

The Church: Invisible and Visible?*

By Armin W. Schuetze

May we properly speak of a visible and an invisible church? Is the claim for a so-called true visible church valid? Is it proper in describing the church to employ the analogy of concentric circles, the invisible communion representing an inner circle within the outer circle of the visible communion? Would a re-study of these terms, contrasts, and analogies possibly reveal that they are more Roman and more Calvinistic than they are Lutheran? Will the use of the term church in the sense of an invisible church and of a visible church lead to a confusion of both concepts?

Questions such as these have resulted in the assignment of an essay on the following topic: "A Study of the Terms of the Visible and Invisible Church, especially in connection with the debate between the German dogmaticians Chemnitz and Gerhard and the new Roman opponents with special emphasis on the age of German Pietism."

This calls for a study not only of the use of the terms, visible and invisible church, during the period of time indicated. This calls for an investigation into the concepts that were intended to be conveyed with these terms. What do, what did they mean when they were used? Of particular importance is the further question: Did the concepts expressed with these terms change over the years? A final question may be pertinent in view of the criticism which we hear of the use of these terms today: Can these terms be used to express genuine Lutheran, Scriptural concepts?

For a single paper such as this exhaustively to investigate this subject will be recognized as impossible. We must therefore set certain limits to what we shall attempt, while still covering at least to some extent the assigned topic. We shall begin by rather rapidly examining the history of the use of the terms visible and invisible during the period indicated in our topic. We shall take a brief look at the Roman opponents and the issues they raised against the Lutherans. Thereupon we shall center our more detailed attention on two questions that arise from the use of the terms visible and invisible, concerning ourselves particularly with Luther's writings on them. Finally we shall make some closing practical observations. Since this is to be a historical study, we have not attempted to include an evaluation of the various points on the basis of Scripture. The omission of that here is not to be construed as though that were not for us always of prime importance.

I

In examining the use of the terms, visible and invisible church, we shall begin with the time when it is generally accepted that they were in common use. That was the time of the orthodox dogmaticians. We shall then work our way back to Luther to see whether we find a time when these terms were not used, or less or differently used. Working our way back in this way should serve the purpose of this investigation best.

There is little difficulty in tracing the use of the terms visible and invisible church among our Lutheran dogmaticians of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. There also appears to be little difference among them. Quenstedt (1617–1688) and Gerhard (1582–1637) both speak, on the one hand, of the church properly and chiefly (*proprie et principaliter*) as being the gathering of saints and true believers (*congregatio Sanctorum & vere credentium*).¹ On the other hand, you have an external assembly (*externus coetus*) where many *non sancti, hypocritae ac mali* are *admixti* with the saints.² In reference to the former they will also speak of the church of the elect, the latter being the church of the called.³ To the church *proprie* they then apply the

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¹ Job. Andrae Quenstedii, *Theologiae Didactico-polemicae Systematis Theologici* (Wittenberg: J. L. Quenstedt, 1691), pars IV, p. 488. Ioannis Gerhardi, *Loci Theologici* (Berlin: Gust Schlawitz, 1867), v, 287.

² Quenstedt, *Theologiae*, p. 488. Gerhard, *Loci*, p. 287.

³ Quenstedt, *Theologiae*, p. 493.

term invisible, to the external assembly the term visible.⁴ Gerhard points out that the distinction between the visible and invisible church helps to make what is said about the members of the church more clear.⁵ Hutter (1563–1616) somewhat earlier also speaks of a visible *coetus vocatorum*, while he considers the church *principaliter* as the *societas fidel et Spiritus Sancti* and says that as such it is called invisible and consists of the elect.⁶ Even earlier than this we have Heerbrand (1521–1600) answering the question: What is the visible church? by calling it the *coetus audientium verbum Dei, & utentium Sacramentis divinitus institutus*, in which assembly it is not possible with human judgment to discern the elect from the hypocrite. On the other hand, the invisible church is the *coetus electorum*, who are also called *vere sancti & credentes*.⁷

This brings us back in time to Chemnitz (1522–1586), who forms a connecting link between our dogmaticians and our Lutheran Confessions, since he was the prime author of the Formula of Concord. Chemnitz points out that God wants us to know where to look for and find the true church, for the church is like a city set on a hill (Matt. 5:15). For this reason, he says, the church is defined as the *visibilis coetus, amplectentium Evangelium Christi, & recte utentium Sacramentis*.⁸ But Chemnitz a little later goes on to say that “it must be diligently observed that not only by Wyclif, Huss, and others, but also in the struggles of Luther against the Papists it was contended that the church is not visible: but is the *numerum praeordinatorum*, concerning which God knows who are his.”⁹ So we have here with Chemnitz the same distinctions and almost the same terms. What is, however, of interest is his reference not only to Wyclif, Huss, and others, among whom we would have to understand men like Zwingli and Calvin, but also particularly to Luther. For it has at times been claimed that Luther does not speak of a visible and invisible church.

