

The 1983 Martin Luther Jubilee: Inge Lønning

In November 1983 the *Lutheran Council in the USA* sponsored a series of lectures in honor of the 500th birthday of Martin Luther. One of the many eminent speakers was **Dr. Inge Lønning** of Norway, who, for many years, was a leading member of the international Lutheran-Roman Catholic dialogue. His address, "Luther and Ecumenism," is transcribed below from the audio-tape of his presentation.¹

First, a word about **Inge Lønning** (1938-2013) as a theological professor, although he was also simultaneously a high-ranking politician and member of the Norwegian Parliament. Trained as a New Testament scholar, he was Professor of Systematic Theology at the University of Oslo from 1971 until his retirement in 2008. In 1985 he was elected Rector of the University, serving until 1992, while maintaining his chair as Professor of Systematic Theology. He published widely a number of books and articles, among them is a chapter titled, "The Holy Scriptures," in *The Lutheran Church Past and Present*, (Augsburg Publishing House, 1977). In 1986 he received an honorary doctorate from Luther College. See more on **Lønning** under "[Unsung Heroes](#)."



Inge Lønning

Inge Lønning: Ladies and gentlemen, dear co-celebrators, it is a new and indeed a great experience for a Norwegian to have the privilege of celebrating a German among Americans. That triangle I suppose already grants us a slightly ecumenical flavor to our point of departure.

When the most stimulating of all topics during this week of hard labor, Luther and ecumenism, has been entrusted to a Norwegian, however, it might in addition be due to the fact that, I suppose it might be argued, that it was the good old Vikings who started up the whole enterprise of ecumenism, admittedly in a somewhat pagan way. But nevertheless, they are the predecessors of modern managers of ecumenism, at least in one respect: They loved traveling. They loved traveling all over the world establishing ecumenical relationships.

Now to come to the serious part. One of the real strange things about Martin Luther, 1983, is his crossing of historical, cultural, linguistical, denominational, philosophical, theological, and political borders. In earlier centuries Martin Luther was celebrated by Lutherans alone, and, by the way, that might be the point where Lutherans have been most faithful to the famous *particula exclusiva* of the Reformation. He was celebrated by Lutherans alone using him first of all for the purpose of strengthening their own self-consciousness, building higher and stronger walls against the world surrounding them. I think the most interesting fact of the Luther Celebration 1983 is that **Luther obviously has escaped at last**. Has escaped from his imprisonment in a Lutheran, a German, a Nordic, and American, and all together Western pattern of religious and cultural tradition.

Today Luther's writings are being translated and published in Japan, Korea, and China. He is a central concern of Marxist scholarship in an officially proclaimed atheist state. During the last 20 years many of

¹ Bolding added below for emphasis.

the most brilliant studies on Luther's theology have been made by Roman Catholic scholars. And today it is even possible, I guess Luther himself with all his vivid fantasy, would not have been able to imagine that, to be celebrated in a national shrine of the Immaculate Conception!²

I have had the privilege in two weeks this year to travel around in East Germany celebrating Luther there, too. And it has struck me that it is surely today also as it was in the sixteenth century that **the Reformation was and is a grassroots movement**. In the first four months after the reopening of the Castle Wartburg this year, they have had 750,000 people inside the walls of that castle.

And the great joke in East Germany in May this year surrounding the celebration of the first of May was the question: "What's the difference between Karl Marx and Martin Luther?" because they were celebrating the one hundredth anniversary of the death of Karl Marx at the same time. The difference between Karl Marx and Martin Luther is that Karl Marx died a hundred years ago, while Martin Luther is still alive.

To be sure Luther is, in a very practical and realistic sense, still alive through his impact on the history of the twentieth century. And today that means not least as **a figure of ecumenical importance** for the whole Christian church. Nevertheless, we should face the fact that the image of the Reformation as the great loss of unity within the Christian Church remains with us. Wasn't it after all the division of the church that was the most important effect of the Reformation?

In Worms in May this year I saw just outside the great cathedral where Luther stood before the Emperor and the whole Roman empire in 1521, just outside of this great cathedral is a huge cross about four meters high, a huge cross made of rough wood split from the top and almost to the bottom, stained with red color alluding to blood, the wound of **a disrupted, divided Christianity**.

It is a fact that Luther himself did not understand himself, the Reformation, and what had gone on in his lifetime in this way. He did not understand the Reformation as the starting up of the ongoing division of the Christian church. He did not think of himself as some kind of founder of a Christian church, of a Christian denomination in the modern sense of the word. As a matter of fact, Luther himself understood it quite the other way around. He understood his own historical task, his vocation within the church, as a **vocation to realize the unity of the Christian church which had been distorted by the government of the church from the central point, Rome**. Luther himself says in the Preface to his first published lectures on the Bible, the Commentary on Galatians from 1519 that he did not realize that he had been striking some kind of wound point when he took up the whole question of indulgences in 1517. He had thought, as he said, that he was just making some consideration on a question of small importance, and it was afterwards that he realized that he had been touching on a question of wide and great importance in the present church.

