

The Presence of the Church

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Nota bene:

Since past experience has shown me just how often I am misunderstood, I find myself often praying the words of the old song by The Animals, “Oh Lord, please don’t let me be misunderstood” (sic).

Please don’t let me be misunderstood: this paper is not written to defend what is wise, nor what might be said to be best practice. This paper is written to defend what is true and acceptable. It is written to counter what is perceived as being over statements in a previous paper. That is not to say that I am not sympathetic to all that was written in the paper that occasioned the writing of this paper, but that we must not say more than the Scriptures allow. That is to say, “We err when we seek divine mandate for what is wise. Wisdom needs no divine mandate; it is simply wise.”

An example of wisdom standing on its own would be in the case of a child bride. Can we say that God forbids the marriage of a thirty-year old male to a 15 year old female—or 12 or 10? Clearly there is no scripture that prevents this. Yet one seriously questions the practice of a mature male marrying a girl whose body has not developed to the point of being able to bear children, let alone whose brain has not developed to the point of making life changing decisions. Our society, in wisdom, makes laws that prohibit such unions, even defining them as being against the will of those too young to have the wherewithal to make such decisions.

An example of trying to force the scriptures to say what they do not say is in the case of missionaries in Africa who pronounced men not married to any more than the first woman they took as wife. This was done under the umbrella of one man and one woman, which admittedly is the way God instituted marriage to be. However, even the Mosaic Law sanctioned the Law of the Levirate, under which a man might end up with several wives. Yet modern missionaries in some cases have pronounced such Levirate marriages to be adultery.

So again, I am not here trying to defend what I believe to be wise or best practice, but guarding truth and freedom. We often err by trying to find or argue for divine mandate for what we believe to be wise. Again, wisdom needs no mandate, it is simply wise.

What is the Issue?

It seems like Lutherans have been arguing over the definition of church since Luther wrote, “A seven year old child knows what the church is” (SA 3 XII, 2). Some have responded, “I wish I could find that seven year old child,” while others have quipped, “None of us is seven years old.” Lutherans supposedly understand that membership in the true church cannot be identified with membership in any visible organization. Yet it is of eternal significance to be able to know if one is a member of the true church. It is also of practical import to know what is, and what is not church, where it is, and where it is not.

Some in trying to be helpful in the discussion have perhaps only muddied the waters. Among these some place CFW Walther with his “The True Form of the Visible Church on Earth.” Others have subtly misunderstood the doctrine of the Lutheran

Church to say what it does not say. And synods, being ever-so-right and ever-so-helpful have put the definition to the process of democracy as if the majority of voters were the true church and could not err.

Let us here note that it is axiomatic that the true church can, and does in fact, err as is indicated in the major prophets, the letters to the angels of the seven churches, The Acts of the Apostles, the Pauline Epistles, and elsewhere. In Ezekiel 16 God speaks of Jerusalem as a child found abandoned, naked and alone. He tells how he found her, bathed her, clothed her, married her, and how she trusted in her own beauty and became crassly unfaithful. He goes on to say that eventually He would shame her and take her back. In the letters to the seven churches all but two indicate error in the churches (Smyrna and Philadelphia). Even St. Peter was drawn aside with the Jews at Antioch (Galatians 2:11ff). St. Paul Rebuked the Corinthian congregation for rejoicing over a case of immorality such as is not even named among the Gentiles (1 Cor. 5:1). Paul also condemned the error of the church in Galatia, which was turning aside from the Gospel itself.

This (that the True Church errs) should be as much of a fact¹ for Lutherans as the fact that individuals err and can fall from faith. It is a fact that the great commission was given to men who: “Worshiped Him, though some doubted.” St. Peter preached false doctrine by his actions when he refused to eat with gentiles, and he above all others should have known better. After all, it was Peter who was given a vision from heaven declaring all foods and peoples clean (Acts 10:9ff). He heard the Lord say that it is not what goes into a man, but what comes out of him that makes him unclean (Matthew 15:11). He saw the Holy Spirit given to the gentiles without the laying on of hands, as He was given to the Apostles themselves (Acts 10:44ff). King David, a man after God’s own heart failed to punish Joab after Joab committed a capital crime, killing in vengeance in the gate of a city of refuge.² Even Abraham, the great man of faith showed his lack of faith in passing off Sarah as his sister when in Egypt and Gerar³. It is also evident from Scripture that the majority often goes south as Elijah lamented about the people of his day.

This reminds us that while we can formulate⁴ doctrine by voting, we cannot establish doctrine by any means, least of all by majority vote. Doctrine can only be recognized and then denied or confessed. It is for the church to confess doctrine; it is for God to establish it.⁵

So it is that the doctrine of Church, which should be a horse that died from the whipping long ago, still troubles us today. In Synodical Conference circles it is caricaturized as an argument between those who claim that the church is only the local congregation, and those who claim that the church is any gathering of Christians. While this is a characterization, there are those who hold to these extremes.

¹ In this paper the term “fact” is used to denote that which is true and real in contrast to the manner in which sophists use the term simply to denote a statement in an argument which may or may not be true.

² In 2 Samuel 3:27 we read that Joab killed Abner in Hebron because Abner killed Joab’s brother in battle...with the blunt end of a spear after warning him repeatedly not to pursue him (2 Samuel 2:19-23).

³ Genesis 12;12, 13; 20:2

⁴ To formulate: to express definitely or systematically.

⁵ Do not misunderstand this as simply a railing against recent events in any synod. Failure to understand this simple truth has plagued the church throughout its history.

It must also be acknowledged that the Holy Spirit also works in the church through those who are not themselves in the church, since we are told as much in John 11:49ff⁶ and Matthew 23:2ff⁷

Argued back and forth is the definition of church, as though Augustana VII (and VIII) is either insufficient, or unclear. For example, Rome claims that its visible bureaucracy is the true church.⁸ Since 1980, the Evangelical Lutheran Synod actually fails to define church, though it says that all true believers in Christ belong to it.⁹ Among other things the ELS speaks to the origin of the church, the authority of the church, and claims that the church is formless.