Before we, however, turn to Luther himself, we should briefly look at Melancthon, who in his *Loci* prepared what must be considered the first Lutheran book on dogmatics. Chemnitz also himself is closely linked with Melancthon, since he in his *Loci*, from which we were quoting, first presents Melancthon’s *Loci*.

In the first edition of Melancthon’s *Loci* of 1521 there is no article on the church and no definition of the church, whether visible or invisible.¹⁰ Later these terms appear, although not quite with the same emphasis and distinction as in the dogmaticians. In describing the church, Melancthon first of all points out that “*the church* means ‘God’s people,’ those who confess the holy gospel and follow it, who rightly use the sacraments, those born again through the Holy Spirit.”¹¹ This description fits the so-called invisible church. He, however, continues: “Because the opponents cry out that we are speaking about an invisible church, and seeking a subterfuge, I want to say something about the visible church.”¹² He ascribes the use of the term invisible to the opponents, who accuse the Lutherans of this. He seems hesitant to apply it to the *una sancta* himself. He thereupon defines the visible church: “The *visible* church is a gathered company of men who confess and obey the gospel, who have been reborn through the Holy Spirit. Hypocrites mingle in such a gathered company, and are included in the confession of true doctrine with the saints if they keep and confess true doctrine.”¹³ These quotations are taken from the 1555 edition of the *Loci*. They changed comparatively little by the final edition of 1559. There too his chief definition of the church is of a visible body.

This emphasis on the visible church and deemphasis of the church in its proper sense strikes one somewhat strange when we note what Melancthon did in 1530 and 1531 in the Augsburg Confession and the Apology. There the church is described in Articles VII and VIII as follows: “The Church properly is the

⁴ Ibid., p. 493.

⁵ Gerhard, *Loci*, p. 307.

⁶ Ibid., pp. 218f.

⁷ Ibid., pp. 642f.

⁸ Martini Chemnitii, *Loci Theologici* (Frankford and Wittenberg: D. Tobiae Mevii & Elerdi Schumacheri, 1653), pars III, p. 117.

⁹ Ibid., p. 116.

¹⁰ The first edition of Melancthon’s *Loci* was translated by Charles Leander Hill, *The Loci Communes of Philip Melancthon* (Boston: Meador Publishing Company, 1944).

¹¹ Clyde L. Manschreck, *Melancthon on Christian Doctrine, Loci Communes 1555* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1965), p. 267.

¹² Ibid., p. 267.

¹³ Ibid., p. 267.

congregation of saints and true believers.” Although in the Augsburg Confession Melanchthon nowhere used the terms visible and invisible church, also not in the longer defense of this definition in the Apology, he does stress that they are defining that which is the body of Christ, not an external organization as the Papists would have it, but “the true Church, which is truly the kingdom of Christ ... properly the congregation of saints.”¹⁴ The closest he comes to calling it invisible is when he says that the “kingdom of Christ has not yet been revealed.”¹⁵ This quotation from the Apology sums up his views at the time quite well: “Wherefore we hold, according to the Scriptures, that the Church, properly so called, is the congregation of saints, who truly believe the Gospel of Christ, and have the Holy Ghost. And yet we confess that in this life many hypocrites and wicked men, mingled with these, have the fellowship of outward signs, who are members of the Church according to this fellowship of outward signs, ...”¹⁶ Here we have a clear definition of the church, *proprie*, and this corresponds to what the dogmatists later call invisible. On the other hand, in the external fellowship of the signs, something that is outwardly visible, although Melanchthon does not use that term, we do have that which in his description does correspond to what the dogmatists simply call the visible church, as Melanchthon also does in the later *Loci*.

I would sum up Melanchthon’s presentation of the church as follows: In the confessions he distinguishes the visible and invisible church about as do the dogmatists, without using the terms. In his definition and discussion of the church his first concern is that which is the body of Christ, the invisible church, whose presence becomes evident through certain marks. In the later *Loci*, while the distinction still is in evidence, he makes what he also calls the visible church his prime definition, recognizing that what he defines embraces also hypocrites and wicked men, who however, are not truly members of it.