In his preface to the writings in Latin, 1545, the year before Luther died, Luther calls God himself as witness that he did not have any intention whatsoever when he started up with the Ninety-Five Theses in 1517, he had no intention whatsoever to start up some kind of process. He did not realize what he was doing. And, as a matter of fact, he says that all his writings, all he had done from 1517 and up to

² The 1983 Martin Luther Jubilee included a two-hour concert in the Basilica of the Shrine of the Immaculate Conception in Washington, D.C. About 2,500 people attended the concert.

1545, were by no means intentional. He had no plan to do anything. He was just forced, **compelled by the circumstances**, to remain faithful to his own calling as a Doctor of Theology and as a pastor of the congregation at Wittenberg.

As a matter of fact, Luther says that he has in his whole life made only one decision for himself out of intention and planning and that was the decision to enter the monastery, and that was a mistake. All he has done in his entire life has not been made out of some kind of planning but just because he had to do so just at that very moment, and just there because God had put him just into that situation where he had to remain faithful. In his will put down on the paper in February in 1542 in a very informal manner, Luther presents himself in the following way:

“Finally, I also ask of every man, since in this gift or in endowment I am not using legal forms and terminology (for which I have good reasons), that he would allow me to be **the person which I in truth am, namely, a public figure, known both in heaven and on earth, as well as in hell**, having respect or authority enough that one can trust or believe more than any notary. For as God, the Father of all mercies, entrusted to me a condemned, poor, unworthy miserable, sinner, the gospel of his dear Son and made me faithful and truthful, and has up to now has preserved and grounded me in it, so that many in the world have accepted it through me and hold me to be a teacher of the truth, without regard for the pope’s ban, and the anger of the emperor, kings, princes, clerics, yes, of all the devils, one should surely believe me much more in these trifling matters; and especially since this is my very well-known handwriting, the hope is that it should suffice when one can say and prove that it is Dr. Martin Luther’s (who is God’s notary and witness in this gospel), earnest and well considered opinion to confirm this with his own hand and seal.”³

We should realize that Martin Luther himself was always from the very beginning to the last moment **insisting on the unity of the Christian church**. That is the Christian church is by its very nature one because **Christ himself is one, the gospel is one**, and Christ was given for the salvation of all humankind.

It might be argued that Luther was forced by his theological opponents to discover what we could call, with a somewhat anachronistic term, “the confessionality,” or perhaps we should avoid that anachronistic notion, and rather say the partiality or **the sectarian character of the late medieval Western church**.

During the dramatic years from 1517 to the Diet of Worms 1521, Luther had to realize that the church was already a divided, a deeply disrupted, and split church. And paradoxically it was so because of its **formal, established order of a centralistic, hierarchically governed body**. Facing the single argument over and over again put forward by his opponents and last with a greatest authority by Cardinal Cajetan in Augsburg in 1518, the authority of the church, that is, the authority of the hierarchy is the first principle and everyone, every single Christian, has to submit to what the bishops, governed by the Bishop of Rome, teach. Faced with this single argument, Luther realized that **the true unity of the church had been lost** and was replaced by the ordinary kind of unity of a political institution in this world, held together by human law and human order.

³ *Luther’s Works* 34:297.

In his proceedings from Augsburg, Luther says as follows:

“Not that I condemn or deny the new rule of the Romans of our day, but I do not wish the power of scripture to be reduced to mere words, and I reject the folly of certain very simple-minded men who would fix the church of Christ in time and place, whereas Christ said, “The kingdom of God is not coming with signs to be observed” [Luke 17:20]. And who dare deny that one can be a Christian who does not submit to the pope and his decretals. Thus (and this is an interesting argument in the sixteenth century) **for more than eight hundred years they have thrown out of the church of Christ Christians in all the Orient and Africa** who never were under the Pope or even understood the gospel in that sense.”⁴

He [writes] also in a later passage:

“There are also those who brazenly state in public that the pope cannot err and is above scripture. If these monstrous claims were admitted scripture would perish and consequently the church also, and nothing would remain in the church but the word of man. These flatterers actually seek to arouse hatred for the church, then its ruin and destruction. For this reason, my reader, I declare before you that I cherish and follow the church in all things. **I resist only those who in the name of the Roman church strive to erect a Babylon for us** and wish that whatever occurs to them—if only they could move their tongue enough to mention the Roman church—be accepted as the interpretation of the Roman church, as if Holy Scripture no longer existed according to which (as Augustine says) we must judge all things, and against which the Roman church certainly never teaches or acts.”⁵

A year later at the great debate with Johannes Eck in Leipzig, 1519, Luther comes back to this argument of **the universal church through the centuries**. And again, it is his opponent that forces him to realize the universal order of the church:

“That he [Eck] vilifies me as a heretic and a Bohemian however, saying that I rekindle old ashes etc., he does out of modesty and by virtue of his office of consecrator, according to which he consecrates everything by using no oil other than the venom of his tongue.

