

Introduction to Volume 3

PAUL W. ROBINSON

What does the gospel mean for the church, and what is the church? Martin Luther famously asserted, “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.’”^a True though that statement might be, it nevertheless belies the complexity and nuance of his body of work on the church and its sacraments. Having rejected a one-sided institutional understanding of church, Luther asserted the primacy of God’s word—both the preached word and the sacramental word—in creating and sustaining believers and thus in forming and sustaining the church. The Spirit gathers this church around the oral proclamation of forgiveness in Christ, delivering that same forgiveness in baptism, absolution, and the Lord’s Supper. Luther rejected other understandings, whether Rome’s contention that it alone was the church and owned the sacraments or the teachings of other reformers that stripped the sacraments of both the Spirit’s work and Christ’s saving power and presence. Luther refused to tolerate a church built on human works, whether it was the pope’s authority or the faith or works of individual believers. This is the thread that runs through all the texts in this volume:

^a *The Smalcald Articles*, in BC, 324.

the church and sacraments belong to Christ, who founded and instituted them.

That is not to say that Luther's thinking on the church and sacraments did not develop over time in the course of his reforming activity. Although he began by defining his understanding of church and sacraments over against the teachings of Rome, he soon had to counter the claims of others attempting their own reforms, such as Ulrich Zwingli (1484–1531) and the Anabaptists. So, Luther found himself fighting these very different theological battles on multiple fronts and at the same time. The texts gathered here, which cover the period from 1520 to 1539, tell this story and highlight the theological themes Luther developed in the course of these controversies.

Luther came into his own as a reformer in 1520 when he published a series of remarkable treatises. Up until that point, he had defended his criticism of indulgences and in so doing had been forced into arguing about the limits of papal authority. When he debated Johann Eck (1486–1543) on that topic at Leipzig in 1519, Luther asserted that the papacy was a human institution and that even general councils could and had erred. He was left with the plain meaning of Scripture as the final authority for Christian faith and life. Furthermore, as he had already repeatedly stated, the central message of Scripture was the death and resurrection of Christ for the salvation of sinners as a pure gift received by faith. This understanding of the gospel contradicted the idea prevalent in Luther's day that the church existed to dispense the sacraments, which were themselves the source of grace (understood as a spiritual power) needed to perform the good works that were required for salvation. *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church*, one of the well-known 1520 treatises, is in essence a lengthy critique of this sacramental system. The treatise answered the question of what needed to be changed in the church so that the gospel could be proclaimed free of error, addition, and ambiguity. Most important, only those sacraments that Scripture clearly attests had been instituted by Christ should remain: baptism and the Lord's Supper. (Although in the first part of the treatise Luther also includes confession and absolution, by the end of the text he has subsumed this under baptism so that it no longer stands as a separate sacrament.) Even these sacraments, however, had been misunderstood and misrepresented, with the result that Luther's task included peel-

ing away layers of tradition and theological speculation in order to restore their scriptural and gospel-centered practice.

The Babylonian Captivity proved remarkably influential and effectively raised the issue of precisely how the Roman church needed to be changed. One thing that desperately needed to be changed to reflect the new Evangelical teaching was the Mass. Luther had argued against transubstantiation and argued for the right of the laity to receive wine as well as bread when they communed. As important as these criticisms were, they were argued as much on the basis of ancient church tradition and a suspicion of Aristotelian ontology as anything else. His most piercing stroke, however, was to reject the idea that the Mass was a sacrifice offered to God on behalf of the living and the dead. He insisted instead that the bread and wine were Christ's body and blood given to Christians for the forgiveness of sins. The sacrament was entirely God's gracious doing, and the presider was no longer a priest who sacrificed but God's minister who served. The question raised in some readers' minds, however, was what this would mean for the communion liturgy, the service that the Lutheran reformers continued to call the Mass. What should an Evangelical Mass be?