We proceed to Luther. Does he use the terms visible and invisible in reference to the church? We already noted that Chemnitz asserted this, and Chemnitz certainly was well acquainted with Luther’s writings. We shall not spend much time on showing that Luther did use the terms, for a note by Holl, the famous Luther scholar of the early part of this century, is significant: “The battle carried on for a time with great vehemence as to whether Luther was acquainted with the expression invisible church was from the very beginning useless. It is true that the word invisible (or rather, as Luther says *unsichtlich*) is not found frequently in Luther. But Luther uses the word spiritual in exactly the same sense. And he has called the church ‘spiritual’ in countless places.”¹⁷ We might add the further expression “hidden” to Holl’s “spiritual.” But even the word invisible is used perhaps more often than the above would lead one to believe. It appears in some of his early writings and continues throughout the years. In fact, even before 1517 Luther in his lectures on the Psalms writes: “Invisible, perceptible through faith is the Church.”¹⁸ In 1519 he writes that the “love and fellowship of Christ and all saints” is of necessity “hidden, invisible, and spiritual.”¹⁹ In his “Sermon on the Ban” of 1520 Luther speaks of two kinds of fellowship and says: “The first kind of fellowship is inward, spiritual, and invisible.”²⁰ Although both of these do not use the term church directly, but fellowship, it is evident he is speaking of the invisible church.

From the following year we have, however, another reference where Luther directly says that “the church, which is without sin, must be invisible, and spiritual.”²¹ In 1530 he speaks of the kingdom of God as being “an invisible kingdom in the spirit within us.”²² In the Galatians commentary of 1535 Luther says that “we confess in the Creed that we believe a holy church. For it is invisible, dwelling in the Spirit.”²³ If we would adduce references where Luther uses expressions like “spiritual,” “hidden,” etc., there would be no end to

¹⁴ *Concordia Triglotta*, p. 231.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 233.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 237.

¹⁷ Karl Holl, *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Kirchengeschichte* (Tuebingen: J. Mohr, 1948), I, 296.

¹⁸ *D. Martin Luthers Werke* (Weimar, 1883—), IV, 289.

¹⁹ *Luther’s Works* (Philadelphia - St. Louis, 1955—), XXXV, 65.

²⁰ LW, XXXIX, 7.

²¹ *Luthers Saemmtliche Schriften* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1880–1910), XVIII, 1445.

²² St. L., IV, 1425.

²³ LW, XXVII, 84.

quotations. We have cited only those where also the particular word “invisible” is used to note that Luther did not hesitate to use it, even if other expressions are found with greater frequency.

Did Luther also use the expression “visible church”? When he spoke of the two kinds of fellowship, the one invisible, he wrote: “The second fellowship is outward, physical, visible.”²⁴ This is perhaps the closest we come to a direct visible-invisible contrast. Otherwise, it can be said, Luther generally does not speak of a visible church, but of visible or external *signs of the church*. He insists that we must be able to find the church, which is invisible, here on earth. He says “there must be some visible sign or indication somewhere whereby this kingdom may be recognized.”²⁵ “Where you *see* a little group, which possesses the pure Gospel and Sacraments, there is the church.”²⁶ So he speaks of seeing a group that is the church. This, of course, involves the entire treatment of the marks of the church, and this is found very much in Luther. That is what makes the church perceptible, visible.

It would appear from this rather cursory investigation that the terms visible and invisible, particularly the latter, were used by all the dogmaticians, and I cannot find a particular development in the frequency of their use among them. Where did they find these terms? Chemnitz refers directly to Wyclif and Huss. We know that Zwingli and Calvin used them. But Chemnitz also refers specifically to Luther, while reprinting Melancthon. And we do find Luther using them without any great hesitancy, especially “invisible.” It, therefore, becomes difficult to call these terms in themselves specifically Calvinistic, as is often done. We have not entered into a study of Calvin’s use of these terms at this time, since that is not the major concern of this paper. We shall assume that, in view of their use often being called Calvinistic. If, then, both Luther and Calvin and many others used them, we will hardly call them specifically Lutheran, Calvinistic, or anything else. It would appear that it is both Lutheran and Calvinistic to speak of an “invisible church.” That need not disturb us. It is, of course, another question whether always the same thing was meant by these terms. We cannot enter in upon this in great detail here. In a general way we can say, I believe, that among the Lutherans the meaning of the dogmaticians does not differ from that of Luther.

