

The Church and Her Members

That Which God Sees and That Which Man Sees

If you ever find yourself in Perth, Australia, make your way over to Claisebrook Square. There you will find a fascinating piece of sculpture. It is a collaboration between a well known Australian artist, Brian McKay, and architect Ahmad Abas. The sculpture is known as the *Impossible Triangle*. If you approach from the north, west, or east, you might wonder about that name. It looks nothing like a triangle. It looks more like goalposts that have been savaged by a tornado. Bars jut randomly here and there. I suppose it has some redeeming qualities. It's shiny. But for the most part, it's not what you would call *beautiful*.

But approach it from the south and you will see something completely different. Eventually those bars seem to converge and form a perfect equilateral triangle—but—not just any equilateral triangle. What you are looking at appears impossible. The sides are made of straight beams. At the three vertices of the triangle, the beams intersect at what are clearly 90 degree angles. Yet, any sophomore geometry student will tell you that the three angles of a triangle always *total* 180 degrees. There is no such thing as a triangle with three 90 degree angles.

Now the title of the sculpture makes sense. You are looking at an object that is a three-dimensional impossibility. Beautiful. Perfect. But impossible. And yet, there it is. So you stand there and you stare. *"I can't believe what I'm seeing!"*

I think this sculpture can serve as a metaphor for what we are talking about in this symposium—the Church. People will sometimes talk as though there are two churches—visible churches and the invisible Church. That is not accurate. The terms *visible* and *invisible* do not describe different churches. They describe different perspectives of the same Church. There is only one Church. However, it looks different depending on the perspective from which you view it, man's or God's.

Approach the Church from most directions—north, west, or east—and it has some shiny parts. Church buildings are attractive (for the most part). The music is pleasing (for the most part). The pastors are nice (for the most part). But there is also plenty that looks just *wrong*. In church you will find bickering. In church you will find greed. In church you will find the most grotesque sins, even among the clergy. Take a close look at *any* church, and you will find plenty that is not beautiful.

But approach the Church from the south, *from God's perspective*, and you see something else entirely. What you are looking at is beautiful and orderly and perfect, impossibly so! When you look at church from God's perspective, you stand there and you stare. *"I can't believe what I'm seeing."*

However, we cannot see the Church from God's perspective, can we? That is what we mean when we speak of the Church as *invisible*. It's a bit of a misnomer. The Church is not really invisible. The perfect beauty of the Church is only invisible *to us*. That is why in our creeds, we confess *"I believe in the Holy Christian Church,"* but never, *"I see the Holy Christian Church."* We believe this perfect, majestic Church exists, not because we have empirical evidence, but simply because God has promised us it exists. *"Faith is being . . . certain of what you do not see."*¹

In this first paper of the Symposium on the Church, we are going to consider the Church from those two different perspectives. First, we shall consider the members of the Church from God's perspective and from our perspective. Then, we shall consider the means by which God builds his Church from God's perspective and from our perspective. Here, too, there are visible and invisible elements. Finally, we shall discuss why it is so vital that we carefully distinguish between that which God sees and that which we can see.

¹ Hebrews 11:1

Part I: The Church's Members

From God's Perspective and from Our Perspective

A Proper Understanding of the Church

What is the Church? Don't think too hard. In Article XII of the Smalcald Articles, Martin Luther says, "Thank God, a child seven years old knows what the Church is, namely, the holy believers and lambs who hear the voice of their shepherd."² The Church is simply all those who believe in Jesus Christ as their Savior from sin. It includes all Christians, everywhere (in heaven and on earth) of all time. Therefore, if the word *church* connotes to you *primarily* the image of stained glass and pews, if it connotes to you *primarily* the image of the congregation you attend, then your concept of church is, in the words of our Lutheran forefathers, "improper." Article VII, VIII of *The Apology of the Augsburg Confession*:

We hold, according to Scripture, 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... Neither do we see how, when the Church, *properly* so called, is named the body of Christ, it should be described otherwise than we have described it.³

In the 17th century, Johann Andreas Quenstedt, professor of theology at the University of Wittenberg, stepped forward to be the leader of orthodox Lutheranism. In regard to the Church, he echoed the Lutheran Confessions:

Properly and principally the church is the assembly of saints and true believers⁴

Taken *improperly*, the word church is used either metonymically for a public place in which it gathers for religious worship, or synecdochically for a part of the church.⁵

Fast forward to the 19th century. Dr. C.F.W. Walther echoes this understanding of the Church in many of his treatises on *Church and Ministry*.

The church in the *proper* sense of the term is the congregation [*Gemeinde*] 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.⁶

Proper and *improper* here are not to be understood as "correct" and "incorrect." *Proper* is a translation of the Latin *proprie*. *Proprius* doesn't necessarily have moral connotations to it. It can simply mean "regular." We still use the word *proper* this way on occasion. For example, "Am I in Mequon proper?" The town of Mequon has a legally defined geographical limit. However, at times the word *Mequon* might be used in reference to an area that is outside the town limits. Likewise, the Church *proper* has borders. Anyone *in Christ* is of the Church. There are those who seem to be near Christ, yet they are not truly *in* him. We call these hypocrites. They are not in the

² *Concordia Triglotta* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1921) 499.

³ *Concordia Triglotta*, 237. In virtually every part of the Confessions, when the Church is being discussed, you will find that word "proper" is used at one point.

⁴ as quoted in C.F.W. Walther, *Church and Ministry* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1987) 31.

⁵ Johann Andreas Quenstedt, *The Church*, ed. Luther Peollot (Malone, TX: Repristination Press, 1999) 8.

⁶ 27.

Church *proper*. They're only in the vicinity of the Church. An oft used and colorful metaphor – hypocrites are like snot or sweat or stool or syphilis. They are *in* and *on* the body, but they are not really *of* the body.⁷

Proprius, especially when used in reference to words, can also be translated “literal.” That truly helps us get a *proper* understanding of the Church. For what does the word the Bible uses for *church* literally mean? In ἐκκλησία we have a combination of ἐκ, which is used to denote separation, and καλέω, “to call.”⁸ Literally speaking then, the ἐκκλησία are those who have been called from one point to another. There is a line that is crossed, as Jesus says: “I tell you the truth, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life” (ἐκ τοῦ θανάτου εἰς τὴν ζωὴν).⁹

That literal understanding of ἐκκλησία also enforces the fact that Church membership does *not* originate in the mind or heart of the members of the Church, but in the eternal mind and heart of God. He issues the call.¹⁰ The Church, therefore, belongs *entirely* to God. “Be shepherds of the church of God (ἐκκλησίαν τοῦ θεοῦ), which he bought with his own blood.”¹¹ It is a singular thing. Jesus said, “On this rock I will build my church” (Matthew 16). *Not* churches. He bought *one*. He built *one*.

Someone will point out: “But the Bible also uses ἐκκλησία to refer a group of people gathered around the Word – a local congregation.” True enough. It does, commonly. ἐκκλησία is linked with specific locations, such as Philemon’s home (κατ’ οἶκόν σου ἐκκλησίᾳ - Philemon 2). It’s found in the plural, as in Romans 16:4 – “All the churches (αἱ ἐκκλησίαι - plural) of the Gentiles are grateful to them.” Jesus does both, pluralizing and geographically limiting the concept of Church, in Revelation 1:4 – “To the seven churches (ταῖς ἑπτὰ ἐκκλησίαις) in the province of Asia”

However, when Scripture uses ἐκκλησία to refer to a local gathering of believers, it’s using the word *improperly* – i.e., in an irregular way. Prof. Wilbert Gawrish writes, “Even though ἐκκλησία is used in the Scriptures of the external group, this is a figure of speech. This is a synecdoche, a *pars pro toto*,”¹² referring to part of something as if it were the whole.¹³

It’s not unlike when we use the word “glasses” to refer to those things sitting on the bridge of our nose. Our glasses consist of glass, metal, rubber, plastics, and maybe even tortoise shell. But we refer to part as though it were the whole. Likewise, when Scripture speaks of “the church that meets in your home” or “the seven churches in the province of Asia,” we should not think Scripture is using the word *church* a whole new way. It’s simply referring to a part as though it were the whole.¹⁴ Furthermore, when Scripture uses ἐκκλησία to refer to a local gathering of individuals, the Holy Spirit will often make it clear that he’s really thinking about something bigger and, yes, something *better*. Consider Paul’s greeting to the Corinthians.

To the church of God in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus and called to be holy, together with all those everywhere who call on the name of our Lord

⁷ *Our Great Heritage III* ed. Lyle Lange (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1991) 346.

⁸ *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* ed. William Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1957) 233.

⁹ John 5:24

¹⁰ The Apostle Paul writes: “But we ought always to thank God for you, brothers loved by the Lord, because from the beginning God chose you to be saved through the sanctifying work of the Spirit and through belief in the truth. He called (ἐκάλεσεν) you to this through our gospel, that you might share in the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ” (2 Thessalonians 2:13-14).

¹¹ Acts 20:28

¹² Wilbert R. Gawrish, “What Church Do You Mean” (WLS Essay File) 18.

¹³ We do this not just by referring to visible organizations as “churches,” but by dividing up *the* Church in various ways. We speak of the “Church Militant” and the “Church Triumphant.” We call the believers who lived before Christ “the Old Testament Church.” These are all fine terms in helping us express Scriptural concepts, but the Lutheran fathers would also call these *improper* uses of the word “Church.” Properly understood, there is but one Church.

¹⁴ Again, Prof. Quenstedt: “We do not hold that there are two churches, one true, real, and internal, the other external. But we say that one and the same church is looked at from two points of view.”¹⁴ Man’s perspective, God’s perspective.

Jesus Christ—their Lord and ours: Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.¹⁵

After the Spirit refers to the church being “in Corinth,” he immediately qualifies what he *really* cares about, *not* that they are “in Corinth,” but rather that they are “sanctified in Christ Jesus and called to be holy.” The Spirit highlights *the* Church, which just so happens to have some members ἐν Κορίνθῳ. The Spirit then opens the letter up to “all those everywhere” who have been called to faith. While he’s writing to a church, what he has in mind is the Church.¹⁶

This is not to downplay the importance of the local congregation, or for that matter, of the synod. The fact that the Spirit often chooses to use ἐκκλησία in an improper sense to refer to local congregations, when he could have as easily chosen another word, ascribes dignity to them. A church or church body has all the rights and responsibilities that belong to the *ecclesia in toto*. But why? Only because when God looks at Christian congregations, he sees the one Church within.¹⁷

If one has a *proper* understanding of Church, two wonderful things happen.

First, it increases our joy as we realize we are part of something bigger. We rejoice at the spiritual blessings that God pours out on humanity, not just in our own little area, not even in our own synod, but throughout Christendom.

