



Provided by the Church of the Lutheran Confession - Board of Missions

**An Introduction to Lutheran Doctrine  
and the Church of the Lutheran Confession  
Lesson 5 – The Holy Christian Church**

**V. The Holy Christian Church**

We teach that the Holy Spirit creates one Holy Christian Church, which consists of all believers in Christ who, by God's mercy, were from eternity appointed in Christ for eternal life. Faith in Christ makes one a member of the Holy Christian Church. Since we cannot see faith in the heart, it is impossible for us to determine which individuals are members of Christ's Church. Therefore we cannot identify this Church with a particular organization or church body. Only God, who has the ability to look into the heart, knows who the members of His Church are. For this reason we speak of the Holy Christian Church as "invisible."

The Holy Spirit promises to gather the members of His Church by the "Means of Grace" (the Gospel in the Word and Sacraments). We can be certain that believers will be present wherever the Gospel is in use.

*Acts 13:48: Now when the Gentiles heard this they were glad and glorified the word of the Lord. And as many as had been appointed to eternal life believed.*

*2 Timothy 2:19: Nevertheless the solid foundation of God stands, having this seal: "The Lord knows those who are His," and, "Let everyone who names the name of Christ depart from iniquity."*

*Ephesians 1:3-6: Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ, just as he chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before Him in love, having predestined us to adoption as sons by Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the good pleasure of His will, to the praise of the glory of His grace, by which He has made us accepted in the Beloved.*

*Isaiah 55:1: So shall My word be that goes forth from My mouth; It shall not return to Me void, But it shall accomplish what I please, And it shall prosper in the thing for which I sent it."*

**Comments:**

The word "church" has many different meanings in English. It may refer to a church building. It may refer to an organized congregation of Christians in a certain place. It may refer to an organization of congregations, such as a synod or church body, like the Church of the Lutheran Confession in the US. Sometimes it may refer to a whole group of congregations that go by the same name, as the Lutheran Church or the Baptist Church. It can even refer to a worship service in a church, as when we say we are "going to church". The many meanings of the word "church" has often led to confusion and misunderstanding.

When the Bible uses the word "church", it almost always refers to people who are believers in Jesus Christ. When the Apostles' Creed and the Nicene Creed speak about the "holy Christian Church" or the "one holy Christian and Apostolic Church", the meaning is the same: all those persons who are believers in Jesus Christ as the Savior from sin and death. Sometimes this Church is called the "catholic" Church, but this does not refer to the organization headed by the pope, the Roman Catholic Church, but it refers to the "universal" Church, that is the believers in Jesus of all times and all places. The original meaning of the word "catholic" is "universal".

All members of this Holy Christian Church, no matter what language they speak or where they live, whether they are rich or poor, whether they are male or female, whether they are old or young, whether their skin is dark or light, have one thing in common: in their hearts they put their trust in Jesus Christ and His life, death, and resurrection for their salvation. **“With the heart one believes unto righteousness.”** (Romans 10:10).

Because trusting in Jesus (faith or believing) is a matter of the heart, others cannot know whether a person is a believer in Jesus or not. There are many who claim that they believe in Jesus, but in their heart, they do not really trust in Jesus for salvation. Rather they trust in something else, or they do not even believe there is such a thing as salvation. People who pretend to believe in Jesus but do not really believe in Him are called hypocrites, or pretenders. Because we cannot see into a person’s heart, do not know who the hypocrites are. Jesus talked about weeds sown among the wheat that look like the wheat. He tells us not to try to separate them in this life. Jesus Himself will separate them at the end of the world, when He comes to judge the world. In this parable Jesus says: **“Let both grow together until the harvest”** (Matthew 13:30). The harvest is the end of the world. God Himself, however, can see a person’s heart, so HE always knows who believes in Jesus and who does not. God’s word tells us: **“The Lord knows those who are His”** (2 Timothy 2:19).

Since faith in Jesus Christ is a matter of the heart, and we cannot look into someone’s heart to see whether they believe in Jesus or not, the Holy Christian Church is often referred to as “the invisible Church.” Only true believers in Jesus are a part of this invisible Church, and only God knows who is in this church.

On the other hand, visible churches, such as congregations or synods or denominations, contain both believers in Jesus and hypocrites. We cannot ever separate the believers from the unbelievers in the visible church in this life. God Himself will do the separating at the end of time.

Because **“faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God”** (Romans 10:17), we know where members of the invisible Church can be found. They are found wherever the Word of God is being used. The Holy Spirit changing unbelievers into believers through the so-called “means of grace,” that is, the Gospel in Word and Sacrament. God promises us through the prophet Isaiah: **“My word ... shall not return to Me void (empty or without result) but it shall accomplish what I please”** (Isaiah 55:11). It is God’s will that people who believe in Jesus are saved. Therefore, wherever the Gospel is proclaimed in one way or another, and where the Holy Spirit is at work through the Sacraments of Baptism and the Lord’s Supper, we can be sure the Lord is gathering believers into His Holy Christian Church in that place.

God’s Word tells us that God has chosen the people who are His from before the creation of the world. In other words, people do not choose to become members of the Holy Christian Church. Rather, God, in His grace, has chosen them from eternity to be His. Then, at some point in time, He brings them into His Church through the Gospel. For example, when the missionaries Paul and Barnabas came to the city of Antioch in Pisidia and brought the good news of Jesus to those people, the Bible says: **“And as many as had been appointed to eternal life believed”** (Acts 13:48). So the spiritual blessings God gives us in time have been planned and prepared by God from eternity. That is why Paul told the Christians in Ephesus: **“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ, just as he chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before Him in love, having predestined us to adoption as sons by Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the good pleasure of His will, to the praise of the glory of His grace, by which He has made us accepted in the Beloved”** (Ephesians 1:3-6). This is why we say that the Holy Christian Church “consists of all believers in Christ who, by God’s mercy, were from eternity appointed in Christ for eternal life.”

## Questions

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1. What are some of the ways the word “church” is used today?
2. What does the word “church” usually mean in the Bible and in our Christian creeds?
3. Why is this Church called the invisible Church?
4. Why can we not determine who believes in Jesus and who does not believe?
5. Why is it wrong for us to try to separate believers from unbelievers?
6. What two kinds of members are found in visible church bodies?
7. How do we know that there are believers in a visible church?
8. What does the word “catholic” mean?
9. What does the Holy Spirit use to bring people to faith in Jesus?
10. Why can we call the Christian Church the Church of God’s elect or chosen ones?
11. Which comes first: our faith in Jesus or God’s choosing us to believe?