In Wittenberg, members of the reform party there attempted to answer this question during Luther's enforced absence at the Wartburg castle following the Diet of Worms. The first laypersons, including Philip Melancthon (1497–1560), received the wine in September 1521. Then, during Christmas of that year, Luther's university colleague Andreas Bodenstein from Karlstadt (1486–1541) celebrated Mass in German without wearing vestments, and he required all those attending to receive the wine and to take the bread in their hands. The perceived forced nature of this reform, among other things, led to Luther's return to Wittenberg, where he excoriated the leaders of reform for their legalism in a series of eight sermons known as the *Invocavit* sermons.¹ In these sermons, Luther also pointed a way forward by insisting on sufficient teaching and sensitivity to conscience when enacting reform. Luther put this approach into practice, not least when, after having proposed revisions in the Latin Mass in 1523, he authored the *German Mass*, which was published early in 1526. Written in response to numerous requests and a proliferation of German liturgies, Luther placed teaching of the basics of the Christian faith and an Evangelical approach to

1. See LW 51:67–100; TAL 4:7–45.



A scene depicting Luther's capture by friends, who carry him away to safety at the Wartburg castle, shown in upper left.

communion at the center of this liturgy. His concern for patient instruction—above all, of children—is apparent throughout his approach to the worship service.

Luther's concern for the common people and their faith also informed his reaction to those who differed from him in their understanding of the sacraments, that is, the Lord's Supper and baptism. As the Reformation movement expanded, differences arose among the Evangelicals themselves, and Luther found himself at odds with former colleagues like Karlstadt and other reformers like Zwingli over a host of issues that tended to

coalesce around the question of the Lord's Supper. Although agreed in their opposition to Rome, they disagreed over how or whether Christ was present in this sacrament. Luther's contention that the body and blood of Christ were truly present with the bread and wine, even for unbelievers who might receive these elements, seemed too Romanizing to many. Yet for Luther, this question went to the heart of the gospel—Christ himself given for the forgiveness of sins. The bitter nature of the controversy is reflected in the sheer weight of treatises written on the subject and the number of reformers who engaged in the debate. This significant Reformation issue is here represented by the treatise *That These Words of Christ, "This Is My Body," etc., Still Stand Firm Against the Fanatics*. Written in 1527, Luther insisted that the New Testament accounts left no alternative to a literal interpretation of Christ's words instituting the supper. He dealt with his many opponents in broad categories rather than individually, since the sheer number of different arguments already made it almost impossible to address each one. This treatise was far from the last word on the subject, but it offers a clear presentation of the major points in the debate.

Central to the question of the Lord's Supper was whether God, in fact, worked through such outward ceremonies. Those who rejected such divine activity called into question the sacrament of baptism, and particularly the practice of infant baptism. Although questions about the baptism of infants arose from self-appointed prophets who visited Wittenberg during Luther's absence in 1521, insistence on believer's baptism rather than infant baptism became the hallmark of a wide spectrum of groups known collectively as Anabaptists. Luther addressed the views of Anabaptists in the treatise *Concerning Rebaptism* in 1528. Once again, he responded out of his concern for faith and the gospel. For him, to insist that only adults who confessed their faith could be validly baptized, as the Anabaptists did, made faith uncertain and rooted the sacrament in human faith rather than in Christ's promise. In this way, faith became yet another good work with which to please God, and the gracious nature of God's gifts given in baptism was obscured, if not denied completely.