Second, it increases our sense of responsibility as we realize we have a debt of love to pay to Christians outside our immediate calling. I do not have a call to serve your church. But the fact that you and I are both of *one* Church affects how I conduct ministry in *my* church. For example, I want my members to grow spiritually. Why? Because it benefits them? Obviously, yes. Because it benefits my congregation? Obviously, yes. But there is a final reason that is perhaps not as obvious. It benefits *you*. I want my members to be valuable assets to your work if they were ever to move and transfer. I want my members to be well grounded in the Word so that with me they might watch your doctrine and practice. I would humbly ask you and your members to do the same for my congregation. We do this for one another because we understand that if we lose the Word, we have nothing worthwhile left. Together, encouraging one another as *Church*, we are infinitely stronger than we are as *churches*.

So, what comes to mind *first* when you hear the word *church*? I hope it isn’t the congregation you are privileged to attend and serve. I hope it isn’t the WELS. When we call those things *church* we are just using a figure of speech. There is “one Lord, one faith, one baptism,”¹⁸ and therefore one Church. There’s a reason, greater than tradition, that we say the Creed Sunday after Sunday. *Lex orandi, lex credendi*. When you hear the word *church*, let the first thing that comes to mind be: “the holy Christian Church, the communion of saints.”¹⁹

¹⁵ 1 Corinthians 1:2-3

¹⁶ Prof. August Pieper had an interesting explanation for why Paul would add that qualifier. “In all epistles without exception [the apostle] is speaking to Christians, believers, saints, but never to the wicked.” *Our Great Heritage III*, 342.

¹⁷ Hermann Sasse, “On the Rights and Limitations of the Individual Congregation.” Dr. Sasse writes: “The Church is not the sum total of churches. The Church is not made up OF churches, but consists IN churches.”

¹⁸ Ephesians 4:5

¹⁹ A whole paper could be written just on the relationship between those two phrases: “Holy Christian Church” and “Communion of Saints.” There are some who believe that “communion of saints” could be a reference to the Supper. You find that in writings such as Werner Elert’s *Eucharist and Church Fellowship in the First Four Centuries*. Still others (Tyrannius Rufinus, for example) think “Communion of Saints” may be a later addition to the Creed, explaining what exactly was meant by “sanctam Ecclesiam catholicam.” Ultimately, while fun to discuss, it is probably impossible to “prove” one’s view. For the purpose of this paper, let it suffice to say that the Lutheran fathers consistently write as though the two phrases are appositional. Consider what Luther writes in the Large Catechism: “The Creed calls the holy Christian church a *communio sanctorum*, “a communion of saints,”... To speak idiomatically, we ought to say “a community of saints,” that is, a community composed only of saints, or, still more clearly, “a holy community.”

Visible and Invisible

If there is only one Church, the body of true believers, why have the terms *visible church* and *invisible Church* worked their way into our ecclesiastical vocabulary? For the exact same reason the term *Trinity* has worked its way into our vocabulary. These terms provide convenient ways to refer to the Scriptural concept that there are both visible and invisible aspects to the Church.

This concept is taught early in Scripture in Genesis 4. Two brothers worship. We can *see* the fruit—the sheep—the fires. We can see them close their eyes—hear them whisper their prayers. Why do they worship? Rewind a few decades, and you see the *apparent* reason. There is their father, Adam, speaking the Word of God to them. The Word then (so far as we know) is short, yet very sweet: “*Cain, Abel, our God is going to raise up one of your brothers to crush our enemy and undo the mess your mother and I created. In faith, we look forward to that day.*”

And so, as the smoke and scent rises from earth to heaven, you and I see two *apparently* identical men, men who bring offerings to their God in gratitude for the promise of a Savior. *That is not what God sees.* He looks beyond proclamation of the Word. He looks beyond presentation of the sacrifice. Instead, he peers straight inside those men, who look so alike *to us*. “The LORD does not look at the things man looks at. Man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart.”²⁰ Inside Abel, the Lord sees love and gratitude. Inside Cain, he sees a grudging sense of compulsion. The LORD somehow makes what he sees known. Cain’s coolness turns icy. Apathy strengthens into hate, not just for God, but for God’s Church. Blood is spilled.

As Abel’s blood soaks into the ground, what is our assessment of the scene? Tragedy! The church loses *two* members. *That is not what God sees.* He looks beyond death. After all, he is “the Lord of both the living and the dead.”²¹ Even before Abel’s body turns cold, the Lord of Life welcomes Abel into heaven as a saint triumphant. Abel’s lot has *vastly* improved. He has escaped the vale of tears and achieved the crown, perhaps the first Christian to do so. Even Cain’s situation is better! While there is no remorse and therefore no repentance, at least he cannot lie to himself anymore. (A hypocrite often doesn’t realize he’s a hypocrite.) Cain’s sin is out in the open for everyone, including himself, to see. That’s *healthy*. God marks Cain, so that he might have time to carry that heavy weight and maybe one day come to repentance. And if that would happen, what then? Cain and Abel, though on opposite sides of life and death, would again be brothers. As the story of Cain and Abel clearly illustrates, in the Church, what we see is often vastly different from what God sees. We see only that which is visible. He sees the invisible.

Thus, while the term *invisible church* is not found directly in Scripture, the concept certainly is. For a more concise Scriptural presentation, consider Romans 2:28-29, where the Apostle writes, “A man is not a Jew if he is only one outwardly, nor is circumcision merely outward and physical. No, a man is a Jew if he is one inwardly; and circumcision is circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the written code.” Paul distinguishes between someone who has an outward connection with the Church from someone who has a true, inward, spiritual connection. It should not surprise us that membership in the Church is an invisible thing. It is simply a matter of the body following the pattern of its Head. “Though you have not seen [Jesus Christ], you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy.”²²

Even before the terms *visible church* and *invisible church* were used, theologians taught the concept. In 413 A.D. Augustine began *The City of God*, a massive tome whose primary topic is the invisibility of the Church.²³ In it, he describes these two cities, the earthly city and the heavenly one, and how it is often difficult to distinguish between the two, even harder to tell who are members of which.

²⁰ 1 Samuel 16:7

²¹ Romans 14:9

²² 1 Peter 1:8

²³ My thanks to Professor Daniel Deutschlander, who at the Cottonbelt Conference last Spring told me that if I was going to present on the Church, I needed to read *City of God*. “It will bore you to tears, but it is invaluable in understanding the nature of the Church.” Both of his assessments were dead on.

Sons of the Church lie *hidden* among the ungodly; and there are false Christians within the Church... She has in her midst some who are united with her in participation in the sacraments, but who will not join with her in the eternal destiny of the saints. Some of these are *hidden*; some are well known, for they do not hesitate to murmur against God, whose sacramental sign they bear... In truth, these two cities are interwoven and intermixed in this era, and await separation at the last judgment. (emphasis mine)²⁴

Where does the term *invisible* come from then? It is born of the Reformation. The concept of *visible* and *invisible church* became a dominant theological theme at that time. Not surprising, given Rome's claim that the Catholic Church *was* the Church.

Even before 1517, Luther himself used the term *invisible* (*unsichtlich*) to describe the Church, although it was never a favorite expression. In describing the Church, he preferred to use the word *spiritual*, which ultimately says the same thing, as the Spirit and Spirit-wrought faith are invisible.²⁵ Luther also would frequently use the term *hidden* as he does in *The Bondage of the Will*: "The church is hidden away, the saints are out of sight."²⁶

Likewise, while Melancthon doesn't use the terms *visible church* or *invisible church*, he confesses the concept clearly. Compare *Article VII: Of the Church* and *Article VIII: What the Church Is* of the Augsburg Confession.²⁷

"Without a doubt, Article VII deals with what we generally speak of as the invisible Church. This is the Church in the proper sense of the term. Article VIII, on the other hand, speaks of the empirical church, the church as it is 'in this life' . . . This is what our theologians refer to as the visible church."²⁸

So it was at this time that orthodox theologians began latching onto the terms *visible* and *invisible* as a convenient way of expressing Scriptural truth. In his *Loci Theologici*, Martin Chemnitz (1522-1586) writes, ". . . the church is not *visible*: but is the *numerum praedestinatorum*, concerning which God knows who are his." Further examples of Lutheran fathers who used the terms *visible* and *invisible* are Jacob Heerbrand (1521-1600), Leonhard Hutter (1563-1616), Johann Gerhard (1582-1637),²⁹ Johann Konrad Dannhauer (1603-1666),³⁰ and Johann Quenstedt (1617-1688). Yet, while using the terms, those men were *very* cautious to explain that they were not dividing the Church into two, but talking about the two perspectives from which the Church is viewed – man's and God's.³¹

²⁴ Augustine, *City of God* translated by Henry Bettenson. (London: Penguin, 2003) 45-46.

²⁵ Armin Schuetze, "The Church: Visible and Invisible?" (WLS Essay File) 3.

²⁶ Gawrisch 16.

²⁷ In the former we read, "The Church is the congregation of saints, in which the Gospel is rightly taught and the Sacraments are rightly administered." Thus, Melancthon defines the church as *die Versammlung aller Gläubigen*, "the gathering of all believers." If Scripture teaches that faith is something only God can see, then Article VII teaches that the Church is something only God can see as well. But in Article VIII Melancthon acknowledges: "Although the Church properly is the congregation of saints and true believers, nevertheless, since in this life many hypocrites and evil persons are mingled therewith, it is lawful to use Sacraments administered by evil men." Article VII focuses on what is invisible—faith. Article VIII focuses on what is visible—that in a group of people gathered around Word and Sacrament, there will be believers, but there will be hypocrites too. *Triglotta* 47.

²⁸ Gawrisch 20.

²⁹ Schuetze 2.

³⁰ Quenstedt 74.

³¹ Prof. Armin Schuetze writes: "In fact, Gerhard at the conclusion of his nearly 350 pages of discussion of the church says that from that entire discussion the definition of the church can be stated as thus: 'The church is the assembly of men who have been called and gathered through the preaching of the word and the administration of the sacraments out of the world to the kingdom of God. In this assembly the elect according to the foreknowledge of the Father are found, namely, those who truly and perseveringly believe in Christ, among whom are mingled the non-saints, who nevertheless profess the same doctrine.' Thus he combines the two in his definition so as to really speak of only one thing, one church."³¹

The Attributes of the Church

Thus, man and God look at one and the same Church; but just as with the *Impossible Triangle* of Claisebrook Square, we see two totally different things. To illustrate this, let us consider just some of the attributes of the Church.

Oneness—Unity

Think about the metaphors God uses to describe his Church: a single building, a temple³²; a single beautiful city, a new Jerusalem³³; a single body³⁴; a single people, priesthood, and nation³⁵; a single flock³⁶; a beautiful bride³⁷; one big, happy household³⁸; the “whole family in heaven and on earth.”³⁹

That is what God sees. That is not what I see.