The Wisconsin Synod in its theses on church and ministry says that the church is: *the communion of saints, the entire number of those whom the Holy Spirit has brought to faith in Christ as their Savior and whom through this gracious gift of a common faith He has most intimately joined together to form one "congregation" (Augsburg Confession VII, VIII), one body, one blessed fellowship.*

CFW Walther in his theses on church stated that the church: *in the proper sense of the term is the congregation of saints, that is, the aggregate of all those who, called out of the lost and condemned human race by the Holy Spirit through the Word, truly believe in Christ and by faith are sanctified and incorporated in Christ.*¹⁰

Others maintain that the church is nothing more (or less) than two or three gathered together in Christ's name, citing Matthew 18 as *sedes doctrinae*. Indeed, Luther comes very close to this claim in Treatise 68: *Here belong the statements of Christ which testify that the keys have been given to the Church, and not merely to certain persons, Matt. 18, 20: "Where two or three are gathered together in My name," etc.*¹¹ Frequently it is said that the church is the gathering of saints around the means of grace.

It isn't that AC VII (and AC VIII) is insufficient or unclear, but that, perhaps, we don't understand it. To test our understanding this paper asks if the following statement true or false: "The Church is the Gathering of Saints Around the Means of Grace." To apply this to the seemingly endless debate it also asks: "Does the answer to this question affect our doctrine and practice?" This paper seeks to answer these two questions and show them in practice. In seeking to answer these questions we will follow good Lutheran practice and search the Scriptures to see how they define church. Then we will look to the Lutheran Confessions and finally the writings of the fathers to check our understanding.¹²

⁶ Caiaphas prophesied in his office as high priest that it is better that one should die than the nation perish.

⁷ "The Pharisees sit in Moses' seat."

⁸ While Rome doesn't figure into our understanding directly, many among the Protestants seem to hold this view. Even some Lutherans come very close to this. When statements are made to the effect that the Roman Church is not Christian, it reveals that the church is being confused with a bureaucracy. Furthermore, consider how various Protestant groups treat each other, often separatistic down to the congregation.

⁹ Since the constitution of the Evangelical Lutheran Synod claims to hold to the Lutheran Confessions, it does, by default, define what church is. However, in her theses on church, no definition is given or referred to.

¹⁰ J. T. Mueller *Church and Ministry*, 1987, Concordia Publishing House, St. Louis.

¹¹ All quotations from the Lutheran Confessions are taken from Concordia Triglotta: The symbolic books of the Evangelical Lutheran Church. Lutheran Church. Missouri Synod. (electronic ed.). Milwaukee WI: Northwestern Publishing House. 1997

¹² It must be admitted that very little *vater theologie* is done here.

What is the Church?

Our word church is a bit quirky, and seems to derive from κυριακός, ἡ, ὄν, an adjective meaning *belonging to the Lord*. We find the word in places such as 1 Corinthians 11:20,¹³ and Revelation 1:10.¹⁴ We use the word church to refer to several general things. One is the *Una Sancta*, another is a denomination or subgroup within a denomination, a third is a local congregation, and finally, we use it to refer to the Divine Service. While this is on the one hand ambiguous, leading to confusion, on the other hand it is quite similar to the term ἐκκλησία.

The choice of ἐκκλησία in place of synagogue is a study of its own, but should be briefly considered here. While it is possible that the Holy Spirit or, conceivably, the early church itself or even her detractors desired to distinguish the church from the Jews, it is more likely that there is in ecclesia the knowledge that our citizenship is in heaven. Synagogue denotes those who are called together. The Children of Israel were called together in the Temple at Jerusalem—a place in the world, and largely exclusive to a nation.

The Christians, conversely, are called out of the world from every nation. ἐκκλησία is a term well used in civil society, though in the Septuagint it is occasionally used of the gathering of the Children of Israel, but only when it is called a gathering *of the Lord*. This, no doubt, leads us to the term church: it is τῆ κυριακῆ ἐκκλησία. ἐκκλησία denotes a lawful, often regular assembly. It is a gathering that is specifically not of the religious cults or fraternal associations which used the word θίασος. ἐκκλησία is a more generic term. The early church fathers did occasionally use the term θίασος in reference to the church, but the Scriptures do not.

The Scriptures teach, then, that the church is an assembly, gathering, or convocation. The Scriptures speak both of a gathering, and gatherings. Yet we are told that there is to be one flock under one shepherd. Ultimately, then, while there are “other sheep not of this fold,” there is one (chief) shepherd and one big flock, though this one big flock or gathering¹⁵ manifests itself as many smaller gatherings lead by under shepherds. This reality is from Christ Himself who first says to Peter, “On this rock I will build my church,” and later to John, “Send it to the seven Churches which are in Asia.”

This gathering of the Lord¹⁶, then is described in quite a few ways, including as the temple of God, which, surprisingly, is not the common name given for the church in the New Testament. We are to keep the temple, that is, the church, holy. If anyone destroys or defiles God’s temple the church, God will hold him accountable. But most important, we learn from this that the church is where God resides. He resides with and

¹³ Therefore when you come together in one place, it is not to eat the Lord's Supper.

¹⁴ I was in the Spirit on the Lord's Day

¹⁵ This paper seeks to avoid terms that have been so colored over time as to have such a connotation that the meaning derived from Scripture is over colored by the term. Therefore in definitions “gathering” is used as much as is practical instead of “congregation.” If the fluidity of gathering is kept in mind, then certain misperceptions about where the church is found, or what Paul, et alia, mean in a particular passage are more easily cleared up.

¹⁶ It should be noted that the various pictures of the church refer to the *Una Sancta*.

in us as individuals, and He resides with and in the church collectively. Where is one to find God? In the church, and not outside of it.

According to the Scriptures the church is the Kingdom of Heaven (or God), which is “among you,” or “within you.” It is spiritual and internal; it *is not eating and drinking, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.*¹⁷ It is preached.¹⁸ According to Jesus’ own words recorded by John, we can see the effect of those born of the Spirit, but cannot see them as such. Finally, it is made up of people from the north, south, east, and west,¹⁹ while many are cast out or not allowed in.²⁰

This tells us that the church is a kingdom, but not of this world. It tells us that the church is internal, not external, and is among, that is, smaller than the visible.²¹ It also tells us that the Kingdom of Heaven is not about what we do, but is God’s, i.e. it is about what God does, for it is preached. It tells us that it is not visible to the human eye, and finally, it tells us that it is universal in the sense of being for all people of the world, but not universal in the sense that it isn’t for those who do not enter by the narrow door, Jesus the Christ.