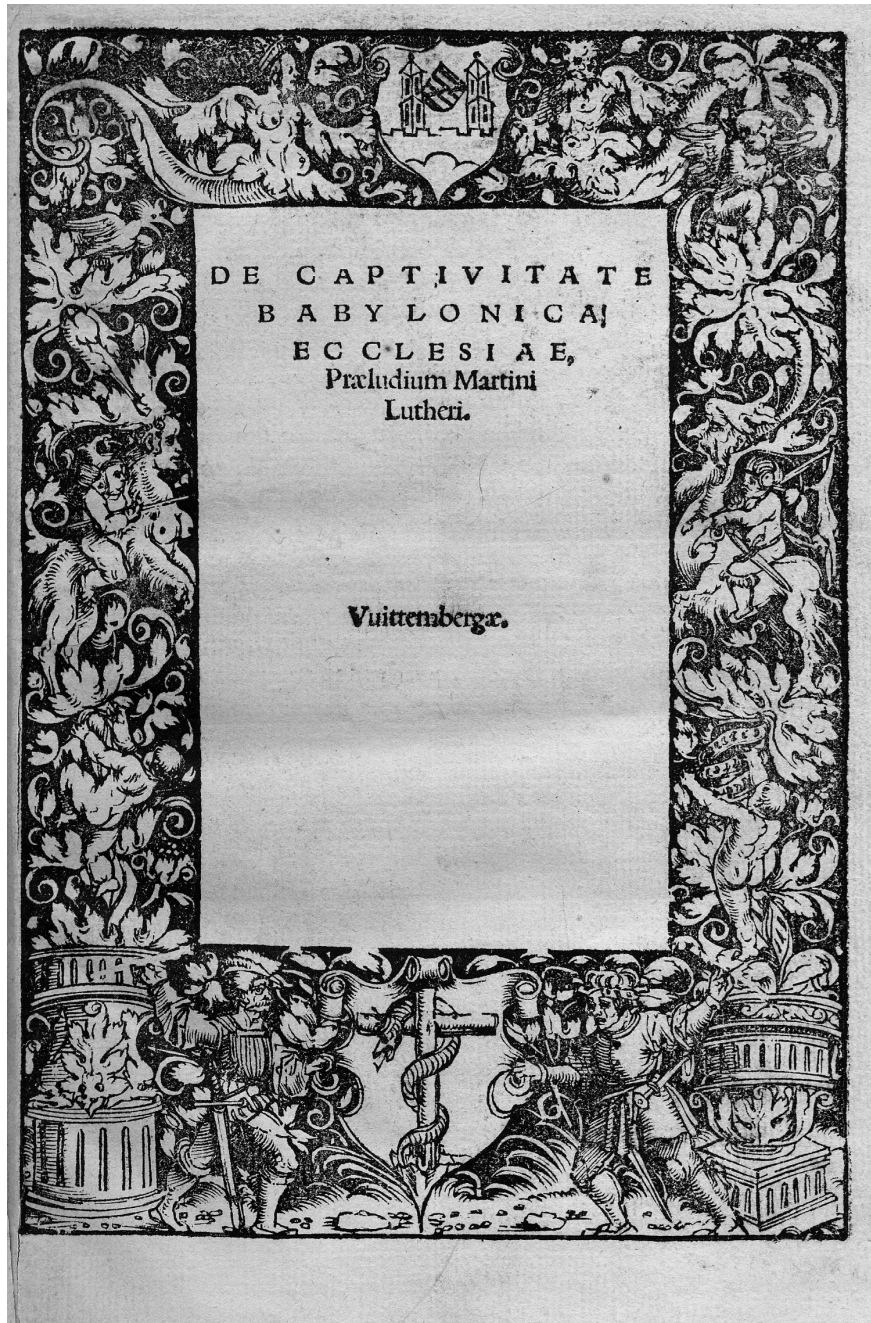
In 1539 Luther returned to the question of the nature of the church. Prompted by the pope's call for a general council, he penned *On the Councils and the Church*, a treatise that addressed

both Rome's exclusive claim to the title *church* and the nature and authority of councils. In this treatise, Luther displayed his experience and wide reading as he marshaled citations from the church fathers and from histories of the councils to demonstrate the feebleness and fragility of his Roman opponents' arguments from tradition. He concluded that Rome was not alone in being the church and that councils had no authority in and of themselves but only as witnesses to the truth of the gospel. Building on a definition of the church's visible "signs" first proposed in 1521, he addressed the question of how the church might be identified in the world and provided both a list of marks of the church and the central claim that the gospel had to be at the very center of any claim to be the people of God.

Luther was not an easy or polite opponent, as these treatises demonstrate. Yet in every situation represented here, his passionate response was rooted in his radical understanding of the love of God in Christ Jesus and a fierce desire to make that gracious love real in the Christian assembly marked by word and sacraments and in the lives of believers.



This icon depicts Emperor Constantine (middle figure) accompanied by the bishops of the First Council of Nicaea (325). The figures are holding the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed of 381.



Title page of Luther's *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church* [*De Captivitate Babylonica Ecclesiae*], published in Wittenberg by Melchior Lotter the Younger (1520).