I see many churches divided in many ways: geographically, theologically, etc. I see churches (on the corporate and congregational level) that are *themselves* divided. Yet, I believe the Church is one. I believe there is *Una Sancta*, because God has told me so. But what I believe is different than what I see.

Holiness—Perfection

Can you remember when you first saw your wife on your wedding day? I can. She turned the corner of the narthex, standing with her father at the back of the nave. I stopped breathing. The woman I am privileged to love happens to be beautiful. She had always looked great. But at that moment—beautiful white dress, hair done, all smiles, and finally *mine*—she looked *perfect*. That is how the Church looks to God. “Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless.”⁴⁰

That is what God sees. That is not what I see.

How could I? The “holiness” and “blamelessness” and “righteousness” are all imputed. Paul speaks for every member of the Church when he says he does “not [have] a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ.”⁴¹ The holiness of the Church is but the holiness of Christ, credited to us. Our beauty is but his beauty. But it is not a beauty that can be seen—not an outward beauty. Remember what justification is—a change in status, a declarative act of God: “*Holy is this one. Do not dare to call him different!*” Those whose life is an unending parade of ugly “stains” and “blemishes” are *called* “radiant,” by virtue of their invisible connection to the only truly radiant One. Sinners are called saints. But that doesn’t mean we always *act* that way. I *hope* when you look at me, you think, “He’s perfect!” I shall think the same of you. Why? That is what my God has said you are, and God has yet to lie to me. So I believe we are holy. But what I believe is different than what I see.

Strength—Durability

Since “the Word of our God stands forever,”⁴² the Church shall stand forever, too. Jesus himself promises that all the forces of Hades are no match for the force that is the Church.⁴³

³² Ephesians 2:21

³³ Hebrews 11:10; 12:22

³⁴ 1 Corinthians 12:12,13,27

³⁵ 1 Peter 2:9,10

³⁶ John 10:16

³⁷ John 3:19

³⁸ Ephesians 2:19

³⁹ Ephesians 3:15

⁴⁰ Ephesians 5:25-26

⁴¹ Philippians 3:9

⁴² Isaiah 40:8

⁴³ Matthew 16:18

That is what God sees. That is not what I see.

I see churches and church bodies collapsing and closing, in some cases because they twist the Word, in other cases because they *don't* twist the Word. I'll believe Jesus when he says that his Church shall not perish. But what I believe is different than what I see.

We could go on and on, but I think you get the point. When looking at the same Church, God and we see two different things. The Lord sees the Impossible Triangle. *We believe* that exists, but *we see* a tornado-ravished field goal post.

Clearly, then, while the Church is real, its reality is invisible to us. This raises a big question.

How shall we know where to find it?

Part II: The Means by which Christ Builds the Church

From God's Perspective and from Our Perspective

Invisible Church, Visible Foundation

Jesus and his disciples walk north, eventually making their way to Caesarea Philippi. There Jesus debriefs the Twelve, asking them what they have learned in their recent travels. "Who do people say the Son of Man is?"⁴⁴ Jesus knows. He is asking for the sake of his disciples, not for himself. The answers vary: John the Baptist, Elijah, Jeremiah, one of the other prophets. A very elite list. We'd be honored to be mistaken for any of those men. But we aren't Jesus. The people have simultaneously assessed Jesus very highly and way too low.

Now Jesus gets to the real point. "But what about you?" he asked. "Who do you say I am?"⁴⁵ Peter speaks for all. "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God."⁴⁶ They had seen Jesus do too much to believe otherwise. More importantly, the Father in Heaven had revealed this when he sent the Spirit to enlighten them. The Jewish populace *thought* Jesus was *great*. The disciples *knew* he was *divine*.

In response to Peter's profound words, Jesus says something even *more* profound. "I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it."⁴⁷ It is the first time in Scripture we hear our Savior use that word ἐκκλησία.

καὶ γὰρ δέ σοι λέγω ὅτι σὺ εἶ Πέτρος, καὶ ἐπὶ ταύτῃ τῇ πέτρᾳ οἰκοδομήσω μου τὴν ἐκκλησίαν...

The possessive pronoun sits there in a position of emphasis—*my* Church. It is rightfully Jesus' Church, not only because he bought it with *his* blood, but also because ultimately its construction is *his* responsibility. "I will build. . . ." *Where, Jesus? Where shall we find it?* ". . . on this rock . . ."

There is lyricism to what Jesus says. He plays with words, using the masculine Πέτρος to refer to Peter, and using the feminine form πέτρα to identify on what he's going to build his Church. The difference? "πέτρα denotes firmness and immovability . . . The masculine πέτρος is used more for isolated rocks or small stones."⁴⁸ To put it simply, masculine means the rock is movable. Feminine means it isn't.

⁴⁴ Matthew 16:13

⁴⁵ Matthew 16:15

⁴⁶ Matthew 16:16

⁴⁷ Matthew 16:18

⁴⁸ *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament, Volume VI*, ed. Gerhard Kittel & Gerhard Friedrich (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1978) 95.

When Jesus called Simon into ministry, he had told him, “You will be called Cephas,”⁴⁹ using the Aramaic word for *rock*. That has come true! Jesus honors Simon by calling him Πέτρος. The confession Peter made demonstrates that he has come far, grown firm in the faith. But is Peter unmovable? No. Therefore, Peter is *not* going to be what Jesus builds his Church on. If it were, Jesus would have said something like: σὺ εἶ Πέτρος, καὶ ἐπὶ σοῦ (and on you) οἰκοδομήσω μου τὴν ἐκκλησίαν.⁵⁰ But he didn’t. Jesus said he’d build his church ἐπὶ ταύτῃ τῇ πέτρᾳ, on something that was totally unmovable, on bedrock.

What exactly is that? The ταύτη tells us we should not look far for the answer—*this* rock, i.e. something in the immediate context; but, as we have established, something *other* than Peter. Even *without* the assistance of the rest of Scripture, it would be logical to conclude that Jesus must be referring to Peter’s confession. When you let Scripture interpret Scripture, it becomes crystal clear. None other than Peter himself writes:

As you come to him, the living Stone—rejected by men but chosen by God and precious to him— you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. For in Scripture it says: “See, I lay a stone in Zion, a chosen and precious cornerstone, and the one who trusts in him will never be put to shame.”⁵¹

Peter quotes the prophet Isaiah, who referred to the Messiah as the cornerstone for a grand building project. A cornerstone was considered to be part of the foundation. In fact, Isaiah’s full prophecy reads: “This is what the Sovereign LORD says: ‘See, I lay a stone in Zion, a tested stone, a precious cornerstone *for a sure foundation*; the one who trusts will never be dismayed’” (emphasis mine).⁵² Paul teaches the same thing when he writes, “For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ.”⁵³

If you read enough commentaries, you will find debate about whether Jesus is saying that the Church is built upon Peter’s confession or the object of Peter’s confession. There is a *slight* difference, I suppose. Peter’s confession is the Gospel. The object of his confession—the object of the Gospel—is Christ. Which is the Church built upon—Christ or the Gospel? If Jesus is indeed the incarnate Λόγος then it’s safe to say *both*. Scripture speaks this way too, referring to the *message* about Christ as the foundation of the Church.

For example, Paul writes, “It has always been my ambition to preach the gospel where Christ was not known, so that I would not be building on someone else’s foundation.”⁵⁴ When he speaks of the foundation there, Paul is clearly not referring to Christ himself, but to the fruits of “someone else’s” preaching about Christ.⁵⁵

⁴⁹ John 1:42

⁵⁰ We do well to be cautious not to overstate the significance of the gender shift. Some might say that the reason Jesus refers to Peter as Πέτρος has nothing to do with a desire to contrast Peter with τῇ πέτρᾳ, but is simply because the name of a man would be in masculine form. On the other hand, others (such as Lenski) would say that Jesus was likely speaking Aramaic to Peter. “We know too little about the Aramaic to assert that when Jesus spoke these words he used the same Aramaic term in both statements” (*Commentary on the New Testament: Matthew*, 627). Lenski would say that therefore, we must concern ourselves only with the inspired Greek text, which does indeed have two distinct words. It is, therefore, a somewhat “difficult” portion of Scripture. We can say two things for certain. Firstly, the Holy Spirit wants us to know that the Church is not built upon Peter. Even excluding the exegesis of this passage, the rest of Scripture makes it clear what the “foundation” of the Church is. Secondly, the Holy Spirit wants us to know that the foundation of the Church is πέτρα in quality – unmovable and unshakable.

⁵¹ 1 Peter 2:4-5

⁵² Isaiah 28:16 – מוֹסֵד מוֹסֵד - “for a sure foundation” This vocable stresses the unmovable, unassailable nature of the Church built upon Christ. It is used elsewhere in Scripture to refer to “the foundation of the mountains” (Deuteronomy 32:22) and “the foundation of the earth” (Isaiah 24:18).

⁵³ 1 Corinthians 3:11

⁵⁴ Romans 15:20

Scripture will even lump both, Christ and the Spirit-wrought teachings about Christ, into one metaphorical foundation. “Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone.”⁵⁶

And so, in this interaction between Jesus and his disciples we see that, just as the Church has both visible and invisible aspects to it, so also there are visible and invisible aspects to the way the Church is built.

The risen and ascended Christ, the architect of the Church, (“I will build my church”) is invisible. Furthermore, the author of faith, the Holy Spirit, who proceeds from the Father (“. . .this was revealed to you by my Father in heaven”⁵⁷) and the Son, is invisible. Jesus himself taught that when he said, “The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit.”⁵⁸ Neither Christ, nor the Spirit, nor the working of the Spirit can be perceived by the senses. But the Gospel *can*. It is the tool God uses to build his Church. It is “the power of God for. . .salvation.”⁵⁹ You can rightly understand, *it is the very foundation* of the Church.

Thus, if you want to find the Church, you do not try to *sense* Christ. You do not hope to *feel* the Spirit. They are *more* than invisible, eluding more than vision. They elude *all* your senses. Instead, to find the Church, you look for what *is* visible, what *can* be perceived with the senses. You look for the Gospel. Find the Gospel, and you find Christ and his Spirit working hard. Thus, you find the Church.

Signs and Marks and Means

It is somewhat like when I go to the refrigerator. My refrigerator is full of cans. There are at least three different types of soft-drinks: regular colas, diet colas, and something lemony. There is beer, both light and manly. I cannot see into those cans. Sniffing them, even with my substantial *Nase*, helps none. I shake the cans, but the sloshing all sounds alike (and has now resulted in a sticky surprise for the eventual consumer). How, then, do I find the beverage that I want? Fortunately, the manufacturers did not package those drinks in generic, aluminum cans. They marked them: Coke, Diet Sprite, Budweiser.