The church is called the Bride of Christ.²² She is cleansed,²³ clothed,²⁴ and made presentable to Him by Him.²⁵ She is to wait for Him,²⁶ to watch,²⁷ pray,²⁸ and be prepared.²⁹ She is to be faithful to Him.³⁰ She is His comparable helper.³¹

Finally, we are told that the church is the body of Christ, that it is made up of many members with one head. Each member serves all the others for the good of the whole, yet not each has the same function. Difference in function does not make a difference in value, in fact those members which seem to be less presentable are accorded greater honor.³²

The church is made up of all who have been born again,³³ who have the Holy Spirit,³⁴ are predestined called and justified,³⁵ and sanctified.³⁶ Therefore the church is not a visible bureaucracy or organization. It is all the faithful in Christ.

¹⁷ Romans 14:17

¹⁸ Luke 4:43, et alia

¹⁹ Luke 13:29

²⁰ Luke 13:28, et alia

²¹ Jesus was speaking to those who were of the visible church when he said, *The kingdom of God is among (or within) you.*

²² John 3:29 et. alia

²³ Ephesians 5:26

²⁴ Galatians 3:27 (Context demands that this be translated as passive: *have been clothed*, and not middle: *have put on*), Rev. 21:2

²⁵ Ephesians 5:27

²⁶ Philippians 3:20

²⁷ Acts 20:31, et. alia

²⁸ 1 Thessalonians 5:17.

²⁹ Revelation 19:7, 8, et alia.

³⁰ Revelation 2:10, et alia.

³¹ Is this not what the marriage imagery is all about—that God creates a helper comparable to His Son?

³² 1 Corinthians 12:24

³³ 1 Peter 1:23

³⁴ 1 Corinthians 6:19

³⁵ Romans 8:30, et alia

³⁶ 1 Corinthians 1:2 et alia

According to the Lutheran Confessions, the church is most emphatically not a bureaucracy. The Apology states:

And it says *Church Catholic*, in order that we may not understand the Church to be an outward government of certain nations [that the Church is like any other external polity, bound to this or that land, kingdom, or nation, as the Pope of Rome will say], but rather men scattered throughout the whole world [here and there in the world, from the rising to the setting of the sun], who agree concerning the Gospel, and have the same Christ, the same Holy Ghost, and the same Sacraments.³⁷

The Lutheran Confessions also do not speak of the church as a local congregation. Remember that the Church of the Reformation was fighting a larger church body that claimed to be church according to its bureaucracy. It was not fighting against particular local congregations, but a very large congregation of congregations that claimed to be the church. The Reformers did not at all argue that a larger church body was church. Nor did they argue that the larger was only church by virtue of being made up of local congregations. Quite the contrary. What the Reformers did argue was the idea that the true church could be identified with anything other than its marks, the Gospel purely preached and rightly administered sacraments. The papacy is not a mark of the church, or even of a church, or even of church.

The Lutheran Confessions define the church as that gathering of all believers in which the Gospel is purely preached and the sacraments rightly administered. Local congregations are church because they are gatherings of believers in which the Gospel is purely preached and the sacraments rightly administered.

When we consider what the church is and the many pictures used to illustrate what the church is, we find a certain distinction that is encompassed. First, bear in mind that the church is congregation and shepherd; churches are congregations and shepherds. The shepherds are not the church, nor are the congregations without shepherds the church. But when the Scriptures illustrate the church for us, it uses pictures that include static and fluid concepts.

For example, the Kingdom of Heaven is very static. It doesn't change. The Kingdom of Heaven is the Kingdom of Heaven, is the Kingdom of Heaven at all times. But the church, the ἐκκλησία, is sometimes actively engaged in gathering, and sometimes not. St. Paul states, "First of all, when you come together as a church..." and, "Therefore when you come together in one place..."³⁸

There are some things stated about what happens, or what may be done (is permissible to do) in the actual gathering of the gathering that does not and cannot apply outside of the act of gathering together. That is to say, there are things that are permissible in the Kingdom of Heaven, but not when the members of the Kingdom are engaged in the activity of gathering. It is certainly permissible for a woman to speak in the Kingdom of Heaven, even teach in the Kingdom of Heaven,³⁹ but it is clearly forbidden for them to teach, even speak, in the gathering of the gathering.⁴⁰

³⁷ Apology VII and VIII, Paragraph 10.

³⁸ 1 Corinthians 11:18, 20 respectively

³⁹ Examples are Priscilla and the daughters of Phillip, Acts 21:8, 9 among numerous others.

⁴⁰ 1 Corinthians 14:34, 35

Church as Divine Service, i.e. as activity.

A careful reading of Augustana Article VII will show that it speaks not of local congregations, but the church as a whole. It reads in Latin: *Item docent, quod una sancta ecclesia perpetuo mansura sit.* In German it reads: *Es wird auch gelehrt, daß allezeit müsse eine heilige christliche Kirche⁴¹ sein und bleiben.* And for Americans: *Also they teach that one holy Church is to continue forever.* In speaking of the Means of Grace in this connection, it does not speak of the church being those gathered around the means, but that in or among this one universal gathering the Means of Grace are distributed: *Est autem ecclesia congregatio sanctorum, in qua evangelium recte docetur et recte administrantur sacramenta.*⁴² *Welche ist die Versammlung aller Gläubigen, bei welchen das Evangelium rein gepredigt und die heiligen Sakramente laut des Evangelii gereicht werden.*⁴³ *The Church is the congregation of saints, in which the Gospel is rightly taught and the Sacraments are rightly administered.*⁴⁴

Note well that the Augsburg Confession does not define the church as a gathering around the Means of Grace, but that assembly that administers the Means of Grace. Now, one might argue that there is really no distinction here. But if one holds that it is the gathering around the Means of Grace, one has a purely functionalist view of the church which has the church essentially disappearing when the Congregation chants the triple Amen at the end of the divine service.

This is like those who are now going so far as to teach that the bread and wine are no longer the body and blood of Christ when it is swallowed by the recipient. This error began with a misunderstanding of the *nihil rule*⁴⁵ in which the character of a sacrament was understood to mean Christ's body and blood rather than the forgiveness of sins, while use was so narrowly defined as to be only the eating and drinking. Such narrow definition of instituted use and misunderstanding of character naturally lead to the teaching that what is in the hand of the pastor and what is in one's stomach is mere bread and wine.