II

But the question may still be asked whether there were different emphases in using these terms or in presenting the doctrine of the church that developed over against the adversaries that were faced by the Lutheran writers of these times. Did this lead the men at the time perhaps to distort their doctrine or to overemphasize something to the exclusion of other important facets? Did it lead to a doctrinal development that in fact resulted in a different doctrine during the time of the orthodox dogmaticians from what Luther had presented, particularly in the area of the visible-invisible church?

What has been called Luther’s “first major treatise on the nature of the church,”²⁷ was occasioned by two treatises of the Franciscan monk, Augustine Alveld, of Leipzig in 1520, contending for the divine institution of the apostolic see, concluding that Rome has to be the center of Christendom. Luther’s treatise of 1520 in response to this is called “On the Papacy in Rome against the Most Celebrated Romanist in Leipzig.” Quite naturally, this called for considerable emphasis on the church being a spiritual fellowship. “The kingdom of God is not in Rome, is not bound to Rome, and is neither here nor there. Rather, it is where there is inward faith.”²⁸ He calls those who “make the Christian unity or community physical and external, equal to other communities,” true Jews.²⁹ “Whoever does not want to err should remember clearly that Christianity is a spiritual assembly of souls in one faith, and that no one is regarded as a Christian because of his body.”³⁰

²⁴ LW, XXXIX, 8.

²⁵ LW, XIII, 264.

²⁶ St L., VII, 1283.

²⁷ LW, XXXIX, 54.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 66.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 67.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 69.

Pointing thus to what he considers the true nature of the church he says: “This is the way Holy Scripture speaks of the holy church and of Christendom. It cannot speak about it in any other way.”³¹ For Luther the church is first of all this spiritual unity.

Another opponent of the Lutherans was Eck. Gerhard still refers to him and others who call this spiritual church of the Lutherans a utopian, imaginary church. Bellarmine, whom Gerhard particularly faced as his Roman Catholic antagonist, claimed that “when the Lutherans saw the absurdities that followed upon calling the church invisible, they began to teach that it is visible, saying that in name it is visible, in fact it is invisible.”³² In other words, realizing that to speak of the church as being invisible led to the folly of an imaginary church, the Lutherans then began to speak also of a visible church.

This leads Bellarmine to another charge against the Lutherans. Gerhard has him accusing the Lutherans of imagining two churches, one visible, the other invisible. Bellarmine himself was of course contending for the position that the church is visible, meaning the Roman church under the pope. Gerhard takes up his arguments at some length.

All of this is found in Gerhard’s chapter entitled “Concerning the distinction between the visible and invisible church.” He recognizes the church as visible and invisible. “In view of those who are called, the church is referred to as visible, in view of the elect, invisible.”³³ However, he stresses that these two are “not contrary opposites” (*ecclesiam visibilem et invisibilem non esse contrarie opposita*).³⁴ He explains their relationship in this way: “For the invisible company of the elect are contained under the visible congregation of the called, because outside the company of the called the elect are not to be sought and the church of the called is broader than the church of the elect, because many are called, but few are elected. Whoever therefore pertains to the invisible church, these also pertain to the visible, that is, whoever is elect, these also are called, but not contrariwise.”³⁵

Another Roman opponent of the Lutherans is the man with whom Chemnitz somewhat earlier crossed swords. This was Didacus Andrada (1528–1575). It was one of his treatises as well as the decrees of the council of Trent that resulted in Chemnitz’ *Examen*. The particular point of interest to us here has to do with the problem of speaking of a true visible church. It pertains to the relationship of the true church to the true faith. Andrada said: “God has ever a Church in the world. But the true Church cannot be severed or parted from the true faith.” Up to this point Chemnitz was in full accord. But then Andrada further said: “Therefore we must necessarily believe whatever in the past or present the Church has either transmitted or believed even if it cannot be proved by any testimony of Scripture; and in consequence it is not the Scripture, but the meaning of the Church which is the most exact norm according to which our faith is to be directed and formed.”³⁶ Andrada thus begins with the presupposition that visible Rome is the one true church. Since the true faith cannot be separated from the true church, therefore whatever Rome contends for must be the true faith. Against this Chemnitz asserted: “Not the truth of the Word of God depends on the Church, as Andrada would have it, but on the contrary, the truth of the Church depends on and is judged by the truth of the Word of God which it holds and confesses.”³⁷ So he declares Andrada to be wrong when he “dreams, that something is to be believed for the reason that that visible communion, which bears the title of the Church, has observed it, although it cannot be proved by any testimony of the Scripture.” So this controversy concerned itself with the question: how do we recognize the true church? The dogmatists thus make the distinction between true and false visible churches. The question is raised whether this is valid, whether this also is truly Lutheran. Or was this a position to which the Lutheran dogmatists were driven by some of the claims of their Roman opponents?

