

Johann Wilhelm Friedrich Hoefling: The Man And His Ecclesiology

Part 2—His Doctrine of the Church

Joel L. Pless

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Two of the most important words in the lexicon of every confessional Lutheran pastor are *text* and *context*. How one approaches and interprets a text is predominately determined by the text's context. In order to comprehend why the nineteenth century Erlangen theologian J. W. F. Hoefling has garnered so much attention regarding his understanding of ecclesiology, one first must research the times, dare we say the context, in which Hoefling lived and wrote.

Issues revolving around the doctrines of church and ministry were the "hot topics" in nineteenth century Lutheranism, both in Europe and among the fledging Lutheran synods in America. For the majority of the century, Lutherans on both sides of the Atlantic heavily debated church and ministry issues. What was the cause? Napoleon's conquests and subsequent downfall had thrown Europe into turmoil in the early nineteenth century. Among the numerous German states there was a rising crescendo of nationalism and a desire for a united Germany. Prussia, the largest and most populous of these states, took the lead in the German unification movement. At the tercentennial of the Lutheran Reformation in 1817, King Friedrich Wilhelm III of Prussia began to issue a series of decrees which were intended to unite the Lutheran and Reformed churches in Prussia. In reaction to the Prussian Union and the rationalism which permeated the German university system, a confessional Lutheran movement, the *Erweckung*, arose, inspired by Pastor Claus Harms of Kiel, who republished Luther's *Ninety-Five Theses* and then wrote ninety-five of his own, protesting the influence of the Prussian Union, Kant, and rationalism in European Lutheranism. Hoefling identified himself with the aims of the *Erweckung*, and it was in this context that he contributed to the church and ministry debates of the mid-nineteenth century, before his untimely death in 1853.

In his monograph, *The Doctrine of the Church in American Lutheranism*, Conrad Bergendoff outlines another dynamic in addition to the Prussian Union, which caused church and ministry issues to be on the forefront of doctrinal discussions in both Europe and North America, namely, the 1848 political revolutions:

The Prussian Union and the political events of 1848 forced the German church to reconsider the relationship of church and state. No longer, after 1848, was the prince the undisputed legal head of the territorial church. Thus the questions arose, who was the head? And what is the nature of the church freed from state control? To mention the names of those who entered into the debate, wrote articles and books on the subject, and followed out the implications, is to call the roll of most of the leading churchmen of the period: Höfling, Sohm, Harless, Kliefoth, Vilmar, Stahl, and Loehe. And to this list Walther's name belongs. The subject is large and has many ramifications, including the whole question of the place of the church in society and in a state.¹

Hoefling was most active in writing about church and ministry issues in the years immediately following the political unrest of 1848.

When one scans the literature about Hoefling's ecclesiology, one finds significant negative reaction to his understanding of the ministry, but next to nothing on how he understood the church. Franz Pieper, in his *Christian Dogmatics*, devotes six pages to describing and then refuting Hoefling's doctrine of the ministry, whereas he does not at all address Hoefling's doctrine of the church.² Adolf Hoenecke's *Evangelical Lutheran*

¹ Conrad Bergendoff, *The Doctrine of the Church in American Lutheranism*, The Knuebel-Miller Lectures—1956 (Philadelphia: Board of Publication of the United Lutheran Church in America, 1956), 28-29.

² Francis Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, vol. 3 (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1953), 443-449.

Dogmatics mentions Hoefling's name in connection with the doctrine of the ministry, but not the church.³ Kurt Marquart's *The Church and Her Fellowship, Ministry, and Governance* thoroughly treats Hoefling's understanding of the ministry but not his understanding of the church.⁴ The first article in this series on Hoefling focused on his life and his influences. This article will focus on Hoefling's ecclesiology proper, his understanding of the church, followed by a third article on his understanding of the ministry. Pertinent sections of Hoefling's foundational work on ecclesiology, *Grundsätze evangelisch-lutherischer Kirchenverfassung* (*Principles of Evangelical Lutheran Church Polity*), will be presented in addition to insights by two theologians, Holsten Fagerberg and Manfred Kiessig, who have studied Hoefling's ecclesiology in-depth. Kiessig wrote his doctoral dissertation on Hoefling's life and work, and his outline of Hoefling's understanding of the church will be followed.