So it is that misunderstanding of the definition of church has it coming into and going out of existence depending on whether or not one is actively engaged in Divine Service at a given time. The effect would ultimately be that a divine call could only be extended during the divine service. While we may not see such an extreme view at present, it would be the natural progression of thought. Moreover, it presently affects the view of through whom a call may be extended.

But the church does remain after the Benediction. It does not come into and go out of existence, but as Article VII states: *una sancta ecclesia perpetuo mansura sit; allezeit müsse eine heilige christliche Kirche sein und bleiben; one holy Church is to continue forever.* The English here is weak compared to the original German and its Latin translation. In German it is literally: always must one holy Christian Church be and remain; and in Latin: one holy church perpetually exists. This perhaps sounds

⁴¹ Here the word used is *Kirche* (church), and not *Gemeinde* (congregation) though the latter is used in the apology.

⁴² Augsburg Confession Article VII, paragraph 1 Latin

⁴³ Augsburg Confession Article VII, paragraph 1 German.

⁴⁴ Augsburg Confession Article VII, paragraph 1 English.

⁴⁵ *Nihil habet rationem sacramenti extra usum a Christo institutum: nothing has the character of a sacrament outside of the use instituted by Christ.*

condescending or pedantic, but many in our day are disconnected from this simple and obvious fact when they speak of the ministry, or whether or not a larger church body is to be regarded as church. This disconnect is not without consequence, as will be shown below.

For now, we can say that according to the Augsburg Confession the Church is not the gathering of saints around the means of grace, but the ultimate gathering of all those holy ones in Christ among whom they are the true Means of Grace. The Apology operates with that concept as shown by the following:

The Seventh Article of our Confession, in which we said that the Church is the congregation of saints,⁴⁶

For we grant that in this life hypocrites and wicked men have been mingled with the Church, and that they are members of the Church according to the outward fellowship of the signs of the Church, *i.e.*, of Word, profession, and Sacraments, especially if they have not been excommunicated.⁴⁷

Which fellowship nevertheless has outward marks so that it can be recognized, namely, the pure doctrine of the Gospel, and the administration of the Sacraments in accordance with the Gospel of Christ. [Namely, where God's Word is pure, and the Sacraments are administered in conformity with the same, there certainly is the Church, and there are Christians.]⁴⁸

Therefore, the Church, which is truly the kingdom of Christ, is properly the congregation of saints.⁴⁹

Wherefore we hold, according to the Scriptures, that the Church, properly so called, is the congregation of saints [of those here and there in the world], who truly believe the Gospel of Christ, and have the Holy Ghost.⁵⁰

We are speaking of true, *i.e.*, of spiritual unity [we say that those are one harmonious Church who believe in one Christ; who have one Gospel, one Spirit, one faith, the same Sacraments; and we are speaking, therefore, of spiritual unity], without which faith in the heart, or righteousness of heart before God, cannot exist.⁵¹

Let us not forget the role of justification in this. The ministry pre-exists the church. It is the ministry that establishes the church. It was when God preached the Gospel in condemning the serpent that Adam and Eve believed and the Church was born. But this chicken and egg argument is not very important beyond helping to establish the fact that the ministry is not an outgrowth of the Priesthood of Believers, nor does it

⁴⁶ Apology VII and VIII, Paragraph 1.

⁴⁷ Apology VII and VIII, Paragraph 3.

⁴⁸ Apology VII and VIII, Paragraph 5.

⁴⁹ Apology VII and VIII, Paragraph 16.

⁵⁰ Apology VII and VIII, Paragraph 28.

⁵¹ Apology VII and VIII, Paragraph 31.

answer to the Priesthood as such, but to Christ. But the fact that the ministry exists for the administration of the Means of Grace is important to remember.

Why is it that the Means of Grace are marks of the church? They are marks because they are the very things by which faith is created, by which justification comes to us. While some have said that the ministry is a mark of the church, that is no truer than that the congregation is a mark of the church. The means of Grace create and sustain faith, so if the marks are missing, then one would expect faith to disappear over (a relatively short period of) time.

Conversely, it is difficult, nearly impossible for unbelievers to maintain the Means of Grace. They simply do not value it, and see no use for it. This was demonstrated in Matthew 27 where Judas is recorded as having remorse over betraying Christ. He confesses to the priests that he has betrayed innocent blood. One could hardly be more on the right track. But because the unbelieving priests saw no value in Christ's sacrifice or the shadows of Old Testament Divine Service which were rooted in Christ's sacrifice, they directed Judas to his own efforts which resulted in despair. That is, faith was inhibited, even destroyed because the *stewards of the mysteries* were not themselves members of the *Una Sancta*.

Part of the reason we can be certain the church is present where the Gospel is preached, etc. is because the unbelieving world will not tolerate it. It is the church that preserves the word among us, functioning as the *body of Christ*. When we view the church in that way, we do not separate shepherd from flock, for they are one body with one Head, Christ. And that one body is active as a whole in preserving the Means of Grace. In this view we think more in terms of the *Una Sancta*. We think more in terms of every Christian having a part in the proclamation of the Gospel.

The other reason that we can be certain the church is present where the Gospel is preached, etc. is because God's word will not return void, but will accomplish that for which He sends it. When we view the church in this way, there is certainly a distinction to be made between shepherd and flock. It is in this view that we think more in terms of the local congregation. We think more in terms of those who dispense, and those who receive.

So, regarding our first question: is this statement true or false, "The Church is the Gathering of Saints Around the Means of Grace"? It is clearly false in regard to the *Una Sancta*. But is it perhaps true in regard to the visible manifestation of the church? To answer this, let us look at how we find the true church.

Where is the Church?

We need to know where the church is. We know from passages such as Matthew 22: 32, Hebrews 12:22, and Revelation 21:2 that the church is in heaven. But the church in heaven doesn't concern us very much, since we are not presently in heaven, and are only going to get to heaven by being a part of the church on earth, as seen above. From the passages we considered in defining the church we see that the church is indeed also on earth. It is in the world, but not of the world.

We have seen that the church is all over the world. And yet, we cannot see church absolutely, but only indirectly. We see, as it were, the rustling of the leaves in the trees. That is, we see the Means of Grace, which at once build the church and are kept by the church. Indeed, it is the temporal purpose of the church to guard and distribute the

Means of Grace. She is the keeper of the keys. In being ready for her beloved's return, she makes use of the Means of Grace. In faithfulness to her betrothed, she distributes the means of grace. In praising her Lord, she reaches out with the Means of Grace.