³¹ Ibid., p. 69.

³² Gerhard, *Loci*, V, 307.

³³ Ibid., p. 307.

³⁴ Ibid., p. 308.

³⁵ Ibid., p. 308.

³⁶ Martin Chemnitz, *Examen concilii Tridentini quadripartitum*, p. 49. Translation from microfilm.

³⁷ Ibid., p. 49.

III

With this background of some of the controversies between the Lutherans and the Romanists, there are two questions about the church, spoken of as visible and invisible, to which we shall now more particularly address ourselves. 1. Does speaking of the “invisible church” and of the “visible church” inevitably lead to the conclusion that these are two different churches as Bellarmine claimed? 2. Can one properly speak of true and false churches? Or we might put it this way: Can we properly identify the true visible church?

We turn to the first of these two questions. When using terms like visible and invisible church, is the church being divided into two? To avoid this the dogmatists carefully stress that they are not speaking of two churches. In fact, Gerhard at the conclusion of his nearly 350 pages of discussion on the church says that from that entire discussion the definition of the church can be stated 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 nonsaints, who nevertheless profess the same doctrine.”³⁸ Thus he combines the two in his definition so as to really speak only of one thing, one church. The terms visible and invisible are not used, yet the distinction between the believers who are the church and the *non-sancti*, who are mingled in it, is maintained in this definition.

Let us see how Luther handles this whole question and then also consider some related points.

We already noted that Luther in speaking of the church begins with it as a spiritual, invisible, hidden fellowship. It does not, however, appear that Luther was forced by the accusations of Eck that this made of the church something imaginary to begin to speak also of the visible fellowship. He had more significant concerns. He is concerned about those who are troubled by the question whether they are truly the Church of God. Although the church is spiritual, he is concerned that its existence and presence in the world be noticed externally so that the individual may know where to get hold of it. He asks the question: “But how will or how can a poor confused person tell where such Christian holy people are to be found in this world?”³⁹ As is so typical of Luther, his concern is the comfort and assurance of the individual about his salvation. For that reason it is necessary to be able to identify the whereabouts of the church, the Christian holy people, the one and only church he knows and acknowledges from Scripture. So looking for an external indication of the presence of the church does not involve a second church, two churches, one visible, the other invisible. No, there is only one church, but where can I get hold of it here on earth? That is Luther’s question. This is important always to remember in order to understand Luther.

The answer to the question of where to find the church lies in the external marks by which its presence can be recognized. In 1520 he wrote: “Not Rome or this or that place, but baptism, the sacraments, and the gospel are the signs by which the existence of the church in the world can be noticed externally. Wherever there is baptism and the gospel no one should doubt the presence of saints—even if they were only children in the cradle.”⁴⁰ This thought is repeated again and again by Luther. It is treated perhaps most fully in 1539 when he wrote “On the Councils and the Church.” There he lists no fewer than eight, and even more, marks for finding the church in this world. He begins with the Word. Of this he says: “And even if there were no other sign than this alone, it would still suffice to prove that a Christian, holy people must exist there, for God’s word cannot be without God’s people, and conversely, God’s people cannot be without God’s word.”⁴¹ Actually, all the other marks he lists are somehow connected with the Word. He lists as marks baptism, the holy sacrament, the office of the keys, the ministry, prayer, the sacred cross or trials. In addition he makes mention of the “signs whereby the Holy Spirit sanctifies us according to the second table of Moses.”⁴² These, however, are not so reliable, “since some heathen too practice these works and indeed at times appear holier than Christians; yet their actions

³⁸ Gerhard, *Loci*, V, 602.

³⁹ LW, XLI, 148.

⁴⁰ LW, XXXIX, 75.

⁴¹ LW, XLI, 148.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 166.

do not issue from the heart purely and simply, for the sake of God.”⁴³ That brings us back to the Word of God as the unmistakable external sign that marks the presence of Christians, hence of the church in its true spiritual sense.