Kiessig presents the fullest treatment of Hoefling's theology. He delineates four key concepts in Hoefling's understanding of the church: 1) The invisible church is the inner communion of faith; 2) The visible church is the gathering institution for faith; 3) Confession (the Lutheran Confessions) is the distinguishing mark of the true visible church; 4) Mission work is the means of the dissemination of the church.⁵

What was the specific context of Hoefling's writings on the doctrine of the church? Many of his thoughts on ecclesiology were recorded in reaction to his theological foil, Friedrich Julius Stahl (1802-1861). Stahl was a jurist and Prussian government official who was a staunch opponent of the Prussian Union. Stahl's ecclesiastical views were quintessentially "high church." He regarded the church as a divinely mandated, authoritative institution with the episcopacy as the ideal church polity.⁶ In contrast, Hoefling promoted a congregational understanding of the church, somewhat akin to the view that C. F. W. Walther of the Missouri Synod championed in the United States.

Hoefling's first major point about the nature of the church is hardly provocative. He emphasizes the distinction between the visible and invisible church. He regarded this teaching as "an essential component of the Protestant doctrinal concept."⁷ Kiessig maintains that for Hoefling, this assertion is a necessary consequence stemming from the Lutheran distinction of law and gospel.⁸ Central to Hoefling's concept of the church is his aversion to the Romanist idea of turning the visible church into an institution which would function as a means of salvation (*Heilsvermittlungsanstalt*), an idea which Hoefling regarded as a confusion of law and gospel.⁹ In order for justification by faith to occur, the concept of the visible church being an institution whereby salvation must be secured must be rejected, for this concept stands in contradiction to the material principle of Protestantism, which teaches the immediacy (*Unmittelbarkeit*) of believers to Christ.¹⁰

How did Hoefling proceed to explain the relationship between faith and the church? According to Kiessig, Hoefling emphasized the functioning of the Holy Spirit, which he described in connection with the explanation to the Third Article in Luther's Small Catechism. Through the gospel, the Holy Spirit works faith in the individual¹¹ and brings believers into fellowship with Christ. Thus Christ is the common Lord over all believers, and therefore all believers are united with Christ and they themselves experience a unity with each other. Believers have fellowship with Christ, their faith is sealed through Word and Sacrament, and this is also

³ Adolf Hoenecke, *Evangelical Lutheran Dogmatics*, vol. 4, trans. Joel Fredrich, Paul Prange, and Bill Tackmier (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1999), 189.

⁴ Kurt E. Marquart, *The Church and Her Fellowship, Ministry, and Governance*, Confessional Lutheran Dogmatics, ed. Robert D. Preus and John R. Stephenson, vol. 9 (Fort Wayne: The International Foundation for Lutheran Confessional Research, 1990), 112-119.

⁵ Manfred Kiessig, *Johann Wilhelm Friedrich Höfling: Leben und Werk*, Die Lutherische Kirche, Geschichte und Gestalten, Band 14 (Gütersloh, Germany: Gütersloh Verlagshaus Gerd Molm, 1991), 6-7.

⁶ Bengt Hägglund, *History of Theology*, trans. Gene J. Lund (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1968), 364-365.

⁷ Johann W. F. Hoefling, *Grundsätze evangelisch-lutherischer Kirchenverfassung*, 3., sehr vermehrte u. verbesserte Auflage (Erlangen: T. Bläsing, 1853), 7.

⁸ Kiessig, 111.

⁹ Hoefling, *Grundsätze*, 4.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 5.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 6.

their bond with one another.¹² It is in this sense that Hoefling understood the Christian church, defining it as "the product of the crafted, common faith by the Holy Spirit in Christians" and as "the organism of the common activity of this faith."¹³ To support his definition, Hoefling in his *Grundsätze* cites the Apology of the Augsburg Confession, Article VII, where the church is defined as "a fellowship of faith and of the Holy Spirit in hearts" and in the Augsburg Confession, "the congregation of saints and true believers."¹⁴

To sum up, Hoefling's basic understanding of the church is readily recognizable to confessional Lutherans. He believed that the church was both invisible and visible, but since faith is invisible and since believers cannot be ascertained in an external organization, "the church is first and essentially an inner and invisible fellowship."¹⁵ According to Hoefling, there are two reasons why the true church is invisible: 1) As a product of justification by faith, the church cannot be in a legitimately established way a designated, divine institution; 2) Faith, which indeed distinguishes the members of the church from the hypocrites and evil ones, cannot be known by human standards.¹⁶