So, while we cannot directly see the Bride of Christ, we look for the Means of Grace, knowing that she is there where they are, because no one else is given the responsibility of the Means of Grace. But we know that not everyone who gathers together to guard and distribute the Means of Grace are part of the body of Christ, for the master confronts the one not wearing the wedding clothes asking, "How did you get in here?" and commanding, "Cast him into outer darkness!"⁵²

So, we can never directly see the church, but as Martin Chemnitz states:

God wills that we seek, know, and understand what and where the true church is, so that we join ourselves to it as members and citizens, and heed it. For it is like a city set on a hill and a light not hidden under a cover but put on a candlestick, Matthew 5:15. Hence the church should be known not only to God, who knows the things that are hidden and searches into the hearts (Psalm 44:21), but also to us. And for this reason it is defined as a visible assembly of those who embrace the Gospel of Christ and rightly use the sacraments. For these are the signs which show the church, cf. Acts 2:41-42; 1 Corinthians 1:2..⁵³

We know then that the true church is found within the true visible church. We know that true invisible churches are found within true visible churches. And what are true visible churches? They are those churches that preach the Gospel in its purity, and administer the sacraments according to Christ's institution. They are rare, but they are present to be found. It is possible to find larger and smaller gatherings in which the Gospel is purely preached, and the sacraments rightly administered. Such gatherings are true visible churches. About this no one, to my knowledge, disputes.

Now, we noted above that the church does not cease to exist after the divine service. We understand that those people who have gathered together in the Divine Service are to be considered a true visible church. But what about other gatherings of such Christians? When they gather together in a meeting to call a pastor, we consider them to be church, and that meeting to be a function of the church, but not church in the sense of divine service. However, if we do not consider the people gathered at that meeting to be church, we have a problem, because we believe that God calls through the church.

It is customary for the call of a pastor to be extended unanimously, because we both want to be sure that the call is from the true church, and because a pastor must never be foisted on anyone. Yet, it is rare that a congregation ratifies the call of a pastor by every member—man, woman and child. Could not the entire voters' assembly be hypocrites? Truly it could. Truly it often happens that some of the very ones who unanimously call a pastor later reject that pastor for doing exactly what he was called to do: preaching the pure Gospel, and rightly administering the sacraments. Others often reject him for any number of trivial, non-Scriptural reasons. So, in the call of a pastor we recognize that the call comes through the true visible church, identified by the marks of the church. We also recognize that the true visible church sometimes meets outside of

⁵² Matthew 22:12, 13

⁵³ Loci Theologici, Vol. II, p. 695; J.A.O. Preus Tr., Concordia Publishing House, St. Louis 1989

the Divine Service to facilitate the preaching of the pure Gospel and proper administration of the sacraments.

But in what other meetings would we identify the presence of the true visible church and note the meeting as a function of the church? If some of the members met together for breakfast once each month, would we call that church? If a political party meeting happened to be made solely of members from a particular congregation, would we call that a gathering of the church? If several such true visible gatherings join together to help each other preach the Gospel and properly administer the sacraments, would we call the larger gathering church or a function of the true visible church? Would we call this conference church or a function of the true visible church?

Certainly we recognize that not every gathering of members of the *Una Sancta*, or even members of a true visible church, is to be called church, nor can it be considered a function of a true visible church. Political gathering have nothing to do with preaching the Gospel or administering the sacraments. It cannot, because the civil kingdom is not concerned with the Gospel at all. It's scope and tools are all in the realm of the Law. Conversely, the church is not to interfere in the civil realm, though we hope that faithful Christians will engage in the civil realm and influence it in a Godly way. Christ's kingdom is not of this world, and therefore is not to involve itself in the affairs of this world. Christ Himself recognized the two kingdoms, and commanded obedience appropriate to each, as long as the civil kingdom did not require us to transgress the commands of God.

So we recognize that the *Una Sancta*, and even the true visible church may be present in many places without the gathering being considered a church or a function of the church. What is the difference? In Matthew 18 Jesus states that His authority is present whenever two or three gather in His name. Would that then mean that a political party meeting that begins with a prayer to the triune God is church or a function of church because it is in Jesus' name? We have already noted that it cannot be a function of the true church (visible or otherwise), because political party meetings are outside the realm of the church.

Truly, "In Jesus' Name" means something other than praying in His name. It is in fact something other than dedicating something to Christ. It must be something that is according to His will in the commission to make disciples of all nations. When Jesus asked who people said he was, the disciples stated several individuals who people thought He was. But when He asked the disciples who the disciples thought He was, Peter answered, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." Jesus then told him that He would build His church on this. So, "In Jesus' name" is that which is done according to Jesus' will, confessing that He is the Christ, the Son of the living God.

In Matthew 18 the two or three are actively engaged in the work of the Gospel, even if they are not called ministers of the word. They are at work calling a sinner to repentance, so that they might "win him over." The purpose of their gathering has everything to do with the preaching of the pure Gospel and right administration of the sacraments. They are confessing that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the Living God by not allowing someone to continue in sin. Truly they are church, but they are not *the church*. Truly they are church, even though in their meeting together to call a sinner to repentance, the Gospel might not be preached at all due to the lack of repentance of the one being disciplined.

It is less clear, of course, in a gathering such as ours where we are trying to determine if we are in fellowship with one another. We are confident that the *Una Sancta* is present. We are also confident that the true visible church is present. And, at some level this conference is certainly about the preaching of the pure Gospel and proper administration of the sacraments. All of the churches represented here, to the best of my knowledge, confess that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God. That is, they hold that Jesus is who He said He is both in regard to His nature and to His purpose. But we would in no way expect this gathering at this point in time to engage together in Divine Service, or in the training or calling of a minister of the Word.

But when a number of true visible congregations work together to help each other preach the pure Gospel and rightly administer the sacraments, their gathering together is truly in Jesus' name. They are a gathering in which the Gospel is preached in its purity, and the sacraments rightly administered. Such gatherings are still smaller than the *Una Sancta*. They are part of that ultimate gathering of all believers in which the Gospel purely preached and the sacraments rightly administered.