Likewise, the manufacturer of the Church has placed a label on it. We call that label *the Means of Grace*. “By what the church is established . . . by that it is also marked.”⁶⁰ The Gospel in Word and Sacraments mark the presence of the Church. They are how we perceive the Invisible. “Through the Word and Sacraments, as through instruments, the Holy Spirit is given, who works faith, where and when it pleases God, in them that hear the Gospel.”⁶¹

It all starts with the proclamation of the Word. “Faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ.”⁶² Where you find the Good News of Christ being taught, there will be faith. Where there is faith, there is the Church. If there were no faith present, there would be no one to joyfully listen to the word of Christ. To the faith-less, that Good News is “foolishness”⁶³ and “the smell of death.”⁶⁴ Therefore, the

⁵⁵ You find the same picture in the letter to the Hebrews: “Therefore let us leave the elementary teachings about Christ and go on to maturity, not laying again the foundation of repentance from acts that lead to death, and of faith in God” (Hebrews 6:1). The “teachings about Christ” provide a spiritual foundation.

⁵⁶ Ephesians 2:19-20

⁵⁷ Matthew 16:17

⁵⁸ John 3:8

⁵⁹ Romans 1:16

⁶⁰ Quenstedt 93.

⁶¹ Augsburg Confession, *Concordia Triglotta* 45.

⁶² Romans 10:17

⁶³ 1 Corinthians 1:18

⁶⁴ 2 Corinthians 2:16

proclamation of the Gospel is a sure sign that the Church is present. As the Lord has promised: “[My word] will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.”⁶⁵

It is important to note that when we talk about “proclamation of the Gospel” we aren’t necessarily talking about preaching in the narrow sense, i.e. a sermon. The Church can and has existed where there has been no public preaching. Enoch, Abraham, Job—they all lacked a pastor. Or consider church history. At “times of most grievous persecutions . . . it was possible for the church to be preserved solely by the reading of Scripture, without public preaching.”⁶⁶

That is *not* to be understood to mean preaching is unimportant. On more than one occasion, Luther commented that listening to good preaching was more beneficial than simply reading the Bible: “Reading it is not as profitable as hearing it, for the live voice teaches, exhorts, defends, and resists the spirit of error. Satan does not care a hoot for the written Word of God, but he flees at the speaking of the Word.”⁶⁷ Scripture teaches the same concept. When Philip asks the eunuch if he understands the book of Isaiah, the eunuch responds, “How can I unless someone explains it to me?”⁶⁸ So the point is *not* that preaching is unimportant.⁶⁹ Rather, the point is that the mark of the presence of the Church is *not* the preacher. It is the Gospel that he preaches. Therefore, if the Gospel is proclaimed, even if it is not by a called servant, the Church will be present there.⁷⁰ If the Gospel is proclaimed from the pulpit, even if the man proclaiming it is a hypocrite, the Church will be present there. *His* truthfulness is not what makes the Gospel effective. *God’s* truthfulness is. Conversely, if a church has a dozen pastors, and they do not preach the Gospel—they preach *something else*—the Church will not be present there. Even if those pastors are pious, God-fearing men, that does me no good. Their faith benefits me none.⁷¹ Where the Gospel of Christ is *not* proclaimed, you will *not* find the Church. A social club, perhaps. The Church, no.

The Gospel is proclaimed not just through preaching, teaching, and witnessing, however. In his love, Christ has attached the Gospel promise and its efficaciousness to things we can see and touch—the Sacraments—the “visible Word.”⁷² Thus, they serve as further signs of the Church’s presence. We confess:

[The Christian Church] 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

⁶⁵ Isaiah 55:11

⁶⁶ Quenstedt 100.

⁶⁷ LW, 18, p. 401

⁶⁸ Acts 8:31 – And while royal eunuchs made certain “sacrifices” for their job, they tended to be well educated. One also thinks of Nehemiah 8:7-8, where thirteen Levites “make [the Book of the Law] clear” to people, possibly simply translating it from Hebrew to Aramaic.

⁶⁹ My normal response to people who say, “A Christian doesn’t need a pastor to be a Christian,” is to ask, “Then why does God even bother to raise up pastors? He isn’t a fool. He doesn’t give worthless gifts.”

⁷⁰ Does not this broaden our appreciation for certain ministries? What is the Lutheran Elementary School? It is, ultimately, the Church. For while the classroom is not run by a pastor, the Word is proclaimed there. Where the Word is proclaimed, there is the Church, not some second-class version of Church, not “Church-light.” Church! Built by Christ himself upon the foundation he chose. What about that ladies’ group, gathering around the Word? That is Church too! This is not said to downplay the importance of the pastoral ministry or corporate worship. Far from it! It is said in sincere appreciation of those tangential ministries, which function as part of the *Una Sancta*.

⁷¹ The oft-heard encouragement, “We need to share our faith” is, I believe, misunderstood more often than we might suspect. In my experience, I have found *many* people who believe that the unregenerate can spiritually benefit by simply being in the presence of the regenerate. That is not accurate, unless those regenerate also “give the reason for the hope we have” (1 Peter 3:15). We need to be clear that we *cannot* share our faith (*fides qua*) any more than we can share our heart. My faith is *my* faith. We can only share *the object of our faith* (*fides quae*). “Loving them into the Church” is not possible if by “loving them” you simply mean demonstrating Spirit-wrought, Christ-like kindness. “Loving them into the Church” requires us to tell them about the One who loved us first. Gospel proclamation, therefore, is always our goal. When we start a preschool ministry, when we decide to run a summer soccer camp, etc. our goal is not just to lead others to conclude, “These are some really nice people. I like being around them.” Our goal is to create opportunities to be witnesses to what we have seen and heard.

⁷² St. Augustine’s frequent way of referring to the Sacraments

the Sacraments are administered in conformity with the same, there certainly is the Church, and there are Christians.⁷³

Thus, these signs, in a sense, make the invisible visible. Better stated, they allow us to identify the presence of the invisible Church, just as the label on the can allows me to identify the presence of its contents.

Can Other Signs Be Trusted?

Are there additional marks of the Church? Obviously, there are plenty *false* signs that *false* teachers would like to include. The 16th century Italian Jesuit Robert Bellarmine found the marks of the Church described in the Lutheran Confessions “insufficient in every way.” Surprise, surprise. He came up with fifteen “true marks” of the Church.⁷⁴ For example: the name *Catholic*, antiquity, large size, episcopal succession, unity of members among themselves, holiness of the life of pastors (gulp), the unhappy end of enemies. And so on and so on. Other church bodies have their own twisted inventory. We consistently notice three things about such lists.

First, we notice that in many cases, the error is simply in confusing the invisible with the visible... confusing what God sees with what we can see. We see that with much of Bellarmine’s list. It is true that *the* Church is *catholic*, which simply means “universal.” The Roman Catholic Church, while big, is not everywhere. So also “the unhappy end of enemies.” That will indeed be a mark of the Church—on the Last Day. This side of heaven, the enemies of the Church will always be around and even appear to be winning.

Secondly, note how Scripture itself refutes those false signs. “Large size”? I’m certain Noah wished that were the case as the entire Church on earth divided up manure shoveling responsibilities in the ark. “Holiness of the life of pastors”? I wonder how they reconcile that with Paul’s confession, “The evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing.”⁷⁵

Finally, note how many of those signs are *tempting*.

Largeness. So tempting! If a church is large, it *must* be doing *something* right. Right? Quite possibly. But, perhaps if a church is small, that is a sign that they’re doing things right in a world where “the love of most [has grown] cold.”⁷⁶ Therefore, tempting as it may be, I can’t use size as *any* indicator of the true spiritual health of a church.⁷⁷

What about unity, peace? Oh, so tempting! I *want* to believe that if a church proclaims the truth of God’s Word, there will be perfect peace, no quarrels about anything. Unfortunately, Jesus says that isn’t so. “I did not come to bring peace, but a sword.”⁷⁸ If everyone in your church is always happy about everything you say from the pulpit, you probably aren’t saying much. *Peace* in a church might not be a sign of life, but death. Corpses don’t fight.⁷⁹

⁷³ Apology, *Concordia Triglotta* 227.

⁷⁴ Quenstedt 90-91.

⁷⁵ Romans 7:19 —Or, for that matter, I wonder how Bellarmine would reconcile that “mark of the Church” with the life of some of the popes. When one reads some of their epitaphs, it is both hysterical and heartbreaking.

⁷⁶ Matthew 24:12

⁷⁷ If you read the Wauwatosa theologians, they make this point frequently. And they do this at a time Lutheranism was growing. Pieper states it succinctly: “The death or health of the church has nothing to do with externals.”—“Despising Grace is the Death of the Church” (WLS Essay File) 17.

⁷⁸ Matthew 10:34

⁷⁹ “Outward peace and unity will never be the visible manifestation of the unity of the Church. Outward peace is often only the peace of the cemetery, the peace of dead consciences and unfeeling souls. Where Christ is truly preached, there must be conflict.” - “Invisibility of the Church,” attributed to Siegbert W. Becker (WLS Essay File) 8. I think there’s an encouragement for us here, when we wrangle over this or that issue. That isn’t a sign that something is wrong. It’s a sign that things are right! We care about the Word deeply, not just in principle, but in application.

Throughout the history of the Church, there are those who have held up such *false* signs as though they were true marks of God’s presence and blessing. It is no different today. Go into any Christian bookstore and look at what is selling. To the consumer, what validates the ministries of the best-selling authors is the size of their congregation. Many of these authors seem well-intentioned, driven by their desire to share the Gospel. But don’t let their good intentions obscure that much of what they are selling is a theology of glory.⁸⁰ The theology of glory is *very* well-intentioned. It’s still a false theology, however, holding up false signs as marks of the Church.

There are, however, *secondary* signs of the presence of the Church—fruits of faith. Where the Gospel is present, the Spirit is present. Where the Spirit is present, “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control”⁸¹ are present.⁸² However, fruits of faith are at best *secondary* signs, for two reasons. First, “hypocrites, to all outward appearances, are able to perform and do perform [good] works.”⁸³ Secondly, believers don’t produce them consistently. If one were to speculate that the Spirit was present at Beautiful Savior in Summerville because of *my* joy, then what shall they conclude on the days I’m down? Certainly, sanctification will follow justification. The same Spirit who calls someone to sainthood by the power of Christ’s death also, by the power of Christ’s resurrection, enables that person “to live a new life.”⁸⁴ However, sanctification is not clean and quick like justification, but slow and sloppy. The Old Adam piggybacks on the New Man, slowing him, sometimes dragging him down. And so you have King David, who did great things for God even before he began his reign—and yet was a peeping-Tom-type pervert and worse. You have Peter, who drew his sword in Gethsemane because he loved Jesus enough to die with him—and who but hours later, *didn’t* love Jesus enough to withstand the withering interrogation of a teenybopper servant girl. You have Philip Melancthon, boldly confessing—then, not so much. You have you. You have me.