Hoefling's second key concept in his doctrine of the church is that the visible church is the gathering institution for the faith. While Hoefling was consistently careful to maintain that the church was first and foremost an inner and invisible fellowship of believers, he also conceded that there was a need for an external, visible fellowship which had to be implemented and operated.¹⁷ Since the Christian faith sought to be expressed and to be activated, "communication and fellowship building"¹⁸ must be arranged. What was involved with this communication and fellowship building? According to Hoefling in his *Grundstutze*: "The commonality of faith generates necessary commonality of the Confessions, the commonality of the means of grace collaterally generates common practices, collective pious emotions generate corporate adoration and worship of God in Christ."¹⁹ Moreover, according to Hoefling, the inner fellowship of believers, worked by the Holy Spirit through Word and Sacrament, from the onset has intrinsically an aspect of externality. Hoefling saw the sacrament of baptism as having from the onset, an extrinsic, established bonding characteristic; likewise in the Sacrament of the Altar, there is a specific, divinely given essence (*Kern*) and central point (*Mittelpunkt*) for liturgical fellowship.²⁰ Thus Hoefling saw in the Christian church an inner fellowship expressed through outward activities. For Hoefling, the church is not merely the product of the activity of the Holy Spirit, but also the *place* of activity and the organ of activity of the Holy Spirit; while the church is the association of believers, it is also at the same time the gathering (*sammelnde*) institution for the faith.²¹ Hoefling was careful always to maintain a distinction between the invisible and visible church, while explaining the interrelationship between the two.²²

In addressing the meaning of Hoefling's ecclesiology, Kiessig asserts: "Whoever wants to understand, appreciate, and critically question Hoefling's ecclesiology, has to first discover the concerns which stand behind his ecclesiology."²³ What were Hoefling's chief concerns in the way he presented his doctrine? Hoefling accented the distinction between the invisible and the visible church for several reasons. He insisted that the claim that a divinely instituted, officially designated church is necessary as a means of salvation stands in opposition to justification by faith alone and to the immediacy of believers' relationship to Christ.²⁴ Kiessig also

¹² Johann W. F. Hoefling, "Der Gegensatz des Protestantismus und Katholicismus im Betreff der Lehre von der Ordination und dem Kirchenamte," *Zeitschrift für Protestantismus und Kirche* 1, 1838: 34. Quoted in Kiessig, 112.

¹³ Hoefling, *Grundsätze*, 6.

¹⁴ Kiessig, 112-113.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 113; Hoefling, *Grundsätze*, 7.

¹⁶ Kiessig, 113.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Hoefling, *Gegensatz*, 34. Quoted in Kiessig, 113.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ Hoefling, *Grundsätze*, 10.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² Kiessig, 114-116.

²³ Kiessig, 118.

²⁴ Hoefling, *Grundsätze*, 5; Kiessig, 118.

points out that Hoefling had another more pastoral (*seelsorgerlicher*) reason. Through this distinction between the visible and invisible church, the erroneous view that all who belong to an established orthodox church also are members of the True Church, and that members of other confessions are excluded from the True Church is avoided.²⁵ Yet another concern for Hoefling was to demonstrate that despite the obfuscation of the gospel for a time, there existed the continuation of the one, holy, catholic church.²⁶ Kiessig concludes: "These concerns, the continuation of the church in spite of its adherence to misusages and false teaching, Hoefling shares with the Wittenberg reformers."²⁷ Kiessig's treatment of Hoefling's ecclesiology becomes less helpful when he takes the questionable position that the Second Vatican Council would find affinity with some of Hoefling's concepts of the church.²⁸

Hoefling's third major point in his ecclesiology is that he regarded the Lutheran Confessions as the distinguishing mark of the true visible church. True to his roots in Erlangen Theology, a nineteenth century theological school established on the principles of the Scriptures, the Lutheran Confessions, and religious experiences, Hoefling saw the Lutheran Confessions not as static documents, but rather as "a dynamic force in the life of the church."²⁹ The crux of his view regarding the Confessions being the distinguishing mark of the true visible church, is that he insisted that the Lutheran church configure its "organs" and its organization (*Ordnung*) according to the Lutheran Confessions, and required pastors and teachers of religion to subscribe to them and be held accountable to their fidelity to the Confessions.³⁰

