**[Martin Luther on the House Church](https://matjazcrnivec.net/2022/10/27/martin-luther-on-the-house-church/)**

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*But the third sort [of Divine Service], which the true type of Evangelical Order should embrace, must not be celebrated so publicly in the square amongst all and sundry. Those, however, who are desirous of being Christians in earnest, and are ready to profess the Gospel with hand and mouth, should register their names and assemble by themselves in some house to pray, to read, to baptize and to receive the sacrament and practise other Christian works. In this Order, those whose conduct was not such as befits Christians could be recognized, reproved, reformed, rejected, or excommunicated, according to the rule of Christ in Matt. xviii. Here, too, a general giving of alms could be imposed on Christians, to be willingly given and divided among the poor, after the example of St. Paul in 2 Cor. ix. Here there would not be need of much fine singing. Here we could have baptism and the sacrament in short and simple fashion: and direct everything towards the Word and prayer and love. Here we should have a good short Catechism about the Creed, the Ten Commandments, and the Lord’s Prayer. In one word, if we only had people who longed to be Christians in earnest, Form and Order would soon shape itself. But I cannot and would not order or arrange such a community or congregation at present. I have not the requisite persons for it, nor do I see many who are urgent for it. But should it come to pass that I must do it, and that such pressure is put upon me as that I find myself unable with a good conscience to leave it undone, then I will gladly do my part to secure it, and will help it on as best I can.*

**Martin Luther: *German Mass*, Wittemberg, 1526 (part of the preface)**

The entire preface to the *German Mass* is a real gem among Luther’s writings (the full text is available here in [English](https://history.hanover.edu/texts/luthserv.html) or [German](https://www.google.com/url?q=http://www.ctsfw.net/media/pdfs/Luther%2520Deutsche%2520Messe.pdf&sa=U&ved=2ahUKEwih-Me277v5AhUG_bsIHcb2CBUQFnoECAoQAg&usg=AOvVaw2_q8psQZkXbGGPwhCx3doV)). Luther is aware of the situation with remarkable clarity: living the gospel presupposes and demands a simple, intimate form of church community in which everyone is strongly connected and is being “apprenticed” together in Christian work. Public worship is for non-Christians, the unconverted! It has the role of proclamation, of public announcement of the gospel, which should call those, who sincerely desire it, to follow Christ closely in a small communion. Luther is under no illusions here. The only reason why he does not begin with this third kind of worship is that he does not (yet?) have the people for it. In fact, he hopes that by publicly proclaiming the word of God he will gain them. And then it is also quite clear to him that the initiative for such a small communion must come from them, not from him: that is, “from below”, not “from above”, from the ecclesiastical authorities.

Unfortunately, Luther never succeeded in establishing this and remained with the German and Latin Mass. His socio-political prejudices and his ideas about the necessary link between secular power and the church also led him to reject a movement which to a certain extent put in practice this third kind of churchianity: the Anabaptists (“re-baptizers”, a pejorative term given to them by their opponents). This is the subject of [this article](https://medium.com/whatschurch/martin-luther-tried-to-kill-the-house-church-movement-88684d86196f), which is probably too critical of Luther: it is well known that Luther, while demanding that the authorities persecute and punish the Anabaptists, was opposed to killing them, as the Zwinglians, the Calvinists and the Roman Catholics were doing. Luther’s attitude towards the Anabaptists was therefore ambivalent, at least to some extent.

Moreover, it is worth noting the following: the Anabaptists met in small house fellowships mainly because they were persecuted. As far as I know, nowhere did they explicitly develop a principled demand for a “house church” as a proper or at least better form of Christian meeting. And where Anabaptists have managed to survive the all-round persecution and experience more tolerant social conditions, they have reverted to the “school” way of meeting, where preaching or teaching is the main focus. The Anabaptists’ decision for a house church was therefore a *pragmatic* one, whereas Luther, in the above passage, realized that it had to be decided *on principle*, because it corresponded better to the word of God.

Luther’s dilemma is well illustrated in [Ecclesiola in Ecclesia](http://www.the-highway.com/ecclesia_Lloyd-Jones.html" \t "_blank), a text written fifty years ago. The writer, who finds many other similar examples in church history, sees with unrelenting clarity: if the Reformation is to be seen as something good, then we must bite the bullet on the question of the church and ecclesiality as presupposed in the New Testament. The only alternative is to drown in the mediocrity of the “general church”, in which the majority are not Christians at all. I would only add this: this deadness is the result of 1600 years of slavery to the “imperial church”.

Dear Martin Luther, don’t you think that after half a millennium we could bring the Reformation to an end and encourage sincere Christians to begin to gather as they should – if they really want to follow Christ, to be accountable to one another and to grow in faith?