



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

A Systematic Study of Bible Teachings (Dogmatics)

Lesson 13.6 – The Doctrine of Church and Ministry

The Church as Invisible and Visible

Since the Church of Christ is made up only of believers in Jesus Christ, and faith in Christ is a matter of the heart and cannot be seen, it has become customary to call Christ's Church of believers the invisible Church. Christ Himself is invisible on earth at the present time; we cannot see Him with our own eyes, nor can we see Him in other Christians. The Holy Spirit is an invisible spirit, and we cannot see His presence in Christians either. The Christians themselves are not invisible, but we cannot look into anyone's heart to determine whether that person is a believer in Christ or not. Faith in Christ always brings forth fruit, and we can see this fruit to some extent. Nevertheless, there are unbelievers who pretend to be believers in Christ, and the external works they do so closely resemble the good works of believers that there is no foolproof way to distinguish between believers and unbelievers.

God knows who His believers (His sheep) are. The invisible Church is not invisible to Him. At one time the prophet Elijah thought that he was the only believer left on earth and cried out to God: "**I alone am left; and they seek to take my life**" (1 Kings 19:10, 14). But God assured him: "**Yet I have reserved seven thousand in Israel, all whose knees have not bowed to Baal, and every mouth that has not kissed him**" (1 Kings 19:18). Elijah was not as alone as he thought. Later the prophet Nahum declared about God: "**He knows those who trust in Him**" (Nahum 1:7).

Jesus told His disciples that the Last Day would reveal that some who profess to be Christians in this life were not truly Christians at all. Their hypocrisy will finally be exposed. Jesus said: "**Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven. Many will say to Me in that day, 'Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your name, cast out demons in Your name, and done many wonders in Your name?' And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness!'**" (Matthew 7:21-23). Jesus made the same point in His parable of the ten virgins. Five virgins were not prepared for the coming of the Bridegroom, and when they wanted to attend the wedding feast, they were told: "**Assuredly, I say to you, I do not know you**" (Matthew 25:12).

Unless the evidence clearly indicates that a person is an unbeliever, we who are Christians refrain from judging the hearts of those who profess Christ through their words and actions. The apostle Paul warns us: "**Therefore judge nothing before the time, until the Lord comes, who will both bring to light the hidden things of darkness and reveal the counsels of the hearts**" (1 Corinthians 4:5).

Notice that the *Apostles' Creed* does not say that we see the Holy Christian Church, but that we "believe in the holy Christian Church". The *Nicene Creed* is worded in the same way. The presence of the Church is a matter of faith. The *Brief Statement* of 1932, one of the statements of faith of the Church of the Lutheran Confession, plainly says: "*The Christian Church on earth is invisible and will remain invisible till Judgment Day.*"

But even though we do not know the individual members of the Church, we do have a way of knowing where Christ's Church is on earth. Since the Holy Spirit creates and sustains faith in Christ through the means of grace, the Church of Christ is surely present where the means of grace are used. Since the means of grace were used in the various congregations founded by the apostle Paul, he confidently addressed his letters to them in this way: "**To all who are in Rome, beloved of God, called to be saints**"

(Romans 1:7); “**to the church of God which is at Corinth, to those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints**” (1 Corinthians 1:2); “**to the church of God which is at Corinth, with all the saints who are in all Achaia**” (2 Corinthians 1:1); “**to the saints who are in Ephesus, and faithful in Christ Jesus**” (Ephesians 1:1); “**to all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi**” (Philippians 1:1); “**to the saints and faithful brethren in Christ who are in Colosse**” (Colossians 1:2); “**to the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ**” (1 Thessalonians 1:1); “**to the church of the Thessalonians in God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ**” (2 Thessalonians 1:1). How did he know there were Christians in these places? Why did he address them as churches? He knew that the Church of Christ was in those places because the means of grace were being used by those who professed Christ in those places.

Notice that the “church” in all of these places is described as “saints” or as “sanctified”. Paul is addressing believers (Christians). The Church is made up of nothing but Christians. So also in Acts the church in Jerusalem is made up of “**those who gladly received his word**” and “**were baptized**” (Acts 2:41), “**those who were being saved**” (Acts 2:47), “**those who heard the word**” and “**believed**” (Acts 4:4). The means of grace were being used there, and therefore we can be confident that there were believers there.