Where do we find the true visible church? We find her anywhere Christians gather in Jesus' name. That is, we find her where Christians gather for the sake of the preaching of the pure Gospel and right administration of the sacraments, even when at times it comes about that those very marks are not present in a particular meeting in a particular place at a particular time. That is because there are occasions when a portion of the true visible church gathers confessing who Jesus is, but circumstances do not permit the actual preaching of the Gospel or administration of the sacraments.

So, then, is our question true in regard to local congregations? Hopefully by now it is realized that even in local congregations we cannot say the church is a gathering of saints around the Means of Grace, but maintain that it is a gathering of saints in which the Means of Grace are administered.

Consequences

The church doesn't go away when the pastor says amen. That is because the Church is a thing itself, and not merely an activity. This understanding Does affect our doctrine and practice of fellowship, who can call, use of fill preachers, understanding of ordination, and training of pastors, and participation of laity. The understanding of the definition of church has real, practical consequences.

Who can call?

We can never say with certainty who is truly a member of the *Una Sancta*. There is no absolute identifying of God's people. Only God knows who are His. Even the holy angels are forbidden to pull out the tares lest they uproot the wheat. The true church always remains hidden within the visible church. So, when we speak of calling ministers or go looking for the true church, we do so on the basis of the true visible church recognized by her marks.

Is a local Lutheran congregation in which the Gospel is purely preached and the Sacraments administered according to Christ's institution a true visible church? Yes. Is it a true visible church after the benediction? Yes. Is it a true visible church when it gathers together to call a pastor? Yes. Is it a true visible church if in a meeting it decides to send a missionary? Yes. Is it a true visible church if it engages in the training of men

for ministry? Yes. Is it a true visible church if it opens a Christian Day School to assist parents in training their children? Yes.⁵⁴

But what about a synod, is it church? Many emphatically say, “No!” They say no because the synod is not normally directly engaged in preaching the Gospel and administering the sacraments. Others will say that a synod is church only by virtue of being made up of churches. However, the very purpose of synods is the pure preaching of the Gospel and the right administration of the Sacraments. Synods are formed out of concern for providing faithful ministers and for preaching the Gospel where it is not being preached (mission work). Can mission work be done by individual congregations? Yes, it can, but it can also be done by a group of congregations working together.

Moreover, calling and ordaining is the responsibility of the church, not the pastors, not the bishops, not the Godly civil rulers, not the congregation or voters’ assembly, but the church. That is, it is the responsibility of the congregation together with the pastors, bishops, and godly rulers if there be any. Martin Chemnitz asks and answers:

But do Anabaptists do right, who entrust the whole right of calling to the common multitude (which they take the word *ekklesia* to mean), with the ministry and pious magistrate excluded? By no means. For the church in each place is called, and is, the whole body embracing under Christ, the Head, all the members of that place. Ephesians 4:15-16; 1 Corinthians 12:12-14, 27. Therefore as the call belongs not only to the ministry nor only to the magistrate, so also is it not to be made subject to the mere will (and) whim of the common multitude, for no part, with either one or both (of the others) excluded, is the church. But the call should be and remain in the power of the whole church, but with due order observed.⁵⁵

Yes, congregations retain the right of calling, a right exercised on its own only in circumstances where no godly bishops or pastors are to be found. In an emergency that may be as little as one Christian asking another to be his minister, but in normal circumstances the call will come through sheep and shepherds together. Moreover, as Martin Chemnitz continues on, he notes that in the historical record (including that of the Scriptures), this was done in somewhat different ways under varying circumstances. The Treatise paragraph 67 defends the right of congregations to call, etc. but does not deny option of appointments by a bishop. In fact, it defends the practice as long as the bishops agree to appoint and ordain preachers of the pure Gospel.

Martin Chemnitz’ opinion that in normal circumstances congregations, pastors, bishops, and pious rulers act together to call is certainly backed by Scripture. When a replacement is found for Judas, Peter takes the lead in seeing to it that the vacancy is filled. Two men are proposed, and the whole assembly participates to some degree in the process. When Paul is called, his call is verified and ratified by Ananias. When Paul is sent from Antioch by the Holy Spirit, the elders lay hands on him. Paul leaves Titus in Crete to appoint (ordain) elders in every congregation.

⁵⁴ This is not to say that the CDS is church. While that is a complex question, the activity of church comes into play in a big way here. A very big part of the difficulty of this question lies in careful exegesis.

⁵⁵ Question 25, *Ministry, Word, and Sacraments: An Enchiridion*; Luther Poellot, Tr.; Concordia Publishing House; St. Louis 1981.

Only God (the three persons of the Trinity are all said to send or call) calls, we cannot insist that the Holy Spirit only calls through the holy ones, since He calls through the visible church. And, as noted above, God does at least at times work through unbelievers. Because calling is the responsibility of the church (Chemnitz is not referring to local congregations as such when he speaks of place), it is certainly permissible for a larger church body to call. What is not permissible is to foist a minister on anyone.

To say that a synod can't call because it is not gathered around the means of grace is to say that a mission congregation that has not had divine service cannot call a pastor because we can not say for sure the true church is present there. This is the essential problem of the functionalist view of the church—it sees the church existing only when engaged in Divine Service. Besides, even the worst of synods purposefully convene around the Means of Grace to the best of their ability. Synod conventions have numerous devotions and services.⁵⁶

Use of fill preachers

A question recently came up in an elders' meeting at Reformation Lutheran Church on how we are to regard a guest preacher in light of Augustana XIV. After all, the pastor filling in for me while I am at this conference has not been called by the congregation. The question is worth asking. Should the congregation rather gather for an office of prayer such as matins, or is it entirely acceptable to make use of fill preachers?

Augsburg Confession Article XIV does not say that no one should publicly teach or administer the sacraments in a church, but in the church unless he is regularly called. Church here is the larger church, the true visible church. The call then is the general call to teach in the church which comes through the church. A minister who has been rightly called may preach in a congregation to which he has not been specifically called, provided he is not meddling in another minister's congregation.⁵⁷

In such cases the pastor loci is bishop to the guest preacher by virtue of holding the specific call to that congregation. But it still remains that the pastor loci does not have authority over the guest preacher by divine right, because anyone worthy to preach in a specific gathering of the visible church is worthy to preach in any and all gatherings of the visible church. It cannot be any other way. Either a man is apt to teach, or he is not. Either he is above reproach, or he is not. Either he is a one-woman man, or he is not. Either he manages his own household well, or he does not.

