
The central aim of this thoroughly researched book is to measure the influence of Johannes a Lascos theology and principles of church order on three churches founded or governed by him: the church of Emden, and the Dutch and French refugee churches in London during the sixteenth century. In a first, important chapter, Becker analyzes a Lascos ecclesiology, pointing out the special importance he attributed to the idea of the communio corporis Christi.

The theory of the Lord’s Supper and the theory of the church are nearly identical in a Lascos thinking: for him, the communion of believers with their head, Jesus Christ, always exists; the act of the Lord’s Supper simply actualizes and represents this eternal communion. As such, the church is identical with this communion; it is the communion which is elected by God, not the individual. The church’s discipline is administered in order to maintain the communion as a communion with Christ as its head; reversion or rather rethinking (metanoia) is the aim of the discipline. Communion, Lord’s Supper and church discipline are intertwined with each other in a circular way (p. 58). There is perhaps no other reformer who deduced his ecclesiology so thoroughly from the one central idea of the communio corporis Christi.

The following chapters are organized in parallel to each other: Becker examines, with relation to the three churches in Emden and London, to what extent the practice of church organization and church discipline conformed with a Lascos theology and with the church model outlined in his Forma ac ratio tota ecclesiastici Ministerii (1555), written in exile in London. Becker looks principally at three aspects: the relationship between the church and others (civil authorities, other churches …), the offices of the church and their distribution, and the management of the church discipline. For the Emden church, her research is based on the edited consistorial minutes from 1557 to 1620. From the Dutch church in London only some rare minutes survive (1560 to 1563 and 1569 to 1585). The consistorial minutes of the French refugee church survive for the period from 1560 onwards, but they are edited only until 1578. While social historians have used those sources extensively from the 1970s onwards to study the processes of ‘social disciplinization’ or ‘confessionalization’, ascertaining types of crimes and punishment, the question of how the theology of a church founder is followed up and reflected in practice—a question which seems to lie even nearer at hand—has not been studied extensively.
Paradoxically, the first church that a Lasco founded, the church of Emden, was from the beginning of recorded consistorial activity the least close to his theological concepts and the most compliant with what later became 'reformed orthodoxy' (p. 243): the idea of a communion as a mystical body of Christ is almost never cited (once in 50 years, in 1595: p. 216). Rather than being an autarchic entity which solved conflicts in its own domain, the communion was subordinated to civil courts and authority. “The communion of the late 16th century was rooted much more in the world of forty years earlier—this meant perhaps more sense of reality, but also a loss of concentration on theology” (p. 137). The theology of excommunication followed a Lasco's concept fairly closely only until 1577 (p. 221). It seems that, instead, the consistory itself—exercising the censura morum as first prescribed by a Lasco to its members by admonishing one another as an example to the whole community—represented the communio corporis Christi which had been conceived by a Lasco as the whole church (p. 247). The implicit theology followed by the consistory in the sixteenth century was founded on the individual relationship between each member of the church and Christ. So, “the associative character of the community consisted more in this relationship with God proper to all members than in the relationship—enabled by God—between all members one to another” (p. 258).

The Dutch refugee church in London follows most closely a Lasco’s theology and the order outlined in the Forma ac ratio, which was written to some extent as a documentation of the practice of that church from 1550 to the intermediary expulsion in 1553 under Mary Tudor. A valuable documentary of the church’s practiced order in 1618 by Symeon Rytinck (p. 279) allows Becker—besides the analysis of the consistorial minutes—to outline the similarities and differences between this and a Lasco’s (and Micron's) original organization. For quite a long time (until the 1570s), the principle that the elders, deacons and minister of the church should be elected by the community itself (and not co-opted by the consistory) persisted—a principle which resulted from a Lasco’s communion-based theology. From 1570 onwards, “the community was marginalized” (p. 315). A characteristic detail of a Lasco’s order, the Prophetia—a kind of debriefing of the sermon with the possibility of asking questions to the minister—was held until 1571 every week on Thursday, as a Lasco had designed it. The conflict about baptismal sponsors from 1564 to 1569 revealed a deacons’ party following a Lasco’s congregationalist concept of the community as the center of power of election, against a presbyterian or even episcopal party: the victory of the deacons meant an “a Lasco renaissance” (p. 330). But nonetheless, a Lasco’s concept of two offices was afterwards