“Since I cannot let this sort of name-calling pass unnoticed, you, my reader, must know that as far as the absolute authority of the Roman pontiff is concerned, I do not spurn the venerable consensus of all the faithful Christians in Italy, Germany, France, Spain, England and other countries. But one thing I pray the Lord, namely, that he never permit me to say or believe anything which will please Eck as he now is; that I do not in behalf of the freedom of the will hold up Christ, the Son of God, as a public spectacle and in behalf of the Roman church deny that **Christ lives and rules in India and the Orient**; or—so I may also give this merry maker of riddles a riddle—that I never reopen with Eck the Constantinopolitan sewer and celebrate the ancient murders in Africa as new martyrdoms of the church.”⁶

⁴ LW 31:280-81.

⁵ LW 31:285.

⁶ LW 31:314.

Luther also tells his readers:

“In rebuttal to Eck I brought up **the Greek Christians during the past thousand years, and also the ancient church fathers, who had not been under the authority of the Roman pontiff**, although I did not deny the primacy of honor due to the pope. Finally, we also debated the authority of a council. I publicly acknowledged that some articles had been wrongly condemned.”⁷

It’s an interesting fact and often a neglected fact that Luther has this keen interest in church history as the history of the universal church, and I think it should be noticed that Luther, just because of the conflict emerging within the Western tradition of the church, the Western branch of the Christian church, because of this very conflict **he was forced to look outside the borders of the church established by Roman canonical law**. Outside the borders he discovered the church in the true universal sense of the word. He discovered **the church in all kingdoms of the world**.

And on this point, it is interesting that Melanchthon has, I suppose by accident, because Melanchthon did not understand very much of theology. He, as a matter of fact, it could be said of **Melanchthon, as it was said of a countryman of mine, that he is able to understand everything, and that is all he is able to understand**. As a matter of fact, he did not understand too much of theology, at least not of Luther’s theology. But by accident he has picked up this point very faithfully in the seventh article of the Augsburg Confession in the definition of the church. And he has done it in greater length and in a very interesting way in his Apology to this article where he states that the true church are the believers in the gospel “scattered all over the world,”⁸ in all kingdoms, on islands (thinking of England I suppose), and throughout all human borders from sunrise to sunset.

The Christian church is, by its very nature, global. That is the first point to be made from Luther’s understanding of the church. Now what does Luther mean when he accuses **the Roman church** of his day with the accusation of being **a sectarian church**, being a party, as he says over and over again.

By going two years further on, 1521, to the writing with the curious title, “Answer to the hyper-Christian, hyper-spiritual, and hyper-learned book by goat Emser in Leipzig, including some thoughts regarding his companion, the fool Murner.” In this polemic writing we find this passage:

“Christ was so diligent in taking precautions against the erection of any man’s law in his church that he wanted to say everything beforehand even though it was neither remembered nor understood. Now the sects of the pope turn it around and what **to attribute to human law what Christ preached against human law**. And yet they do not want to be heretics but the masters of all Christians!

“In this matter the sects of the pope are up to their necks in the Manichaeian heresy. They [the Manichaeians], too, claimed that the Holy Spirit, who was to teach more than what is written in Scripture, was promised. St. Augustine overcomes this masterfully and proves that everything the promised Holy Spirit should teach is fulfilled and written down by the apostles.”⁹

⁷ LW 31:322.

⁸ The church “scattered throughout the world” is found twice in *Apology* VII-VIII:10, 20; *Book of Concord* (Tappert 170, 171; Kolb/Wengert 175, 177), but the rest of the quote is from elsewhere in Melanchthon.

⁹ LW 39:170.

