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**A Summary Workbook on
"The Proper Distinction Between Law and Gospel"
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Point 20

The sixteenth way that people mix up the Law and the Gospel is when it is taught that a person must be connected to a visible, true-teaching church to be saved, and that any error in understanding God's Word will take salvation away.

REVIEW: When we are describing the teachings of different churches, the word "orthodox" means "true teaching." An orthodox church is one which teaches all things according to the Bible. The word "heterodox" means "OTHER teaching." A heterodox church may teach some things according to the Bible, but at least some of its teachings are "other" than what the Bible says. (Do not confuse this word with the way it is used in the name "Eastern Orthodox Church," which is a particular organization. That is a different subject.)

There are some churches, such as the Roman Catholic Church, which teach that you must belong to a certain visible organization in order to be saved. Some have thought that a person must belong to an orthodox (true teaching) Lutheran church in order to be saved. This idea is wrong. Our Savior made this clear:

"And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it." (Matthew 16:18)

With the words "this rock" Jesus was talking about faith in him alone as the Savior. To be built on Christ means having trust only in his forgiving grace. This does not require a person to have outward membership in any visible church. The Bible says "Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved." (Mark 16:16) It does NOT say that whoever believes, is baptized, AND belongs to a certain church will be saved.

Membership in the Holy Christian Church, GOD's church, comes from trusting alone in Christ. Whoever does not have such trust is not built on this rock, and is not a member of Jesus' church. This is true even if he is a member of a certain church here on earth.

"You are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit." (Ephesians 2:19-22)

Jesus himself is the cornerstone; he is the head of his Church. Someone can only be a member of this Church if light, life, strength and grace flows into him from Jesus, who is the head. A person who does not have this connection with Jesus, and who wishes to be his own head, does not belong to Jesus' Church.

"Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it." (1 Corinthians 12:27)

Here the Church is called the body of Christ. Some might say that the Church must be visible, because a body is visible. That is not the meaning of this passage. Paul uses a figure of speech to show how Jesus is the head, and gives direction to all the "members" of the body. The true Church is like a living body in this way. Every member of this body receives its life and direction from the head, who is Jesus.

Consider the parable which Jesus told about the wheat and the weeds in Matthew chapter 13. Some would say that Jesus compares the Church to a field in which both wheat and weeds are growing, and

suppose this Church is something visible, with both believers and hypocrites in it. But what does Jesus say? He gives the true meaning when he says "The field is the WORLD." (Matthew 13:38) He is not talking about his true Church, which has only real believers in it. Instead he is talking about our world where there are some real believers in visible churches, but there are others who outwardly belong to the same churches, but are only pretending to be believers in Christ. He teaches the same lesson in the parables of the wise and foolish virgins (Matthew 25:1-13), the good and bad fish (Matthew 13:47-50) and the wedding feast (Matthew 22:1-14). With all these parables Jesus is not teaching about his Holy Christian Church as it really is, with only true believers in it. Instead he is talking about the outward form of visible churches as we find them in this world, which have both true believers and hypocrites in them. All visible church and church organizations have both kinds, both believers and hypocrites, in them. We must wait until Judgment Day for everything to become clear, for then Jesus will separate the true from the false, and his church will be united and pure.

We can certainly see people around us going to church, but we cannot see whether they truly belong to Jesus' Church because only God can see into their hearts. We can see many kinds of churches, but only God can see who belongs to Jesus' Church. That is why we say that we believe in this Church in the Apostle's Creed: "I believe in the Holy Christian Church, the communion of saints."

It is a serious error to teach that any visible church in this world is the only saving church. The Roman Catholic Church has always had this false teaching, and today some Lutheran churches say the same thing about their own visible organization. The worst thing about this teaching is this: it says that salvation depends on a person's membership in a certain kind of church, as though this were some kind of good work. This kind of teaching would destroy the Gospel, the Bible's teaching that we are declared righteous by God only through faith in Jesus.

We are very thankful to God that through the leadership of Dr. Martin Luther we still have the true teachings of the Bible. We are thankful that we have an orthodox (true-teaching) church to which we can belong. At the same time we must never teach that only members of an orthodox Lutheran church can be saved. There were many true believers in Christ before the time of Luther. Anyone today who truly trusts in Christ as their only Savior from sin is a member of his Holy Church, regardless of the visible organization they belong to. If they belong to a church that teaches false doctrine, this is a danger to them and is not a God-pleasing thing. Still, what finally matters for their salvation is whether they trust in Jesus alone for forgiveness and eternal life. We can be sure that there are such people, even in churches that teach false doctrine, because of the power of the Word of God that is still there. God's promise is certain:

"So shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it." (Isaiah 55:11)

But God's firm foundation stands, bearing this seal: "The Lord knows those who are his." (2 Timothy 2:19)

No one should teach that a person can only be saved by becoming a member of an orthodox Lutheran church. That would be mixing up Law and Gospel, because it would make our visible church membership a good work we must do to be saved. We are saved by faith in Christ alone. It is a FRUIT of our faith to say "I now want to belong to a church that teaches only the truth of God's Word, without adding anything to it or taking anything away. Because I value the Gospel so highly, I want to stay away from all false teaching." A person who belongs to a false teaching church should recognize the errors, leave such a church, and find a fellowship that teaches only the truth of God from the Bible:

"I appeal to you, brothers, to watch out for those who cause divisions and create obstacles contrary to the doctrine that you have been taught; avoid them. For such persons do not serve our Lord Christ, but their own appetites, and by smooth talk and flattery they deceive the hearts of the naive." (Romans 16:17-18)

QUESTIONS

1. What is the difference between an "orthodox" and a "heterodox" church?
2. What is the "rock" which Jesus said would be the foundation of his Church?
3. What kind of person belongs to Jesus' Church? (This is the "Holy Christian Church" as we speak of it in the Apostle's Creed)

4. Jesus' true, invisible Church is made up only of true believers. What was he teaching about in the parables above, in which there was a mixture of believers and hypocrites?
5. What is the worst thing about teaching that a person must belong to a certain kind of visible church to be saved?
6. What promise of God shows us that He has his own believers all over the world, in many kinds of earthly Christian churches?
7. Yes, there are true believers in Jesus, even in visible churches that are heterodox. Why then is it important to belong to a church that is orthodox?