The fourth major doctrinal point of Hoefling's ecclesiology is that he regarded Christian missions as the means of the dissemination of the church. According to Hoefling, the church has a three-fold responsibility and consequently a three-fold desire: 1) The preservation and actuation of its fellowship; 2) the proliferation and propagation of its fellowship; and 3) the pervasion of life with its Spirit.³¹ In this final section, Kiessig focuses his attention especially on the second point, Hoefling's interest in the dissemination and propagation of its fellowship—really how the church is to be occupied with mission work. Kiessig cites an excerpt from Hoefling's lectures on catechetics, in which he describes the process of bringing people to faith in Christ as the church's constant, divine assignment for all time.³² From faith comes the desire to propagate this new spiritual life in others. In these lectures, Hoefling resolutely commits himself and the church to carrying out the Great Commission to make disciples of all nations. This happens in Christianity both in an outward way and an inward way. The wider dissemination of the faith was the work of missions, while the instruction of baptized children in the true faith was the propagation that takes place inwardly.³³

In concluding this introduction to Johann Hoefling's understanding of the doctrine of the church, it must be stressed that we have only scratched the surface. There is enough material in Hoefling's *Grundsätze* alone for several articles, and regrettably this work has never been translated into English. This article was written only with the intention of introducing some of the main themes of Hoefling's ecclesiology. His doctrine of the church can be aptly summarized by his constant stress on the church being both an invisible and visible institution, which cannot be bound by legalistic, man-made requirements. Rather, its operative force is the Holy Spirit who works through the means of grace.

Hoefling's doctrine of the church has garnered relatively little attention compared to his more provocative ideas about the doctrine of the ministry, (his view of the ministry will be addressed in a future article). There is much that appears exemplary about how Hoefling presents his doctrine of the church. Hoefling

²⁵ Hoefling, *Grundsätze*, 16; Kiessig, 118.

²⁶ Kiessig, 119.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid., 119-122.

²⁹ Otto W. Heick, *A History of Christian Thought*, vol. 2 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966), 204.

³⁰ Kiessig, 126.

³¹ Johann W F. Hoefling, *Das Sakrament der Taufe nebst den andern damit zusammenhängenden Akten der Initiation. Dogmatisch, historisch, liturgisch dargestellt. Erster Band, Welch die dogmatisch-historische Einleitung und Grundlegung, so wie die Darstellung des Katechumenates und der Taufe der Proselyten enthält*, Erlangen, 1846, 3f. Quoted in Kiessig, 134.

³² Kiessig, 135.

³³ Ibid.

certainly appeared to have his heart in the right place in wanting to be a confessional Lutheran professor and pastor in largely Roman Catholic Bavaria, but a caveat must be mentioned. Holsten Fagerberg has concluded through his studies of Hoefling's ecclesiology, that Hoefling exhibited a dependency on Friedrich Schleiermacher's ecclesiastical definitions. This is especially true in his understanding of the working of the Holy Spirit and the means of grace.³⁴ This would not be a surprise in view of the fact that Hoefling's approach to the theological task is that of the Erlangen School, a school of theology in which Scripture, the Lutheran Confessions, and religious experience were all regarded as sources of truth. This was a forewarning of the ominous influence of Schleiermacher, the father of theological liberalism. Fagerberg's conclusion about the degree to which Hoefling remained influenced by Schleiermacher would be a good subject for further exploration.

In conclusion, adherents of the Wauwatosa Theology will find much to admire about the ecclesiology proper of Johann Hoefling of the Erlangen School. The more one reads Hoefling, the more one is left with the impression that this was a man who truly saw himself as a committed Lutheran—who wanted to perform the theological task in a distinctly confessional Lutheran way—yet who never completely recovered from drinking from the well of Friedrich Schleiermacher. What a budding theologian reads—and who influences him—can make a long-term difference, even subconsciously. This is certainly a call for all who cherish historical, confessional Lutheranism to be lifelong students of the Holy Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions and carefully evaluate all other sources in the light of Scripture.

³⁴ Holsten Fagerberg, *Bekenntnis, Kirche und Amt*, in *Der Deutschen Konfessionellen Theologie des 19. Jahrhunderts*, (Uppsala: Almqvist & Wiksells Boktryckeri AB, 1952), 227-228.

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