Thus, when it comes to fruits of faith, we must realize that while they *are* a sign of the presence of the Church, they *are not* an infallible sign. Only the Gospel provides us with such certainty. However, let us also acknowledge that to the spiritually immature (which could be nonmembers or members) fruits of faith are often the *first* thing they look for as “the sign” that “this is where I need to be.”⁸⁵ It’s similar to when I buy a used car. I know that the most important thing is that the engine is in good shape. Unfortunately, I have no clue what to look for under the hood! And so, I look at secondary things. Is it rusty? How did it run during the test drive? Etc. Given my limited knowledge of cars, it’s all I have to go on. So also, for many, when assessing a church, they don’t know what to look for “under the hood.” They settle for kicking the tires a little. Therefore, to assess the presence of the Church or the health of a church, while *you and I* would not rely too heavily on apparent fruits of faith, let us recognize *others do*. Consequently, let it never be enough for us to say, “We have the Gospel in its truth and purity! That should be all that people care about.” Sure. If they were spiritually mature. Since not all are, recognize the weight of Jesus’ words. “Let your light shine before men.”⁸⁶

⁸⁰ Please don’t interpret this to mean that I see no benefit in reading a Rick Warren book. I own two myself. In certain areas, such as how to approach the administration of a church, I find him very insightful. On occasion, he even has a nice devotional thought. I am simply suggesting that if you read such material, keeps Proverbs 4:23 in mind: “Above all else, guard your heart.” I might also humbly suggest diversifying your literary diet. Personally, when I read something like *Purpose Driven Church*, I find it does me well to follow it with something meatier. Even Twinkies are fine in moderation. But the body needs meat.

⁸¹ Galatians 5:22-23

⁸² Article VII/VIII of the *Apology* says such things are a much better indicator that the Holy Spirit is active than is slavish adherence to church traditions or mindless recitation of church dogma. “To this quickening, human traditions, whether they be universal or particular, contribute nothing; neither are they effects of the Holy Ghost, as are chastity, patience, the fear of God, love of one’s neighbor, and the works of love” (Triglotta 239). The Pharisees *looked* righteous, until you examined their lives for the fruits of the Spirit.

⁸³ Prof. Johann Gerhard, as quoted in *Invisibility of the Church* by Siegbert Becker.

⁸⁴ Romans 6:4

⁸⁵ For example, I have no doubt that the one of the reasons for the rapid growth of Mormonism is that Mormons are some of the nicest people I know. If I knew nothing of the Gospel, I would join them myself.

⁸⁶ Matthew 5:17

Mixed Signals

You have directions to a prospect's house all Mapquest-ed out. Two miles on Main Street. Turn left onto Bleacher Lane. Go one mile. Turn right on Marymeade Road. They're three houses down on the right. But, as you drive, you don't find a sign for "Bleacher Lane." You find a sign that reads "Blea," but the back half of it has been blown off by a shotgun.⁸⁷ You assume that's Bleacher Lane. You turn left and drive a mile. There's a road, but no sign. You assume it's Marymeade. Mutilated signs. Absent signs. You might get there, since it's a pretty simple route. But you also might not.

Certainty has decreased. Assumptions have increased.

So it is when churches send out mixed signals. Take, for example, a church that allows for theistic evolution to be held as a possible explanation of the origin of the universe. They have taken a shotgun to Genesis, chapters 1-3. And yet... they still preach Christ crucified, Christ risen. Is the Church there?

Certainty has decreased. Assumptions have increased.

What would we say when a church sends out mixed signals? What would we not say?

We would not say that a church which twists God's Word would contain no Christians. "Even if to the greatest degree impure doctrine is taught in some chief parts of religion . . . God can beget and preserve a holy seed and spiritual children for Himself."⁸⁸ Consider the congregations of Revelation 2 and 3. Christ himself calls them "church." Yet they taught the doctrine of Balaam and held to the Gnostic teaching of the Nicolaitans. The fact that members of a church are "bewitched"⁸⁹ or "foolish"⁹⁰ doesn't mean the Church isn't present there. In our Confessions, we acknowledge that the Roman Catholic Church can rightly be called *Church*, even though the Word is twisted, the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper is badly abused, and the Antichrist himself runs the whole thing.⁹¹

Nor would we say that a church which doesn't have the Means of Grace in their entirety would contain no Christians. Ultimately, the absence of the Sacraments would not mean the Church was also absent. Luther writes:

A sign [of the Church] indeed is necessary, which we also have, namely, Baptism, the bread and, above all, the Gospel; these three are the Christian's symbols, watchwords, and marks . . . The Gospel, *far beyond the bread and Baptism*, is the unique, most certain and most noble symbol of the church, since through the Gospel it is conceived, formed, nurtured, generated, reared, pastured, clothed, adorned, strengthened, armed, and sustained.⁹² (emphasis mine)

⁸⁷ If you are ever privileged to have a call to the Deep South, you will find... *not* uncommon.

⁸⁸ Quenstedt 101

⁸⁹ Galatians 3:1

⁹⁰ 1 Corinthians 15:36

⁹¹ For example, one thinks of the Catholic Church's consistent use of the Western Rite. The faithful Catholic has come to the Mass only after going through the penitential system prescribed by his priest – work-righteousness through-and-through. Then, at the service, if there is a homily, it is likely to be trite at best. False teaching is *everywhere*. And yet, that Catholic sings, "O Lord God, Lamb of God, Son of the Father, you take away the sin of the world; have mercy on us! You take away the sin of the world; receive our prayer!" Since that Gospel truth is there, so is the Spirit.

⁹² as quoted in C.F.W. Walther, *The True Visible Church*, tran. by John Theodore Mueller (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House) 11-12. Professor Quenstedt writes the same thing: "The most proper mark of the church is the true and pure preaching of the divine Word, to which the proper administration of the Sacraments in common is attached... The Word of God is absolutely necessary and positively necessary to the church and inseparable from it. But the sacraments are relatively and definitively necessary to the church; that is, insofar as the church is visible and able to be seen, the Word of God is chiefly and primarily a mark of the church, but the Sacraments, as appendices to the Word, δευτέρωσ and secondarily" (*The Church* 14, 102). We are talking about the official teaching of a church here. For example, if a Baptist church teaches representation, that doesn't mean there are no Christians there. However, when we now focus in on the individuals in that church, there might be distinctions that need to be made. Person A believes in representation, because that is all he has ever heard. He knows nothing else.

I don't think we'd accuse Luther of being anti-Sacramental. We echo him when we use his catechism to teach: "Without God's word the water is just plain water." "It is certainly not the eating and drinking that does such great things, but the words, 'Given and poured out for you for the forgiveness of sins.'" If the Word of God is what gives the Sacraments their saving power, then if a church had the Word, but did not have the Sacraments, the Holy Spirit and his saving power would still be present—angry, but present.⁹³

Nor would we say that the purity of doctrine determines the ratio of true believers to hypocrites. It might be that your congregation contains 90 percent true believers and 10 percent hypocrites, while the Baptist church down the road contains the reverse percentage. Or *it might be the other way around*. It is logical to conclude: purer doctrine = higher percentage of true believers. Logical, but not *theological*. Scripture makes no such claim. Instead, Scripture simply promises that where the Gospel is present, there will be the Spirit, doing what he wills. And what a foolish thing to even speculate about—the percentage of true believers in a church! It's a subtle type of blasphemy, a way of playing God. We must distinguish between what we can see (doctrine) and what only God can see (faith). We concern ourselves with the former. We let God be concerned about the latter.

What we *would* say is that any and all false teaching places a church in danger, for two reasons.

First, since Scripture was written by God to be a unified whole, when you lose *part* of it, you decrease the impact of *all* of it. For example, take the Biblical gender principles. On their own, they might not seem to be of major theological importance. But they do not stand "on their own." As Law, they are meant to drive us to Christ. Lose gender principles, and you have a much bigger problem than female pastors. You have tossed aside a plethora of reasons men and women need the Savior to cover them with his blood. While gender principles are categorized dogmatically under *anthropology*, they have *soteriological* implications. Therefore, when God's Word is perverted *in any way* the mark of the Church is obscured. "*All Scripture* is God-breathed."⁹⁴ If a single teaching were twisted, or *simply absent*, the sign of the Church is diminished, and uncertainty grows.

The second reason false doctrine endangers churches is that, just like all sin, it grieves the Holy Spirit. Therefore, if false doctrine persists unabated, eventually the Holy Spirit will take his leave. Take one of those "Path of St. Paul" vacations. Visit the places where the Lord, through Paul, established mighty churches. Where are they now?⁹⁵

Therefore, when we have mixed signals coming from a church, how should we respond? In two ways. First, we should joyfully thank God that there is *some* evidence of the presence of his Church. Second, we joyfully should do what God has called us to do—to testify to the truth and to refute error, even if it comes to the point that the only way to do this is by no longer expressing Christian fellowship. When we sever fellowship with a church, we aren't saying that church is not Christian. That we cannot see. We are saying that their confession of faith is not in line with God's Word, a very dangerous thing. That we can see. Read the Confessions cover to cover. You will not find a condemnation of the Roman Catholic Church. Not one. You will find endless condemnations of its false doctrine. There is a *massive* difference between the two.

Person B was a former Lutheran who "jumped ship" for whatever reason. In his instruction classes, he learned that that Baptist church denies the Real Presence. It just didn't bother him. He maybe even *agreed* with that! "*This makes more sense.*" Ultimately, I cannot see into either's heart, but I'm more worried about Person B. He does more than misunderstand the Sacrament. He despises the Sacramental promise, which is ultimately the same as despising the Gospel promise.

⁹³ About a decade ago at a conference in New Orleans, Prof. Forrest Bivens gave a paper on the Lord's Supper. He was discussing how many Reformed Churches don't truly celebrate the Lord's Supper, because they have emptied the words of institution of their true meaning. One of the brothers asked an angels-dancing-on-a-pin type question, something to the like of, "But what if I were there, with a proper understanding of the words of institution? Wouldn't I receive the Lord's Supper, since the Jesus' promise was there for me?" The professor's answer was perfect: "What would you be doing taking communion in a Reformed church?" It illustrates that *good* theology requires that we ask *good* questions.

⁹⁴ 2 Timothy 3:16

⁹⁵ That is not to say that every church that ceases to exist does so because it turns heterodox. An oft-asked question goes like this: "If a church retains pure doctrine, does that guarantee that it will endure?" Some would say yes, based on Jesus' promise in Matthew 16, that the gates of hell will not overcome Christ's church. But that is once again confusing *the* Church with *your* church. There are too many examples of right teaching churches that had to close their doors for one reason or another. God has not promised that our congregations or synod will stand until Judgment Day if we remain true to the Word. He has promised that *his* Church will.