The question is raised whether it is proper to distinguish quantitatively between the invisible church and what is visible on the basis of the marks. Does that not make of it two churches? How does Luther deal with this? Here there is also a very practical consideration.

That Luther recognized a quantitative difference between the visible and invisible church is quite evident. He writes: “There are many Christians who are in the physical assembly and unity but through their sins they exclude themselves from the inward spiritual unity.”⁴⁴ He refers to the external Christendom as “all those who are regarded as Christians according to externals.”⁴⁵ Yet he recognizes that such an external Christendom “never really exists without some people who are also true Christians.”⁴⁶ When he writes: “There must always be hypocrites and false Christians in the church,”⁴⁷ it is clear that he is using the word church of the visible body, embracing quantitatively also the hypocrites in the *corpus mixture*. So he writes further: “Accordingly, we draw this distinction: not all are Christians who pretend to be Christians.”⁴⁸ No further quotations are required to show that Luther did call also the visible body church, which is quantitatively made up of both true believers and false Christians. On the other hand, his whole concept of the church in its true sense includes only God’s holy people, true believers.

In view of this, I have difficulty in understanding the criticism that finds fault with picturing the visible-invisible church by means of two concentric circles. This finds particular expression in the volume *This Is the Church*, edited by Nygren, and is reiterated by Frederick Mayer in an article in the *Concordia Theological Monthly*. Mayer considers it characteristic of the “tremendous emphasis on the distinction between the visible and the invisible Church” in German Pietism.⁴⁹ Herbert Olsson in the Nygren volume wrote the chapter entitled “The Church’s Visibility and Invisibility According to Luther.” On this point he writes: “It has been customary to understand Luther as holding that the visible and the invisible are quantitatively different ... There are, so to say, two concentric circles: the outer which consists of all who use the means of grace, i.e. the visible church; and the inner circle which consists of the true believers, the invisible. Of course, it is held, the latter is the true church ... We shall find that the customary view, which we have just given, is quite mistaken.”⁵⁰ He finally concludes his discussion on this with the summary statement: “He (Luther) speaks of the visibility of the church and of its hiddenness or invisibility. But he has no thought of two different totals.”⁵¹ This is said, it appears from the entire thrust of the volume, in the interest of a false ecumenicity.

The fact is that Luther does recognize that the two are quantitatively different. It seems to me that the two concentric circles are a way of illustrating this which can be quite useful. Hidden within the external body of those gathered under the means of grace (which includes hypocrites), the outer circle which we can see, are God’s holy people, the inner circle, known only to God. By placing the one circle within the other, the fact that these are not two different churches can be recognized. As with any illustration, the question is how we explain and understand it. There is always a proper use and there can be an abuse. But the abuse does not eliminate a proper use. This illustration goes back to Melancthon and need not be rejected because of some doubts we will have about his doctrinal constancy.

⁴³ Ibid., p. 167.

⁴⁴ LW, XXXIX, 66.

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 70.

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 70.

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 218.

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 219.

⁴⁹ Frederick E. Mayer, “The Proper Distinction Between Law and Gospel and the Terminology Visible and Invisible Church,” *Concordia Theological Monthly*, XXV, (March, 1954), 185.

⁵⁰ Herbert Olsson, “The Church’s Visibility and Invisibility According to Luther,” in *This Is the Church*, Anders Nygren, ed. (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1952), pp. 231f.

⁵¹ Ibid., p. 242.

In this connection there is, however, something we can learn from Luther when it comes to the practical matter of how I as a pastor will look upon the visible church that confronts me in my congregation. It would be an abuse of the above illustration if I were to wonder about each member whether he is truly in the inner circle and suspect confessing Christians of being hypocrites. Here a word of Luther from his *De Servo Arbitrio* is very much in place: “I call them saints and regard them as such; I call them and believe them to be the Church of God; but I do so by the rule of love, not the rule of faith.” Note the distinction he makes here: “For love, which always thinks well of everyone, and is not suspicious but believes and assumes the best about its neighbors, calls anyone who is baptized a saint; and no harm is done if it makes a mistake, for it is in the nature of love to be deceived.”⁵² In other words, love leads me to accept as valid the confession that is made by those who are gathered in our visible congregations. I look upon all of these people as the Church of God, identify for all practical purposes this visible gathering with Christ’s church invisible. I know I am mistaken in the case of some, but that does not matter. Love will accept them all. Luther goes on: “But faith calls no one a saint unless he is declared so by a divine judgment, because it is in the nature of faith not to be deceived. Therefore, although we ought all to be regarded as saints by one another according to the law of love, yet no one ought to be decreed a saint according to the law of faith, so as to make it an article of faith that this or that person is a saint.”⁵³

A pastor will not attempt to divide his congregation into two groups, the true believers and the hypocrites. By faith he knows that the invisible church is present in his congregation. In love he will consider all as God’s saints, preach to them as such, deal with them on that basis. Thus he also does not really separate the two, make of them two churches.