There is nothing that would disqualify a man from service in one gathering that would not disqualify him from service in every gathering. That is not to say that there are not gatherings in which one is better able to serve. It would be ridiculous to have a man who speaks only Chinese serve people who speak only English. In such a case the

⁵⁶ I'm not here defending the practice of celebrating the Lord's Supper at conventions, etc. I believe such a practice is wrong, but not because the larger church gathering has no such authority. I believe it is wrong because, practically speaking, we should receive the sacrament from those who are called to administer it to us for several very practical reasons.

⁵⁷ There are several commands to ministers to shepherd that flock among whom, or over which, the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. While worthiness to teach in one congregations means worthiness to teach in any, it does not mean one is an overseer of all congregations.

minister will have great difficulty teaching.⁵⁸ Numerous other factors may weigh in as well, but they do not rise to the level of Scriptural suitability.

Training of Ministers

Can an individual congregation train men for ministry? Yes, it can, though it can be argued that it is more properly done by groups of congregations working together. After all, according to AC XIV the church in which one must have a proper call in order to preach, teach, or administer the sacraments is not a local congregation but the church, the universal visible church. Is it not then more appropriate that the larger church see to the training of men for ministry?

The fact that worthiness to teach in any particular gathering means worthiness to teach in any and all gatherings of the true visible church suggests that ministers should be trained by the larger church. It may be OK for congregations to train pastors in house, but seminaries are recognition that these men are being trained for service to the church in general. When a gathering of the true visible church operates a Christian Day School, it is operating that school primarily for the benefit of members of that gathering.⁵⁹ In training ministers, it is doing so for the benefit of the whole church.

Even if a particular congregation were training a minister to be called to itself, that minister must be worthy to teach in any and all gatherings of the true visible church. For this reason the larger church has an interest in the training of ministers. In theory every congregation is able to train ministers. Practically, this is not the case. Few are the ministers who are experts in every area of theology. Beyond that, there is great benefit to having men prepare for the ministry along with others. Much of the learning at a seminary actually takes place outside of the classroom as the students engage in theological discussion and debate.

When smaller gatherings work together, it is easier for them to watch out for one another. Errors in teaching are recognized quicker. If a seminary is run by an individual congregation, errors peculiar to that congregation are more likely to be spread to other congregations. Christian day schools are very local in nature. Seminaries, on the other hand, are regional, national, even multinational. It is in the interest of the true visible church in the region, nation, or nations served by the seminary to have input and influence in the seminary.

When we consider that the training of ministers is a specific duty of those who are already ministers, it is only appropriate that those who do so are those who have been examined and approved. Seminary professors, even those in the largest of seminaries, are ministers who, for the sake of good order and convenience, limit their ministry to that aspect of training others for ministry.⁶⁰ That is not to say that every teacher of every subject in a seminary must be called and ordained.

There are subjects in seminaries that are not directly a part of the Gospel ministry. But in general it stands to reason that most teachers in seminaries will themselves be in

⁵⁸ There are certainly cases where a preacher makes use of a translator, at least for a time; such situations are governed by wisdom and necessity.

⁵⁹ The paper that occasioned this response asserts that Christian Day Schools are operated in the estate of marriage, and not essentially in the estate of the church. It then uses the fact that congregations successfully run Christian Day Schools as a basis for arguing that they can and should run seminaries.

⁶⁰ I am not arguing that such must be or even should be the case.

the ministry. Here the injunction of Augsburg Confession XIV stands: *No one should publically teach in the church or administer the sacraments unless he be regularly called.* When we speak of teaching in the church, we are not speaking of mathematics, choir, or even techniques of rhetoric. We are speaking of God's Word. Can layman teach in order to prepare men for ministry? Under normal circumstances, no. Yes, they may have a part in it, even teaching peripheral or supportive subjects, but the very nature of the ministry assumes that those who are themselves ministers will train others for ministry.

Participation of the laity

One's understanding of the definition of church affects one's view of who may participate in the work of the church, as well as how they may participate. If one holds to the erroneous view that the church is the gathering around the Means of Grace, then one doesn't see much activity for the laity beyond "Pray, pay, and obey." But there is evidence that the early church saw a much more active role for the laity, even having elders who were laity as well as those who were clergy. The lay elders had concern for the maintenance of property and care for the poor, while the clergy elders preached and administered the sacraments. Martin Chemnitz held this view, and also held that it was only appropriate that educated laymen have a seat on the consistory, since the church is not merely the ministers. The church is the pillar of truth, and the church is the whole body.⁶¹

It certainly follows then, that voting as such is not wrong. God gives His people real input into the Kingdom of heaven. He tells us that we can hasten the day of our Lord's return. He commands us to pray and tells us that He will give us whatever we ask in Jesus' name. He gave Hanna a son, and offered Solomon whatever his heart desired. Voting certainly can be a misuse of power. Any time voting becomes an expression of ultimate authority in the church, or usurps the rule of the ministers, it is wrong. But when it is used for the church to express her godly desires, it is an acceptable practice. There are events recorded in Scripture that at the very least sound very close to voting as we know it.⁶²

Moreover, when representatives of the congregation are sent to a convention, they function on behalf of, and at the behest of, the congregation. To say that larger church or "representative" church is not church is to say that the church disappears when it is not actively participating in Divine Service. The whole reason synods exist is because of the means of grace—it's right proclamation/administration. Synods gather around the word not incidentally, but primarily. It is not as if local congregations meet to handle the church's spiritual affairs and synods the temporal. Even the deep wound in the Evangelical Lutheran Synod was of a spiritual nature, and not temporal. By far the bulk of most synod conventions consists of spiritual matters, even when synods are far off the beam. And the temporal affairs that are dealt with are, at least in theory, to support the spiritual.

On the other hand, we cannot say that a synod is the church, because it is smaller than the *Una Sancta*. Nor can we say it is a church, because it doesn't have locale⁶³ as such, unless we were to say for example, "The Church in the United States." While

⁶¹ 1 Timothy 3:15

⁶² e. g. the sending of a delegation to the Jerusalem synod, the decision of the same, the choosing the 7.