Part III: The Need to Distinguish Between That Which God Sees and That Which Man Sees

The Church has both visible and invisible aspects to it.

The way Christ builds the church has both visible and invisible aspects to it.

So what?

Since both are clearly taught in Scripture, God is giving us implicit directions. We are not to concern ourselves with what we cannot see. We are simply to believe that what God says exists, *exists*. What God says is reality *is reality*. “As soon as we begin to discuss the church forgetting it is an invisible communion of saints, we will err.”⁹⁶

Correspondingly, since God would not have us worry about that which we cannot see, we give our full attention to that which we can.

Let us close by considering some of the practical reasons why it is necessary, when talking about the Church, that we distinguish between that which God sees and that which man sees.

Distinguishing Between That Which God Sees and That Which Man Sees Is the Only Way to Maintain a Joyful Outlook on Life.

I remember it vividly. I must have been nine or ten, sitting on our front porch swing, reading the Bible. I wasn't looking for enlightenment, but entertainment. I recently had heard one of my pastors preach a sermon from Revelation. The imagery was so striking; I wanted *more*. I was flipping through the Apocalypse, when I stopped on chapter 12. There is this beautiful woman, wearing clothing as glorious as the sun. I was enchanted with her, so I read on. What God showed me kept me awake that night. Three decades later, it still is horrifying. The woman is not only in agonizing pain, she is being pursued by “a great red dragon, having seven heads and ten horns, and seven crowns upon his heads.”⁹⁷ He wants to devour her unborn child. That woman is the Church as we see her.

How can one “be joyful always”⁹⁸ when life—even life in the Church—is *that* ugly? One can't, unless one remembers that is not the *full reality*. That is only *current perception*.

Current perception (what I see): I have no money. I even tried to join a church to get my life back on track, hoping that maybe then God could turn my situation around. But it doesn't seem to have done much good. Instead, I see plenty of others in church who are losers like me. And I see plenty of those outside church who prosper. (Ah, the wisdom of Solomon! Does he not say the same thing again and again in Ecclesiastes?)

Full reality (what I believe): Through the faith that the Holy Spirit created and sustains by Word and Sacraments, my life is linked inextricably to Christ's. I am his “co-heir.”⁹⁹ Everything that is his is also mine. (And there is *nothing* that is not his.) Soon enough, he shall give to me not just some shiny baubles and heavenly trinkets. No. He shall let me sit with him on this throne.¹⁰⁰ And from there, I shall judge angels.¹⁰¹

The woman being threatened by the dragon, that is how I *see* the Church. God knows it. He's the one who painted that awful picture. It's his way of saying, “*My son, I know things look scary.*” But that woman is pregnant with child. God points and promises. “*Don't be scared. It's going to be just fine.*” And then he follows Revelation 12 with Revelation 21—the New Jerusalem, the Church as it *now is invisibly*, the Church as it *will visibly become*, the Church from God's perspective. “Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be

⁹⁶ *Our Great Heritage III* 350.

⁹⁷ Revelation 12

⁹⁸ 1 Thessalonians 5:16

⁹⁹ Romans 8:17

¹⁰⁰ Revelation 3:21

¹⁰¹ 1 Corinthians 6:3

his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.”¹⁰²

The same faith which trusts that such good lies ahead, also trusts that good is all around *presently* as well, hidden underneath “the bad.” At the times the Church has faced physical persecution, the Lord accomplished good, training her in patient endurance. At the times the Church has faced the challenge of false teaching, the Lord accomplished good, training her in wisdom. Any time the Church has been persecuted, the Lord accomplished good, training her in benevolence, “so that love may be shown even to enemies.”¹⁰³

Confuse that which God sees and that which man sees, and you will grow depressed very quickly. For it will often look like our Lord hates those who do good and loves those who do evil. Not so. It will seem like being a church member has very few practical benefits. Not so. And so we simply trust that the glorious Church is always there, and that one day very soon, we shall see her as God sees her. That is why we can “be joyful always.”

Distinguishing Between That Which God Sees and That Which Man Sees Is the Only Way to Achieve Real Ecumenicity.

οἰκουμένη — “the earth, the world”¹⁰⁴

From that Greek word, we get *ecumenical*. I desire to be ecumenical. I want all Christians to be united in the world. However, I’m not talking about this world, but the next. Like Israel in Exodus, we are just pilgrims living in tents. Like Abraham, we are “looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God.”¹⁰⁵ We are *ecclesia migrans*.¹⁰⁶

Unity in heaven will be easy. Our mind and our faith will be made perfect. Thus, our grasp of the will of God shall be perfect as well. The image of God shall be fully restored. It’s like the conductor who goes to every instrument in his orchestra with his A-fork. “*Set yourself to this.*” When he’s through, not only are all those instruments in tune with that fork, *they are in tune with each other*. They can make beautiful music together *then*, not before. We will have perfect unity in heaven, because God will have touched the invisible—perfecting our faith.

Here on earth, we must be consumed only with what is visible, *not* faith, but that which produces faith. And so, in this world, we unite with those whose confession is like ours. We separate from those whose understanding of any portion of the Word is persistently different than ours. Why? Precisely because we want to be united with them in heaven.

Confuse that which God sees and that which man sees, and you will strive to achieve ecumenicity in other ways. “*They are such God-fearing people! We should* (insert whatever you want: “do mission work,” “exchange pulpits,” “pray,” etc.) *with them!*” Pretending you can see what God sees would indeed allow one to achieve ecumenicity here in this world, but it would jeopardize the fellowship we should care about—the invisible bond of faith that is sustained by the Word and that will become visible when the Church achieves her consummation on the Last Day.

¹⁰² Revelation 21:4

¹⁰³ *City of God* 833-834.

¹⁰⁴ *Theological Dictionary* 563.

¹⁰⁵ Hebrews 11:10

¹⁰⁶ For personal devotion, I would highly recommend Herman Sasse’s paper, *Ecclesia Migrans*. It well demonstrates how the Lord does amazing things through the movement of large masses of Christian people. It indirectly encourages a mission mindset, by reminding us that “the Holy City” is not Jerusalem or Rome or Wittenberg or Milwaukee, but one to which we currently sojourn. The mission of the Church militant is to wander and proclaim, wander and proclaim.

Distinguishing Between That Which God Sees and That Which Man Sees Is the Only Way We Will Be Able to Deal Appropriately with Hypocrisy.

Again, a little St. Augustine, talking about how hypocrisy “tortures” those in the Church:

Inside [the city of God] there are many, who by their unprincipled behavior torment the feelings of those who live devout lives. For such people cause the name “Christian” to be defamed . . . Many who wish to be Christians are forced to hesitate by [hypocrites’] dissensions . . . Owing to this kind of discreditable behavior and this sort of human error, those who want to lead a devout life in Christ suffer persecution, even though they endure no physical violence or bodily torment. For they suffer this persecution not in their bodies but in their hearts.¹⁰⁷

It is painful to see how hypocrisy damages the reputation of the Church¹⁰⁸ (which is an entirely different thing than saying it damages the Church itself). But how does one deal with hypocrisy? One waits. Jesus warned that if you try and pull up weeds, you risk accidentally destroying wheat. “Let both grow together until the harvest. At that time I will tell the harvesters: First collect the weeds and tie them in bundles to be burned; then gather the wheat and bring it into my barn.”¹⁰⁹ What is the way to deal with hypocrisy? You don’t.¹¹⁰

Someone might ask, “But, what about Matthew 18? What if someone is caught in some unrepentant sin? Don’t you have to deal with that?” Absolutely. But you aren’t dealing with hypocrisy anymore. You are dealing with that which men can see, a confession of action that says, “I do not love Christ.” That confession of action speaks louder than any confession of mouth. As Jesus said, “by their fruit you will recognize them.”¹¹¹ It’s important to note that Jesus begins that whole “fruit” discussion by saying, “Watch out for false prophets.”¹¹² Deeds can help you identify with certainty that someone is *outside* the Church. Deeds cannot help you identify with certainty that someone is *in*. Who is *in* the Church for certain? Only “the Lord knows those who are his.”¹¹³

Thus, we cannot “weed out” hypocrisy. We can only wait patiently for God to do so. “Therefore judge nothing before the appointed time; wait till the Lord comes. He will bring to light what is hidden in darkness and will expose the motives of men’s hearts.”¹¹⁴ Till then, all we can do is look at one’s confession of faith and put it in the best possible light, acknowledging that membership in the Church does not presuppose either perfect knowledge of God’s Word nor a certain degree of sanctification. If it did, who of use would be in?

True good works flow from faith. Therefore, like faith, whether or not a work is “good” is ultimately invisible as well. Isn’t that what Scripture means when it says that we “[offer] *spiritual sacrifices*”?¹¹⁵ And so when it comes to

¹⁰⁷ *City of God* 834.

¹⁰⁸ Someone might ask, “Why do hypocrites even bother with church?” Augustine wrestles with that question extensively in *City of God*. His conclusion is that the inhabitants of the two cities, the earthly city and the heavenly one, have many of the same goals. We *all* want good order, happy families, etc. The difference between the two cities is that the earthly one *worships* those things. A happy family is the end in itself. Inhabitants of the heavenly city worship God alone. *He* is the end. And as we pursue him those other things—good order, happy families—are obtained. Augustine would say this is epitomized in the pursuit of glory. Hypocrites join the church to pursue glory—a good reputation, honor, respect—for glory is their god. Believers pursue God, who is their glory, and who, through Christ, has made them *glorious*.

¹⁰⁹ Matthew 13:30

¹¹⁰ In Matthew chapter 13, Jesus uses a series of illustrations to stress just this point: the grain mixed with chaff, the tares among wheat, the good and bad fish caught in the same net. The repetition is our Savior’s way of saying, “Just expect this.”

¹¹¹ Matthew 7:20

¹¹² Matthew 7:15

¹¹³ 2 Timothy 2:19

¹¹⁴ 1 Corinthians 4:5

¹¹⁵ 1 Peter 2:5

hypocrisy in the Church, let us preach the Law as if there were no Gospel and the Gospel as if there were no Law. That is the recipe for true piety. Beyond that, patience, my friends.¹¹⁶

Distinguishing Between That Which God Sees and That Which Man Sees Is the Only Way to Avoid Ecclesiastical Panic.

