a unity that must be equally as visible as the unity of the local congregation itself. It was therefore correct that Luther organised regular visitations of the local congregations and attempted to create a regional office of protestant bishops. Had this last effort been more successfully implemented, it would have averted the emergence of church government through sovereigns and would have made possible the development of a regional organisation of the protestant church that was independent from the state.

Luther could state that a Christian congregation has the right and power to call and install preachers and ministers from its midst, because for him the priesthood of all believers was the norm of the church order. That not only persons consecrated by bishops are priests, but all Christians, is for Luther a result not only of the clear witness of Holy Scripture, but also of the nature of the Church as a communion of the saints. Being a priest means, for Luther, acting as a representative for others before God, offering sacrifices to God and proclaiming the Word of God to others. In this sense, Jesus Christ became a priest for us all, and in this sense all Christians should sacrifice themselves for others, pray for them and proclaim God's Word to them. A Christian thus becomes a priest for others. Included in this priesthood of all believers is the spiritual authority and fundamental right of every Christian to preach, to baptise, to administer the Lord's Supper and to listen to the confession of others. Luther makes what in the Catholic Church is reserved for the ordained priests a commission for all Christians.

Where there is an orderly congregational life, the public exercise of this spiritual authority must nevertheless be linked to a proper calling through the congregation. Luther argues that there should be particular ministries in the congregation of priests, to avoid chaos when all members of the congregation would want to preach and administer the Lord's Supper at the same time. Thus, he argued from reasons of good order. This point of orderliness is not only important for practical, organisational reasons, but also for specific theological reasons, for the sake of the priesthood of believers. The equality of all believers in their spiritual authority would be harmed, when individual believers would claim their rights for themselves without a calling coming from the congregation. The congregation must therefore call an appropriate person to represent the others in their name in preaching, administering the sacraments, hearing private confessions of sin and providing absolution. Whoever is called in this way gains no advantage over the congregation, but is rather a servant to the congregation in their common commission from God. Luther's understanding of ministry arises directly from the concept of the priesthood of believers.

We may not make such an assertion without pointing out at the same time that, until today, this issue has been controversial in the interpretation of Luther. Since the nineteenth century the so-called 'transfer theory' (German *Übertragungstheorie*) has stood in opposition to the 'institution theory' (German *Stiftungstheorie*). The transfer theory was conceived by Johann Höfling (1802-53),²¹ the practical theologian from Erlangen. The institution theory was most vehemently advocated by the Marburg theologian August Vilmar (1800-68).²² The transfer theory derives the ordained ministry from the priesthood of all believers and grounds it in the congregation, 'from the bottom up', as we have just seen. The institution theory, on the other hand, grounds the ordained ministry 'from above', from Christ, and derives it from the office of the apostles.²³ It seems to me from more recent investigations that the balance is clearly in favour of the transfer theory.²⁴ Apart from the question of which interpretation of Luther is more precise, a protestant theory of ministry can only be based on the transfer theory, if it does not wish to separate ministry and congregation or clerics and lay people in an unbiblical manner. Above all, the transfer theory is the theologically superior solution, because it can integrate the justifiable concern of the institution theory, namely the grounding of the ordained office from above. The creation of an orderly office of preaching and ministry is not simply a merely human organisational affair, but rather it is Christ Himself who calls and installs His servants by means of the congregation. The ministers then exercise their ministry, as Luther puts it, 'in behalf of and in the name of the church, or rather by reason of their institution by Christ, as St. Paul states in Ephesians 4[.8], "He received gifts among men."²⁵ The installation through the church and the appointment through Christ coincide for Luther. The called office-bearer does not thereby gain any higher status above the congregation. He only stands before the congregation because and as long as he is carrying out his office, that is, as he discharges his ministry

²¹ Johann W. F. Höfling, *Grundsätze evangelisch-lutherischer Kirchenverfassung* (Erlangen: Blaessing, 1853); cf. Manfred Kießig, *Johann Wilhelm Friedrich Höfling. Leben und Werk*, Die Lutherische Kirche, Geschichte und Gestalten; vol. 14 (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 1991).

²² August F. Chr. Vilmar, *Die Lehre vom geistlichen Amt* (Marburg und Leipzig: Elwert, 1870); cf. Herbert Kessler, *Gott mehr gehorchen als den Menschen. Christlicher Glaube zwischen Restauration und Revolution – dargestellt an der kurhessischen Renitenz* (Gießen: Brunnen, 2005); Gerhard Müller, *Die Bedeutung August Vilmars für Theologie und Kirche*. Theologische Existenz heute; N.F. 158 (München, 1969). Another important spokesman of the institution theory has been the expert in constitutional law Friedrich Julius Stahl (1802-61) in Berlin in his work *Die Kirchenverfassung nach Lehre und Recht der Protestanten* (Erlangen: Blaessing, 1862); cf. Aric Nabring, *Friedrich Julius Stahl - Rechtsphilosophie und Kirchenpolitik* (Bielefeld: Luther-Verlag, 1983).

²³ Cf. Gilberto da Silva, 'Luthers Rezeption in den Vorgängerkirchen der SELK am Beispiel der Lehre vom geistlichen Amt der Kirche', in *Freikirchenforschung* No. 20 (Münster: Verein für Freikirchenforschung, 2011), pp. 117-132.

²⁴ See Harald Goertz, *Allgemeines Priestertum und ordiniertes Amt bei Luther* (Marburg: Elwert, 1997); Klaus Peter Voß, *Der Gedanke des allgemeinen Priester- und Prophetentums. Seine gemeindeftheologische Aktualisierung in der Reformationszeit* (Wuppertal und Zürich: R. Brockhaus, 1990).

²⁵ 'On the Councils and the Church' (1539), *LW* 41:154.

in the name of Christ. But in this sense, according to Luther, every Christian stands before each other in God's commission, when he has a word from God to say to him. Luther's understanding of the office of the ministry is thus completely oriented towards the task of disseminating the gospel.

It is important, from a Baptist perspective, to appreciate Luther's teaching on the priesthood of all believers: firstly, so that Baptists may remain conscious of whom they have to thank for this key teaching, and that in this respect they have a close affinity to Lutheran ecclesiology. Then also, because Baptists can learn from Luther that the priesthood of all believers by no means stands in contradiction to the calling or ordaining of individual ministers. The calling of office-bearers is a necessary consequence of the common priesthood. If all members of the congregation have the same spiritual authority, then the exercise of this authority must be ordered in such a way that no individual can declare himself to be responsible on his own; rather the congregation must pronounce a corresponding calling of an individual. That is the core of the protestant understanding of ministry that Baptists not only *can* share, but *should* share.

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Contents

iii

Baptistic Theologies
Volume 8, No. 2
Autumn 2016

Contents

Editorial	iv
What Baptists have learned and still can learn from Luther in the doctrines of Justification and of the Church Uwe Swarat	1
Anabaptists and the Magisterial Reformation – the Question of Grace and Free Will with Particular Emphasis on the Danish Context Johannes Steenbuch	16
Faith and Art: Reforming Perspectives Graham Sparkes	33
‘An Intolerable Usurpation’: Theology and Practice of Ministry among Early Particular Baptists Ian Birch	46
Book Reviews Stuart Blythe, Toivo Pilli, Dorothy McMillan, and Ian Randall	61