We continue with our second question. Can we properly speak of true and false churches? Can we properly identify the true visible church? Is it Lutheran in the best sense to do this?

The point is made that the dogmaticians in opposing the Roman opponents, Andrada and Bellarmine, were led to shift the emphasis “from the ‘true Church’ (*una sancta*) to the ‘pure Church,’ the visible Church of the true Gospel, in contrast to heterodox churches.”⁵⁴ Others make the point that the emphasis on the element of pure doctrine was “prominent in Melanchthon’s view of the church.” The implication is that Luther was not so concerned about this. One cannot escape the feeling that all of this is done to escape what is sometimes called “an unscriptural isolationism and a legalistic separatism.”⁵⁵ The latter must be avoided where it is truly unscriptural and legalistic. However, one wonders whether the concern is rather to foster an unscriptural inclusiveness and ecumenicity that has little concern for true doctrine but emphasizes life, deeds not creeds, and in the process succumbs to the same mistake made by the Pietists.

Since the claim is made that the idea of a true visible church is foreign to Luther, that the emphasis on pure doctrine is chiefly Melanchthon’s, that the true-false visible church contrast is a development of the dogmaticians, we must direct our attention back to Luther.

Luther’s most complete treatment of the idea of the true and false church is found in his treatise of 1541 entitled “Against Hanswurst.” Here he is concerned about the fact that the papists “call us heretics. And the point is that they allege that we have fallen away from the holy church and set up a new church.”⁵⁶ It is clear that he is speaking of visible churches in this treatise. At the same time he stresses that “we are concerned *non de nomine*, ‘not with the name’ of the church, but with its essence.”⁵⁷ In other words, the visible church is not something different from the church in its essence as though the latter were not involved when speaking of visible churches. Luther cannot separate the two. That is evident in his whole presentation. At the same time, he can concern himself with the visible body and speak here of a true church.

⁵² Martin Luther, *On the Bondage of the Will*, Library of Christian Classics, (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1969), XVII, 157.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 157.

⁵⁴ Mayer, *Proper Distinction*, p. 197.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 198.

⁵⁶ LW, XLI, 193.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 194.

Luther points out that there are two kinds of churches, basing this on Jesus' own words: "The Lord Christ commands us not to embrace the false church and he himself distinguishes between two churches, a true one and a false one, in Matthew 7 (15): 'Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing,' etc. Where there are prophets, there are churches in which they teach. If the prophets are false, so also are the churches that believe and follow them."⁵⁸

Where can the true church be found? Luther shows that the Lutherans had the same baptism, sacrament, keys, preaching office, Creed, Lord's Prayer, etc. as the ancient church. Therefore he concludes on the basis of these marks: "Thus we have proved that we are the true, ancient church, one body and one communion of saints with the holy, universal, Christian church."⁵⁹ What about Rome? He points out its many false practices and doctrines as marks that Rome is the new false church, apostate, separated from the true, ancient church. What a visible gathering is must be determined by what you can see, by definite marks. These are the same marks as those that reveal the presence of the *una sancta*. Where these marks are pure, there you have a true church. Where error is present, there the church is apostate.

Did Luther still consider Rome a church, in spite of the fact that he condemns them so severely as apostate? He writes: "We do not regard you as Turks and Jews (as said above) who are outside the church."⁶⁰ Again a little later: "We acknowledge not only that you have, with us, come from the true church and been washed and made clean in baptism through the blood of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, as St. Peter says here, but also that you are in the church and remain in it."⁶¹ He refers to II Thessalonians to show that they are in the church, for "the accursed Antichrist would sit (not in the cowshed), but in the temple of God."⁶² Nevertheless, whoever follows their errors are no longer "members of the church, for in this holy church of God you are building your own new apostate church."⁶³ We might put it this way: The true baptism that they still have marks them as truly church. Nevertheless the errors they proclaim mark them as an apostate church. Church they are, but a false church.