“Then I looked, and there before me was the Lamb, standing on Mount Zion, and with him 144,000 who had his name and his Father's name written on their foreheads.”¹¹⁷

Thank you, St. John! You have taken a *huge* burden off our shoulders. The Church, those on whom Jesus has written “mine” with his blood, has a definite number. No, it is not *actually* 144,000. We understand that apocalyptic literature is like a Monet. He didn't paint what water lilies *actually* look like, but instead gave us a vivid impression. What is the impression here? We have the product of 3, the number of God, and 4, the number of man. We have that to the second power, once for the Old Testament Church, once for the New. We have 10, the number of completeness and perfection, taken to the third power, for the Father, Son and Spirit are all perfect. We have all those symbolic numbers multiplied together. Thus, we have 144,000, a number representing the totality of God's saving work on behalf of mankind. That number is older than earth itself. “[God the Father] chose us in [Christ] before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love he predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will.”¹¹⁸

Those 144,000 are “the elect.” Right now, that is *not* synonymous with “the Church.” We all know individuals who were in the Church at one point, but sadly fell away. They were not among the elect. Their falling cannot be attributed to the fact they were not among the elect. Scripture doesn't speak that way. Their falling is to be attributed to the fact that they hardened their hearts towards the Means of Grace. Conversely, right now, there is an unknown number of elect on earth who are not in the Church. They will be before they die. Thus, while “the elect” and “the Church” are not synonymous currently, in the end, *they shall be*. The Church ultimately shall consist of everyone God has chosen, not one soul more—but not one soul less either. Nothing can change that. Judgment Day shall not come until that 144,000th member is called in. The instant he or she is, the skies shall rend.¹¹⁹

Why, then, would we ever panic that “our churches are not growing”? Why would we freak that the WELS has shrunk somewhat in the past few decades? First, if you think that right-teaching churches are going to get larger as we progress through the End Times, you clearly do not understand why we call it the *End* Times. And second, if

¹¹⁶ Lutheran history is full of those who tried to “deal” with hypocrisy. Heinrich Müller comes to mind. I don't think it's coincidence he is also the one who called font, pulpit, and altar “dumb idols.” He thought he could see what God sees, and therefore despised that which man can see. Phillip Jacob Spener had ways to deal with hypocrisy too. When I read him without guarding my heart, I am driven to one of two extremes, either to hate myself or to hate those who aren't as good as me. Pietism, at its heart, is an unwillingness to accept that there are aspects of the Church and the ways Christ builds the Church which we simply cannot see.

¹¹⁷ Revelation 14:1

¹¹⁸ Ephesians 1:4,5

¹¹⁹ There are those who will ask, “Why, then, does God give us the Great Commission?” Here again I borrow an illustration from Prof. Daniel Deutschlander, who has described Scripture as a Greek temple. Every pillar is important, holding up the whole. That doesn't mean the pillars don't all touch one another. Which pillar you go to depends on what question is being asked. If the question is “Why are some going to heaven and others going to hell?” you have no business going to the doctrine of predestination. If the question is, “With all the sick fruit and doubts that plague my heart and life, how can I possibly be called a Christian?” you *run* to that doctrine! It says, “My child, ultimately, your salvation was born before you could produce any fruit, good or bad . . . before you could believe anything thing . . . before time itself.” The doctrine of predestination is meant to comfort the troubled soul, not explain why this person is going to hell. So also with Election and the Great Commission. A rationalist would say, “They contradict one another!” Or at least, he would try and twist one to fit the other, i.e. “*The 144,000 will be saved, so long as we fulfill the Great Commission.*” The Lutheran minister will let both stand, understanding that he needs both doctrines at various times in his ministry.

the Church you love most is the only one God loves, the Communion of Saints, then what of the fact that *your* church is not growing? The Spirit is not going to edit Revelation 14. “Whoops. St. Paul’s is down. Better make that 143,000!”

I am tired of this question: “Why can’t we have any more Pentecosts?” Those who ask it are well-intentioned, wishing, I believe, not for the glory of explosive growth, but for the salvation of many souls. In that desire, their heart beats in rhythm with God’s, who truly “wants all men to be saved.”¹²⁰ However, the premise behind that question is wrong and dangerous. It assumes *your* church is the same thing as *the* Church. It isn’t. Your church (Trinity Lutheran, the WELS, etc.) is but *of* the Church. I would not be surprised if in *the* Church, Pentecost is playing out again and again, that through the efforts of the Holy Christian Church on earth, thousands are coming to salvation daily. I don’t concern myself with that, because it’s something only God could see. But I wouldn’t be surprised.

If we fail to distinguish between that which God sees and that which man sees when it comes to church membership (confusing our membership roster with the Book of Life), we will panic if membership plateaus or declines. And then, gripped with fear, it will not be long before we fail to distinguish between that which God sees and that which man sees when it comes to the Means by which God builds the Church. Getting people in the doors will trump getting people in the Word.¹²¹ It is not the purpose of this paper to examine Church Growth methodology. Suffice it to say, the name is misleading. Church Growth methods produce organizational growth, not Church growth. Ultimately, C. Peter Wagner’s plan for “growing the church” isn’t any different than Charlemagne’s forced baptisms. Both fail to distinguish between that which God sees and that which man sees.

Distinguishing Between That Which God Sees and That Which Man Sees Is the Only Way to Avoid Ecclesiastical Lethargy.

In the applications we have made so far, we have seen that it is important to understand and believe that there are aspects to the Church that only God can see. It is equally important for me to understand, there is plenty that I can see. To put it another way, I cannot let the fact that God has promised that there are invisible aspects to the way Christ builds the Church to become a crutch, fueling the laziness or pride of my sinful nature.

Let’s take our preaching, for example, the highest task we do. The Word works. Therefore, if 60 percent of my congregation doesn’t want to listen to my preaching, it must be that their hearts are hard. Right? Perhaps. But that is to make an assumption about the invisible, the state of one’s heart. Perhaps if I would look at the visible (my preaching) more closely, I would find another explanation. Prof. Pieper writes:

We are to a great extent ourselves guilty that our people don’t come to church with pure desire and love—through the tediousness of our sermons. It is not always a boredom with God’s Word, but often an entirely natural boredom with our commonplace, tired and stale boomings from the pulpit. Sunday after Sunday, year in, year out, our hearers have to always hear the same trite phrases from us, which they’ve already heard a thousand times. They hear and learn nothing new. We always keep them at the same level of knowledge as twenty years ago . . . Why, then, is the sermon so boring? Just because you

¹²⁰ 1 Timothy 2:4

¹²¹ This is *not* to say I’m against getting people “in the doors”! As a man who has served his entire ministry in the home mission field and has been privileged to serve our church at large as a Mission Board member and chairman, I’m convinced “come strategies”—where you invite people to some event where the Word will be proclaimed, Christmas Eve or Easter for example—is a good way of approaching outreach, so long as it is not done to the exclusion of the “go strategies.”

lack freshness. As a rule, the pastor who complains about the lack of interest in his hearers, condemns himself.¹²²

God has said that when I preach, the Spirit works through the Word. To then conclude then that *all* God cares about when I preach is that what I say is drawn from his Word is neither sound logic nor good theology. The doctrine of stewardship applies to preaching as much as the doctrine of the efficacy of the Word. Therefore, when I preach, while my *primary* concern is that I rightly divide Law and Gospel, that is *not* my only concern. Far from it! I am concerned with *all* that can be perceived.¹²³ I am concerned that I am both logical and well-spoken. I am concerned that my delivery is fluid, that I don't look at my manuscript twenty times. I am concerned about whether or not visual aids might enhance my presentation, or might detract from it. Why am I concerned about more than simply proclaiming Law and Gospel? Because I don't believe the Word works? No. I *know* it does. But it works in a way I cannot see. "The wind blows where it pleases." And so, I trust that the Word works, but I also concern myself with all that which I *can* see.

This applies to *all* areas of ministry. Take outreach. If you had zero adult confirmations last year, you might want to give a phone call to the one who had thirty. "What are you doing that I'm not?" It could very well be that the reason you had no adult confirmations is that was part of God's hidden will. But it is not sound pastoral practice to hide behind *Deus absconditus*. It could also be that you have no adult confirmations because, while you know how to present Law and Gospel, you aren't skilled at seeing opportunities to do so. This is not good! It is God's will that what you can see, you *do* see.

Someone may say, "Wait a second, Mr. Inconsistent. You just said a page ago that we shouldn't be concerned with numbers." I certainly did not. I said, "Why would we ever panic that our churches are not growing?" Numbers can be helpful.¹²⁴ The numbers—my brother's 30 confirmations to my zero—tell me, "Maybe he has gifts that I don't have. Maybe he's learned something I don't know. I should look at what he's doing." If I learn from my brother, do all I can, and I *still* have no adult confirmations, then what I said a page ago applies. There is no reason to panic. The 144,000 are still safe. But if I don't even look, don't examine—"Eh, why bother? It must just be God's will."—then there is reason to panic. While the 144,000 are safe, *I am not*. My lethargy displays a sickness of heart, an unwillingness to look at that which I can see. Repentance is required.

St. Paul serves (as he often does) as a model here. In First Corinthians, chapter 2, he puts man in his proper place in God's saving work. Man is nothing. It's all the Spirit. "What we speak" is only that which is given to us by the Spirit. The ability to believe "what we speak" is granted to our listeners by the Spirit. It's *all* the Spirit. And yet, what does Paul say just a few chapters later? "I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some" (ἵνα πάντως τιναὶ σώσω Note the first person singular).¹²⁵ Based on what he said in chapter 2, you would perhaps expect Paul to say, "I have become all things so that by all possible means, the Spirit might save some." Nope. Obviously, Paul *isn't* teaching that he is the principle cause of salvation. He is, however, the ministerial cause, and that is not insignificant.¹²⁶ And so, Paul will look at all that which is visible. If he can see that

¹²² "The Despising of Grace is the Death of the Church" 13-14.

¹²³ I recently had an enjoyable phone conversation with Pastor Aaron Christie, who has been my good friend since we began our freshman year at MLS, and who has become, in my estimation, one of our synod's experts on worship. He said, "It's funny. We tell our people to repent in dust and ashes, but we don't actually do it." I wondered exactly what he meant: "Aaron, I know you aren't saying that preaching a message of repentance is not adequate. God's Word, not the ashes, produces faith and repentance." His response: "Yes. I know. But while the Word provides an audible sermon, when it's combined with the ashes, you also have a tactile sermon. Considering God made us to be a big bundle of nerves, that's something to think about." What is my friend doing? That which God would have all of us do: focus on *everything* that which we can see and perceive.

¹²⁴ The Holy Spirit chose to say more than, "A whole lot of people were added to their number Pentecost Day" or "Jesus fed a great multitude of people with only a little bit of food."

¹²⁵ 1 Corinthians 9:22

¹²⁶ The Lutheran fathers talk like this. They will talk about the "principle cause" of the Church being the Trinity. God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit build it. The "impulsive cause," that which moves the Trinity to gather the Church, is twofold. The *outward* impulsive cause is the misery of people, which moves God to mercy and compassion, the *inward* impulsive cause. The instrumental cause of the gathering and preserving of the Church is the Word. And finally, there is the ministerial cause, those

speaking philosophically seems to help as he shares the Word with the Greeks, he'll do it. If he sees that participating in Jewish customs seems to help as he shares the Word with the Jews, he'll do that. Why all this rigmarole? Because the Word couldn't work otherwise? No. But because Paul is distinguishing between that which only God can see, and that which we can see.