⁶³ i.e. does not gather in the locale of the Means of Grace

because of the amount of alphabet soup that is out there this wouldn't entirely make sense, there is evidence in the Scriptures that references to the church in a particular city meant more than one congregation. 1 Corinthians 14:23 reads: "If the whole church comes together in one place..." And it is hardly conceivable that the entire church at Rome met together as one congregation, or even in one place.

Remember that it is the gathering of all the holy in which—when we send some of our number to a larger group meeting for the very purpose of carrying out the preaching, how is that not the church? We (should) send them to speak the will of the congregation. At the same time, let us bear in mind that while we are to walk in fellowship with all who hold to the pure marks of the church, no larger church grouping as a bureaucracy is commanded by Christ. That we gather together in local⁶⁴ congregations is commanded by God, and well attested in the Scriptures: e.g. Acts 20:28,⁶⁵ 1 Peter 5:2, 3,⁶⁶ Titus 1:5,⁶⁷ Hebrews 10:24, 25,⁶⁸ etc.

Fellowship

Because the church is the gathering of all believers, we are truly in fellowship with all who have faith in Christ, who have been justified through faith in His sacrifice. But because we identify the church by outward marks that are to be well displayed (no one puts a candle under a bushel...), we practice fellowship according to the marks of the church. Prayer is not, as such, a mark of the church,⁶⁹ but the preaching of the Gospel and the administration of the sacraments are. We should not attend the services of the heterodox, because we thereby identify ourselves with them according to the marks of the church. We will not commune with them for the very same reason. We will not engage in any sort of divine service together with false churches, because according to the visible signs, we are not in fellowship.

The Scriptures are quite plain in this regard, speaking against displaying unity on any basis other than on the basis of the marks of the church, even if true unity exists in faith. God Himself commands us to mark and avoid, not just those who are unbelievers, but even those who (though they may have faith) cause divisions and offenses contrary to the doctrine we have received.⁷⁰ We are not to receive or eat with those who do not come with the true doctrine.⁷¹ Therefore, we are not to participate in divine service with them,

⁶⁴ By local is not meant a geographical place, but an identifiable group with a "permanent" minister or ministers—a group that gathers regularly in the locale of the Means of Grace. There have been peripatetic local congregations.

⁶⁵ Therefore take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood.

⁶⁶ Shepherd the flock of God which is among you, serving as overseers, not by compulsion but willingly, not for dishonest gain but eagerly; nor as being lords over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock.

⁶⁷ For this reason I left you in Crete, that you should set in order the things that are lacking, and appoint elders in every city as I commanded you.

⁶⁸ And let us consider one another in order to stir up love and good works, not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as *is* the manner of some, but exhorting *one another*, and so much the more as you see the Day approaching.

⁶⁹ We will not, however, engage in prayer that is not keeping with sound doctrine. We will not pray with Mormons, or anyone who would make our prayer a point of offense.

⁷⁰ Romans 16:17

⁷¹ 2 John 10

even if we are the ones conducting the service. Closed communion is to be closed, because fellowship is to be practiced according to the visible signs of the church.

Conclusion

Earlier this paper asked: “Does the answer to this (first) question affect our doctrine and practice?” The answer is an emphatic, yes! It affects who we believe may call, who should participate in the work of the church, how ministers should be trained, and the practice of fellowship. Truly there has been abuse. But abuse doesn’t make the structure right or wrong anymore than a pastor (or layman for that matter), who leads an immoral life, makes Christianity wrong.

There are those present here today who will have nothing of episcopal polity, because episcopal polity has been abused. Martin Stephan used his position for ignoble purposes, and Rome set itself up as lord in the church and world. Yet, the church of the Reformation did not turn away from such polity, but largely retained and defended it. And it remains a fact that there have been countless godly bishops under whose rule the church has thrived. While some would contend that episcopal polity doesn’t provide for checks and balances, Martin Chemnitz postulates that checks and balances are exactly what episcopal polity provides. Chemnitz, writing centuries earlier, gives the very reason why men like Steffan and Grabau go too far: they have no one to whom they have to answer. This is no surprise; it is the same reason why Rome went too far.⁷²

There are others present here who will have nothing of congregational polity, because congregational polity has been abused. We have seen too many pastors treated like hired hands and thrown out for any number of carnal reasons. Too many pastors have heard their elders say, “Pastor, you do what we tell you to do.” Too many have been dragged into arguments about what hymns should be sung, even what words are to be recited at the distribution of Christ’s body and blood. Too many faithful preachers have been idolized—credited when the church grows and blamed when it shrinks. Yet the early church showed a great deal of lay involvement, and the Holy Spirit made great use of laymen and laywomen. It appears rare, if ever, that the Apostles made decisions or worked apart from the laity. Besides, preachers have always been treated with contempt. Read Luther’s comments on the 3 visitors to Abraham. Read 1Corinthians, 1Kings 18 and 19, Exodus, etc.

Just because something can be misused or abused does not make the thing wrong e.g. salvation through faith alone leading to the idea that works are not necessary or are even wrong, being guided by objective truth leading one to conclude that emotions are necessarily bad, reason, etc. Lord’s Supper after all, it was Episcopal polity that had gone wrong in the days of the Reformation, yet that polity was not rejected as being untenable according to Scripture; rejected were the abuses of that polity. Can we say that a synod is church? Certainly not if by synod we mean a bureaucracy. But if by synod we mean that gathering of saint in smaller groups of which the Gospel is purely preached and the sacraments rightly administered, then yes.

Are the decisions and decrees of a synod binding on local congregations? Yes, they are. All those decisions and decrees that are based on order and outward unity are binding by virtue of voluntary association. And all those decrees and decisions based

⁷² The patriarch of Rome was separated geographically and linguistically from the other patriarchs.

squarely on God's word are as binding as God's word is binding both from synod to congregation and from congregation to synod.

But mark well that nothing that is contrary to God's word or said to be according to God's word when it is not has any authority over any individual or congregation whatsoever. It simply cannot, must not according to the Gospel. We must obey God rather than men, and when it is contrary to God's word, including when it is claimed to be according to God's word when it is not, it is nothing other than the words of men. *Omnis caro ut faenum et omnis gloria eius tamquam flos faeni exaruit faenum et flos decidit. Verbum autem Domini manet in aeternum.--All flesh is as grass, and all the glory of man as the flower of the grass. The grass withers, and its flower falls away, but the word of the LORD endures forever.*⁷³

Soli Deo Gloria!

⁷³ Isaiah 40:7, 8