The next passage:

“That is why it is really an abominable, un-Christian blasphemy of Emser that he wants Roman usage and law kept just as though they were written in Scripture, although universal Christendom neither affirms nor keeps them since **the Greeks and Orientals, who are also Christian** (even though it annoys Emser and the Pope’s sects), **have not accepted them**. And even if they were to belong to universal Christendom, it would still not be an error of faith not to keep them. To obey human laws does not make a Christian. Not to obey them does not make one a non-Christian, even though it is not right to despise willfully and without reason what the masses believe and do, it is tyrannical and inhuman, indeed, devilish, on the other hand, to burden, drive, and impose human laws without cause upon a single Christian, to say nothing of coercing a whole mass of them.”¹⁰

Luther is telling us that the Christian church could not and should not be understood in the way we are understanding political institutions and bodies. That is to say, **the unity of the church could never be safeguarded or maintained or regained by human efforts of law-making, by human efforts of diplomacy, deals of cooperation, and so on**. All that kind of business may be useful and good for Christians. But it does not constitute the unity of the church, because the unity of the church is given as a fact. It’s not some kind of ideal or some kind of program realized by human efforts. The church is realized once and forever by God in Jesus Christ. But it is, as long as this world remains, **a hidden reality only to be seen by faith in Christ himself**. The church is by its very nature one, and by its very nature universal because **Christ is one and universal**.

But there is another level of this whole problematic that we have to add to this to become a true picture of Luther’s ecclesiology. The unity, or perhaps we should say the oneness of the church, is not only the unity of a global fellowship, a universal fellowship. It is also **a unity within every single Christian congregation at the grassroots level**. The church is the fellowship of all believers, as the German version of the seventh article of Augsburg Confession states. And here again we are facing a quite central part of Luther’s understanding of the church. **The church is not a hierarchy with some laymen added to it**. The church is by its very nature one in this respect, too, that is, the church has only one priest, that is, Christ himself. **The church cannot have a vicar or a priesthood re-presenting Christ because that would mean that Christ himself is absent, that he has left his church. Christ himself is present in his church and therefore everyone who believes in him is a priest**.

Luther never gave up, as some modern scholarship has maintained, his central idea of **the priesthood of all believers**. He was sticking to that until his death. The priesthood of all believers is just a way to proclaim the gospel itself, that **Christ is the only priest in heaven and on earth**. Luther failed, perhaps, or at least the later Lutheran tradition failed, to realize **this central concept of the priesthood of all believers**, and I suppose this is due to many historical circumstances. It is certainly due to the state church tradition. It is also due to the development of a new kind of hierarchy within the church, the Lutheran pastors. It is due to many other historical circumstances, too.

But I think that we have to realize today, when we are facing the problems of the Christian church in the modern world, and the whole problem of ecumenism today, we should have to realize that **the Christian church**, because it is not a political institution or a political body, **can never be identified from its top**.

¹⁰ LW 39:171.

The church can never be identified by a universal council. It can never be identified by a single person, the bishop of Rome, or someone else. It cannot be identified at the national level or the international level. The church, by its very nature, could only be identified **at the grassroots level where the gospel is proclaimed, where the sacraments are administered, where two or three believers come together to worship God in Jesus Christ.**

I think that what makes Luther a living reality in our world of today is first of all this realistic understanding of everyday life in this world, everyday life as transparent of **the active God**. That is Luther's most fundamental theological concept: **God is active**. He is always **active** upon the world he has created and upon every single human being. **God is active** and that is to be seen in the vocation given to every single believer. He is to serve God together with all other sinners. He is to serve God in prayer, thanksgiving. He is to serve God in the troubles and problems of everyday life together with his neighbor as long as he lives in this world.

Perhaps the most helpful point we could listen to Martin Luther facing the problems of the unity of the church and the unity of the world today might be in his teaching on marriage where he states that all the troubles of everyday life are to be experienced by married people, and therefore wise and learned men in all ages have warned against marriage and against women. But they failed to see that **God is the Creator, the always active Creator**. And they failed to see the most simple facts that **we have all started our lives as a child coming from one man and one woman**. And that is the most fundamental of all vocations, **to be a child**. And therefore it is not accidental that we are told in the New Testament that **the future** toward which we are moving as believers is called **the freedom of the children of God**.

I think the great challenge given by Luther to us today is to realize this in the realistic, everyday sense that **Christian faith is to be lived in the body** and that is to say, in the very concrete, everyday problems facing us in the most elementary fellowship between human beings, between man and woman, between parents and children.

What has that got to do with the unity of the church and the business of ecumenical management? It has to do with the very central point of Christian faith, that **God is the active one. And we are those who are acted upon**. One of the most impressive passages of the later writings of Luther I have found in his lecture on Genesis where he helps his readers that he has over and over again been tempted **to tell God what he should do** to safeguard the unity of his church and to run all the other problems of this world and undoubtedly he states that God has laughed and said, "Oh dear, Martin, I know very well that you are a wise and well educated person. But still it was not and will not be the habit in this house that a Martin or a Peter tells me how to govern or gives me advice about how the problems of the world should be solved."¹¹

I think that is a message that we should listen to. Thank you for your patience.

¹¹ We welcome help in identifying where this quote is found in Luther's lectures on Genesis.