Finally, Distinguishing Between That Which God Sees and That Which Man Sees Is the Only Way to Fully Enjoy the Comfort of Salvation.

I'm a member of a church, but am I a member of the Church? That's a very dogmatical way of asking:

Am I a Christian?

Be honest. On dark nights, you've asked yourself that, haven't you? But how do you gauge whether you are a Christian? How do you *know*? You say, "Well, I know what I believe. I believe Jesus is my Savior and my Lord!" Oh? "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven."¹²⁷

"*But I love Jesus.*" Do you? Really? Then why did you do *that*? (You think, "*How does he possibly know?*") Because Scripture says, "All have sinned.")

To ask, "Am I a Christian?" is to ask a bad question. What you are *really* asking is, "Do I have faith?" And faith is that which only God can see. If you try to look for faith, what you are really looking for is fruits of faith. Look at your life, and you will see fruits. You will see plenty that is beautiful. You will also see plenty that is not. Mixed signals. Plus, even when you do good, can you be 100 percent certain it is *really* good? I can think of endless times in my ministry when I thought I was doing something purely out of love for God, and then, upon closer examination, realized I was doing it mainly for myself. "The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?"¹²⁸ As Isaiah says, our righteous-looking acts are only considered righteous because Jesus' righteousness covers over the filth that *always* accompanies our good intentions.

"Am I a Christian?" Note the first person singular. First person singular is where faith goes to die. Faith cries out for the third person, begs for *Him*. Instead of searching *my* heart for evidence of salvation, a first-person focus, I do well to search for evidence of salvation in *God's* heart, a third-person focus. His heart is more open than my own! For he has made the contents of his heart *visible*.

What is in God's heart? I can *see* that, for when I open the Word, God says to me: "I have loved you with an everlasting love."¹²⁹ The Word reveals to me that God isn't all talk either. "God *demonstrates* his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us."¹³⁰

What is in God's heart? It is not just love for the world in general, but for *me* in specific. For when I was all of ten days old and God called me his own, there was *no one* there but me. Even if I had been baptized simultaneously with a thousand others, still I could not deny that the water and Word were applied *to me*. He wanted *me*.

What is in God's heart? In the Supper Christ answers. "I love you. Let us dine together for all of time."

Try to find that which is invisible, the faith in your heart, and you will have trouble answering the question, "Am I a Christian?" Look long and hard at that which is visible, the beating heart of God, revealed in the Gospel, and *you won't even ask the question*.

God has called to use his Word and Sacraments. Johann Quenstedt, for example, goes on for some length about these in part IV of his *Theologia Didactico-Polemica*.

¹²⁷ Matthew 7:21

¹²⁸ Jeremiah 17:9

¹²⁹ Jeremiah 31:3

¹³⁰ Romans 5:8

In Conclusion

As the very first verse of Scripture demonstrates, God loves to make something out of nothing. And so he places his saving power, not in lightning or earthquake, but in seemingly foolish things—words, water, wine. The Lord takes not the wise or powerful to be his apostles. He takes humble men with no education, moreover, takes evil men, in the case of Judas. Christ takes the weak, like you and me, points at that powerful, ancient archangel Satan, and commands us, “Fight! With him, show *no* mercy.” Thus, the pattern of the Church on earth is but the pattern of Christ on earth—greatness hidden behind lowliness, joy hidden beneath sorrow, life hidden within death.

“Your life is now hidden with Christ.”¹³¹

This side of heaven, we walk in the shadow of the cross. We walk, knowing that if we follow Christ through the shadow of the cross, then we shall certainly follow him into the glorious light of the resurrection. So too, the Church. For what is true of the Christian must be true of the Church, which is simply the assembly of all saints.

And so we walk and watch. Like one walking around that *Impossible Triangle*, as we walk we can tell there is more going on than meets the eye.

So we continue to walk and watch. While what we are looking at remains the same, it seems to be constantly changing as we advance in our perspective. *What shall it be? What shall it become?*

So we continue to walk and watch. The closer we get to the *final* perspective, the more anxious we grow.

So we continue to walk and watch. Till—finally—we see that which God has seen all along. We fall to our knees, tears in our eyes, smile on our face. And with every child of God we simultaneously cry:

I can't believe what I'm seeing.

S.D.G.

Pastor Jonathan R. Hein
Symposium on the Church
Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary - Mequon, WI
September 22, 2008

¹³¹ Colossians 3:3

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Special thanks

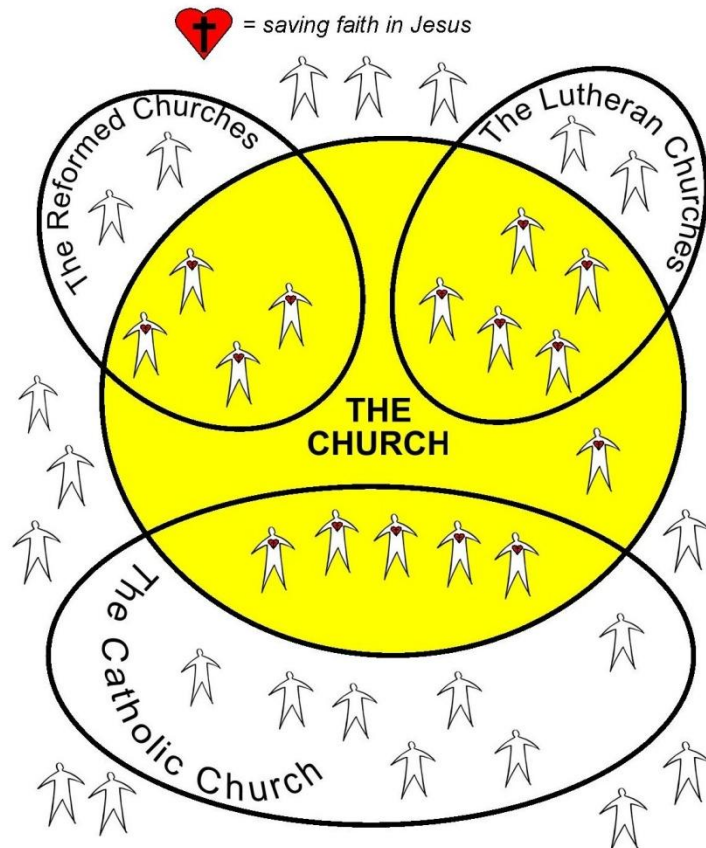
To Professor James Tiefel and those who organize this annual symposium, for extending me the invitation to present. It has been one of the most spiritually rewarding experiences of my ministry.

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The Impossible Triangle
By Brian McKay & Ahmad Abas
Located in Claisebrook Square of Perth, Australia



The Church & visible churches



Reaction to: “The Church and its Members” by Rev. Jonathan Hein

“Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.”
Hebrews 10:25

To begin at the end . . .

A discussion of the Church may seem in so many ways theoretical until the discussion of the Church is turned to the individual—to you and to me. We may distinguish between visible and invisible. We may recognize proper and “improper.” We may acknowledge the importance of a certain foundation and note the deceptiveness of false fruits. We may even say yes to the presumption that should one see by faith what God says he sees, one would have a joy in life that can’t be taken away.

But could one comprehend the substance of such discussion and still at the end wrestle with an unsettling question? If the Church is invisible, and only God can see the heart, and I know that my heart so often has attitudes that would shame me before you, but more important, before my Maker, how can I know that I am a member of that reality unseen?

And so to begin at the end, our presenter set the stage—or perhaps identified the bottom line—for a discussion of the Church by reminding us that my personal membership in God’s family, and your personal membership in God’s family, finds its verification not by a search into the depths of our hearts, but through the visible display in Word and water, in bread and wine, of God’s heart. “While we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Romans 5:8).

This is the Gospel. This is the only source of true peace. This is the last word, that fact which I can lay before the face of my mortal enemy and before which he must flee.

Yet fighting off that wicked sort of self-reflection and insisting by the gracious power of God that the only safe and certain source of confidence is the very opposite of anything I could produce or offer not only serves as our humble Spirit-given confession. It is this heart and core of saving truth that alerts us to the great debt of love we owe the world, including that portion of the world that bears the name Christian.

As Paul addressed a group in Galatia that seemed ready to allow for a confession of Christ but then required the addition of a human contribution to complete the salvation package, the substance of his rhetoric ascends in passionate crescendo to leave no doubt about what was on the line. “Mark my words! I, Paul, tell you that if you let yourselves be circumcised, Christ will be of no value to you at all. Again I declare to every man who lets himself be circumcised that he is obligated to obey the whole law. You who are trying to be justified by law have been alienated from Christ; you have fallen away from grace” (Galatians 5:2-4).

We owe a debt of love to those within our fellowship, that we are constantly alerting our brothers and sisters in Christ—yes, each other—to the intentions of our flesh, which is happy to hold to a confession of Christ so long as it is conditionalized, for then it is no confession of Christ at all. And with regard to those outside of our fellowship, as we witness public confessions that have put into writing the natural deception that festers in each of our hearts, we pray for open doors in order that we might be a blessing. We long to rejoice in the resilient confessions of Christ that the Spirit preserves by a power no less gracious than the power that preserves us. And we long to communicate sincere love through patient and seasoned-with-salt conversations that recognize real risk when paper public confessions become heart-felt personal ones.

This prayer on our part surely finds as its starting point not a parochial pride. This prayer does not arise from a belief that mindless institutional affiliation somehow makes more likely, percentage-wise, membership in the Holy Christian Church. This prayer swells from the words of Paul to Timothy: “Watch your life and doctrine closely. Persevere in them, because if you do, you will save both yourself and your hearers” (1 Timothy 4:16). While the initial context may be a bit more narrow, the underlying principle crosses every boundary. There is a connection between appropriate handling of the word of truth and the salvation of souls, mine and others.

That is the reason we care. That is the reason God encourages us to look at the Church from two different perspectives. That is the reason we gather together on an occasion like this and ask a brother to encourage us in the Word. We understand that we do not have inherent power to hang to the truth, to persevere in humility, to look forward to authentic ecumenicity, to avoid ecclesiastical panic, to recommit to excellence. We cannot do these by our strength. We need the Word. We need the Word properly handled. We need gentle, seasoned-with-salt words for our own spiritual strengthening.

Today we have received them. Thank you, Jon. And with you, we thank our gracious Lord for using you as a true brother. Through you we have received godly encouragement about things both seen and unseen.

Let us be well aware of what goes beyond human vision. Let us act confidently in arenas that stand visible before us. And most of all, let us thank the Lord that through things seen he has given our hearts a solid foundation for confidence in what cannot be seen.

“Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed” (John 20:29).

Prof. Stephen H. Geiger