Many years before this, the prophet Isaiah had assured his readers: “**For as the rain comes down, and the snow from heaven, and do not return there, but water the earth, and make it bring forth and bud, that it may give seed to the sower and bread to the eater, 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**” (Isaiah 55:10-11). Where the means of grace are being used, God is at work through His Word, and His Word accomplishes what He wants it to accomplish: it creates faith in Christ and sustains persons in that faith.

For this reason the various groups in the world that gather around the means of grace can be called churches because the invisible Church of Christ (true believers in Jesus Christ) is present in those places,. Paul addressed his New Testament letters to these churches.

Believers in Christ generally also confess Christ. “**For with the heart one believes unto righteousness, and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation**” (Romans 10:10). “**For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks**” (Matthew 12:34). Christians are known for their allegiance to the Word of God. For Jesus said: “**If you abide in My word, you are My disciples indeed. And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free**” (John 8:31-32). The early Christians in Jerusalem “**continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers**” (Acts 2:42). Believers in Christ are also concerned that the Gospel of Christ be proclaimed where they live as well as in other places in the world. They want others to be brought to faith through this same Gospel as the Holy Spirit has brought them to faith. And so they heed the word of their Savior to go into all the world and preach the Gospel and make disciples of all nations.

But it is possible and even probable that in many of these gatherings where the means of grace are in use, unbelievers or hypocrites may also be present. These unbelievers are not really members of Christ’s Church, and Paul’s letters were not really addressed to them. But we do not have the ability to separate these unbelieving hypocrites from the true believers. The Lord knows those who are His, but we do not know who are His. Therefore, unless these hypocrites show themselves to be obvious sinners who are impenitent, we, in love, consider them to be Christians and members of Christ’s Church, even though God knows they are not Christians and therefore not members of Christ’s Church.

Therefore, membership in a visible church organization, such as an organized congregation with a membership list or a larger church body with a stated membership is no guarantee of membership in Christ’s spiritual, invisible Church. Believers in Christ who have wrongly been excommunicated by a visible church organization may still be true believers in Christ and members of Christ’s spiritual Church. Martin Luther, for example, was excommunicated by a visible church organization, the Roman

Catholic Church, and yet we have confidence that he remained a believer in Jesus Christ to the end of his life because of his confession of Christ in words and actions. A man born blind said good words about Jesus, who had healed him, and the Jewish synagogue “**cast him out**” (John 9:34). But when this man then saw Jesus again, he confessed his faith in Jesus as the Son of God and “**worshiped Him**” (John 9:38). On the other hand, certain Pharisees were told by Jesus that there was no forgiveness of sins for them, because they refused to admit their sin. “**Jesus said to them, ‘If you were blind, you would have no sin; but now you say, “We see.” Therefore your sin remains’**” (John 9:41).

Jesus told His disciples in advance that they would be persecuted, condemned, and even excommunicated by religious organizations (even those professing Christianity), and that the ones persecuting them would think they were serving God by treating them in that way. Jesus said: “**They will put you out of the synagogues; yes, the time is coming that whoever kills you will think that he offers God service**” (John 16:2). We are also read that a member of a visible church organization named Diotrephes was “**putting them (true Christians) out of the church**” (3 John 10). Note that this verse is one place where “church” does not mean Christ’s invisible Church but rather some visible church organization or congregation.

When the Bible calls believing Christians “**saints**”, it does not mean that Christians are free from sin or perfect in their understanding of Christian teaching. It simply means that God counts their faith in Christ as righteousness. Their sins are forgiven, and they are regarded as holy saints in God’s sight. Martin Luther liked to use the Latin phrase *simul justus et peccator*, which means that a Christian is at the same time both sinner and saint. In addition to confessing the sins that we aware of, the we need to say with David: “**Who can understand his errors? Cleanse me from secret faults**” (Psalm 19:12).

Even as Jesus was about to ascend to heaven, His disciples showed a weakness in their understanding when they asked their Lord: “**Lord, will You at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?**” (Acts 1:6). It seems they still had not fully grasped the concept that Christ’s kingdom is not an earthly one. Jesus replied: “**It is not for you to know times or seasons which the Father has put in His own authority**” (Acts 1:7).

