



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

A Systematic Study of Bible Teachings (Dogmatics)

Lesson 13.8 – The Doctrine of Church and Ministry

The Church Is Holy (Imputed and Incipient)

Both the *Apostles' Creed* and the *Nicene Creed* speak of Christ's Church as "holy". It is important that we understand in what sense the Church is holy. The term "holy" comes directly from the Bible. The apostle Paul wrote to the Christians in Ephesus: "**Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself for her, that He might sanctify and cleanse her with the washing of water by the word, that He might present her to Himself a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but that she should be holy and without blemish**" (Ephesians 5:25-27). It is clear that the holiness of the Church, as spoken of in this passage, is a perfect holiness; the church is described as being "**without blemish**" and "**not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing.**" Only if the Church is perfectly holy can the Church be described as "**glorious**".

It is also clear from this passage why the Church is called holy. The Church is holy because Jesus gave Himself for the Church. He took all the sins of the members of the Church on Himself when He suffered and died on the cross. It was this substitutionary suffering of Christ on the cross that gives baptism ("**the washing of water by the word**") the power to sanctify and cleanse the Church. For baptism is baptism into Christ's death, and that is why baptism imparts to those who are baptized the benefits of Christ's death, the forgiveness of sins.

Baptism gives the forgiveness of sins. Peter said on Pentecost: "**Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins**" (Acts 2:38). Ananias, the Christian who baptized Paul in Damascus, said to him: "**Arise and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on the name of the Lord**" (Acts 22:16). The forgiveness of sins given to us in the Gospel through Word and Sacrament is always a total forgiveness. In other words, God regards those who are baptized in His name and who trust in the salvation won by Christ as totally forgiven and therefore also as perfectly holy. Thus, all believers in Christ, all the members of Christ's Church, are forgiven and therefore holy. They are the communion of saints, the fellowship of the holy people, having eternal life by faith and they will eventually enjoy eternal life by sight. Jesus said: "**Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature. He who believes and is baptized will be saved**" (Mark 16:15-16).

It is important to remember that the holiness of Christ's Church is *Christ's* holiness, which is imparted to the believers in Christ as a covering for their sins. It is the robe of Christ's righteousness that is counted as their own. Paul said that what was most important in his life was to "**be found in Him (Christ), not having my own righteousness, which is from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which is from God by faith**" (Philippians 3:9).

We can call this righteousness a foreign righteousness. That is, it is not our own internal holiness, or a personal holiness of attitude and behavior, but a holiness from outside of us that God counts as our holiness through our trust in Christ. In other words, Christ's righteousness is imputed to us or accounted as ours when we believe in Jesus. And this faith becomes ours either through baptism or through our hearing of the Gospel of Christ. The book of Genesis says that God came to Abraham with a promise. Then it says that Abraham "**believed in the LORD, and He accounted it to him for righteousness**" (Genesis 15:6). That is why we speak of the holiness of believers in Christ as "imputed" holiness. Since Christ's holiness is perfect holiness, and His holiness is counted as ours when we believe in Him, the holiness of the Church is perfect, without spot or blemish.

The apostle Paul used the example of Abraham to explain imputed righteousness to the Christians in Rome. He wrote that Abraham “**did not waver at the promise of God through unbelief, but was strengthened in faith, giving glory to God, and being fully convinced that what He had promised He was also able to perform. And therefore ‘it was accounted to him for righteousness.’ Now it was not written for his sake alone that it was imputed to him, but also for us. It shall be imputed to us who believe in Him who raised up Jesus our Lord from the dead, who was delivered up because of our offenses, and was raised because of our justification**” (Romans 4:20-25). In the same way the Church is holy through the perfect imputed holiness of Christ.

But it is also important to remember that every Christian, that is, every member of Christ’s Church, also has the Holy Spirit living in him that leads him through Word and Sacrament to begin to live a new life of love and obedience and gratitude. But this holiness of life is far from perfect, for every Christian still has his sinful flesh living in him also. For this reason, this personal holiness of the Christian in their attitude and behavior is called an incipient holiness, that is, a holiness that is just beginning and that remains imperfect even to the end of the person’s earthly life. But there is no Christian who is totally lacking this incipient holiness. For Peter said on Pentecost: “**Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit**” (Acts 2:38). The apostle Paul wrote: “**Now if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he is not His**” (Romans 8:9). And again Paul wrote: “**If you live according to the flesh you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live. For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God**” (Romans 8:13-14).

Thus, the Church of Christ is holy in a twofold sense, perfectly holy through the imputed perfect righteousness of Christ, and also imperfectly holy through the working of the Holy Spirit in all of the members of Christ’s Church, bringing forth in their attitude and conduct an incipient holiness that continues to grow in this life but does not reach perfection until the life hereafter. Paul wrote: “**Not that I have already attained, or am already perfected; but I press on, that I may lay hold of that for which Christ Jesus has also laid hold of me**” (Philippians 3:12).

Martin Luther explained the imputed holiness of Christ’s Church like this: “Since we are baptized and believe in Christ, we are holy and righteous in Christ and with Christ. He has taken our sin from us and has graced, clothed, and adorned us with His holiness. Thus the whole Christian Church is holy, not by itself or by its own work but in Christ and through Christ’s holiness, as St. Paul says: ‘**He has cleansed her by the washing of water with the Word**’ (Ephesians 5:26). Anyone who hesitates to boast and confess that he is holy and righteous is actually saying: ‘I am not baptized. I am not a Christian, I do not believe in Christ. I do not believe that Christ died for me. I do not believe that He took away my sins. I do not believe that His blood has cleansed me, or that it can cleanse me. In short, I do not believe a word of what God has declared or Christ and all Scripture testifies’” (*Luther’s Works*, Vol. 14, p. 93).

Luther also explained the incipient holiness of Christ’s Church. He wrote: “They are called a Christian people and have the Holy Spirit, who sanctifies them daily, not only through the forgiveness of sins acquired for them by Christ, but also through the abolition, the purging, and the mortification of sins, on the basis of which they are called a holy people” (*Luther’s Works*, Vol. 41, pp. 143-144).

Questions:

1. Why can we call Christ's Church the holy Christian Church?
2. In what sense is Christ's Church perfectly holy?
3. When were the sins of Christ's Church taken away?
4. How does the benefit of Christ's death come to us?
5. How can baptism wash our sins away?
6. What did God impute to Abraham?
7. What did God count as righteousness in Abraham?
8. How can we also be counted as righteous by God?
9. Why is imputed righteousness absolutely perfect?
10. What is meant by incipient righteousness?
11. Which kind of righteousness can grow and increase?
12. What did Luther say about a Christian who says he is not holy?
13. What is the difference between imputed righteousness and incipient righteousness?