On one occasion the apostle Paul had to rebuke the apostle Peter publicly (Galatians 2:11-21). Luke tells us that Paul and Barnabas disagreed about whether to take Mark with them on a mission journey, and “**the contention became so sharp that they parted from one another**” (Acts 15:39). Paul wrote: “**Now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then face to face**” (1 Corinthians 13:12). Members of Christ’s Church are still afflicted with their sinful flesh. Their knowledge and understanding of spiritual things will not be perfect in this world. In weakness Christians may still subscribe to erroneous ideas and doctrines. And Christians will never become perfect in their Christian living on this earth.

As Christians we enjoy total forgiveness of our sins through faith in Christ. But we need to be on guard lest we consider the forgiveness of sin as meaning that we have permission to sin. In his letter to the Romans Paul asks two questions that we need to consider carefully: “**Shall we continue in sin that grace may abound?**” (Romans 6:1). “**Shall we sin because we are not under law but under grace?**” (Romans 6:15). Paul’s answer to both questions is a strong “**Certainly not!**” Sinning in the hope of future forgiveness is always dangerous. It is also dangerous to cling to any kind of false teaching, whether in major or minor matters. When such a false teaching alters the Gospel of Christ, we need to remember Paul’s curse: “**Even if we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel to you than what we have preached to you, let him be accursed. As we have said before, so now I say again, if anyone preaches any other gospel to you than what you have received, let him be accursed**” (Galatians 1:8-9). If the false teaching is about something that seems insignificant, we need to remember Paul’s warning: “**A little leaven leavens the whole lump**” (Galatians 5:6). Reckless living or adherence to false teaching endangers our faith in Christ and may even destroy it.

In contrast to what the Bible teaches about Christ’s Church, the largest visible Christian organization, the Roman Catholic Church, teaches that Christ’s Church is a visible organization under the pope. This

is the wording of an official statement from Vatican II: “Christ, the one Mediator, established and continually sustains here on earth His holy Church, the community of faith, hope and charity, as an entity with visible delineation through which He communicated truth and grace to all. ... This Church constituted and organized in the world as a society, subsists in the Catholic Church, which is governed by the successor of Peter and by the Bishops in communion with him. ... They are fully incorporated in the society of the Church who, possessing the Spirit of Christ accept her entire system and all the means of salvation given to her, and are united with her as part of her visible bodily structure and through her with Christ, who rules her through the Supreme Pontiff and the bishops” (Vatican Council II, *The Constitution of the Church*; §8 and §14). In their opinion, one can be sure of membership in Christ’s Church only by being an obedient member of the Roman Catholic Church and submitting to the authority of the pope and his bishops.

Because the word “church” can mean different things to different people, we need to be careful in how we speak. When we are speaking of Christ’s invisible Church, made up of only believers in Christ (sometimes called the *Una Sancta*, the one holy Church), we need to make that clear to our hearers. When we are talking about some visible church organization, such as an organized or incorporated congregation or an organized church body such as a synod, we need to make that clear to our hearers.

At all times we need to remember that Christ’s Church is made up only of those who believe in Jesus Christ as their Savior in their hearts. Paul distinguished between believing Jews and those who were Jews in name only, saying: “**He is not a Jew who is one outwardly, nor is circumcision that which is outward in the flesh, but he is a Jew who is one inwardly, and circumcision is that of the heart, in the Spirit, not in the letter; whose praise is not from men but from God**” (Romans 2:28-29). Even as “**they are not all Israel who are of Israel**” (Romans 9:6), so also not all who are called Christians or who call themselves Christians are really Christians.

Questions

1. What do we mean when we say Christ's Church is invisible?
2. How is it possible that some who think they are Christians are not?
3. Why would it be wrong for us to try to determine who the believers are?
4. Why does our creed say that we *believe* in the Holy Christian Church?
5. How can we determine where Christ's Church is on earth?
6. How is it possible that an excommunicated person may still be a Christian?
7. What promise has God given us concerning His Word?
8. How can a person be both a sinner and a saint at the same time?
9. Why can we call visible church organizations churches?
10. Why is it important to know that forgiveness of sin is not permission to sin?
11. What is the Roman Catholic teaching concerning the Church?
12. What is wrong with this teaching of the Roman Catholic Church?