Did Luther stress purity of doctrine, or does this originate with Melanchthon? Let us hear a few statements of his in this treatise. "Therefore the holy church cannot and may not lie or suffer false doctrine, but must teach nothing except what is holy and true, that is, God's Word alone; and where it teaches a lie it is idolatrous and the whore-church of the devil."⁶⁴ Again: "The church must teach God's word and truth alone, and not error or falsehood."⁶⁵ Again: "Therefore nothing must be preached in church except the sure, pure, and one word of God. Where that is missing, we no longer have the church, but the synagogue of the devil."⁶⁶ And once more: "But whatever else is taught or whatever is not with certainty God's word, cannot be the doctrine of the church, but must be the doctrine, falsehood, and idolatry of the devil."⁶⁷ Let no one say that Luther leads to the conclusion that we cannot distinguish between a true and a false visible church. Let no one say that Luther did not stress the importance of pure teaching and that alone. They may say that Luther's view, followed by the dogmaticians, was wrong. But they cannot say that he did not hold it the same as Melanchthon and the later dogmaticians. Luther does not fit into the picture of today's false ecumenicity.

In this connection it is interesting to note the comparative importance Luther places on purity of doctrine and purity of life. We already saw that he did not consider the works of the second table of Moses very reliable as a mark of the church. Here, too, he recognizes that the life of the church will often leave much to be desired. "It is, of course, quite true that if judged by its way of life, the holy church is not without sin, as it confesses in

⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 194.

⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 199.

⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 207.

⁶¹ Ibid., p. 209.

⁶² Ibid., p. 209.

⁶³ Ibid., p. 209.

⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 214.

⁶⁵ Ibid., p. 216.

⁶⁶ Ibid., p. 217.

⁶⁷ Ibid., p. 217.

the Lord's Prayer."⁶⁸ He confesses "that although we have the pure doctrine of the divine word, and a fine, pure, holy church like that of apostolic times in all matters profitable and necessary for salvation, we are neither holier nor better than Jerusalem, God's own holy city, where there were so many wicked people, yet where God's word was always kept pure by the prophets."⁶⁹ The life of the church may leave much to be desired, "but doctrine should not be sinful or reproachable."⁷⁰ He warns the preacher that he "should neither pray the Lord's Prayer nor ask for forgiveness of sins when he has preached ... but should say and boast with Jeremiah, 'Lord thou knowest that what came out of my lips is true and pleasing to thee.'"⁷¹ In fact, "whoever cannot boast like that about his preaching, let him give up preaching."⁷² Luther knows no church here on earth that is pure in the sense of purity of life. But he does insist that the church must and can be pure in its teaching. The former is not possible, the latter is not only possible, but must be insisted upon. Calling to mind Jesus' reference to the mote and beam in the eye, he writes: "For, as we have related above, what we have against them is not only the speck (that is, the way of life), but also the big log (that is, doctrine)."⁷³

But why this emphasis on purity of doctrine? It is not that Luther did not recognize the importance of the purity of Christian living. It is not that he failed to encourage good works and love. But he recognized that there is only one thing that truly brings the church into existence, that is the Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. Nothing else will. That is why you can know that the true church, the *una sancta*, is present where the pure Word is taught. Hence a visible group can be called a true church because the true Gospel taught in its midst is a clear mark of the presence of the true church, the *una sancta*. The Gospel, and it alone, is irrevocably connected with the true church.

On the other hand, wherever error is taught, faith is being undermined. The error works against the Gospel. The error places a question mark over the marks which produce and identify the *una sancta*. It is true, a visible group that still has true baptism is still a church, the *una sancta* is there. But because the false teaching, if followed, destroys faith again, the true church's presence is endangered and such a church Luther for this reason calls an apostate or false church.

Here again, the importance of this distinction is the eternal salvation of sinners. The whole emphasis lies on the purity of teaching because the Gospel alone saves. A true or pure church in the sense of purity of life does not exist on earth. That is reserved for heaven. But purity of the saving Gospel we must and can have.

In Pietism this emphasis was reversed. Much stress was laid on holiness of life. Sanctification received more emphasis than justification. In his *Pia Desideria* Spener describes the evils and degradation of the church and makes his proposals for improvement, for a reform. He does not question the truth of the teaching of Lutheranism. He writes: "Although our Evangelical Lutheran church is a true church and is pure in its teaching, it is in such a condition, unfortunately that we behold its outward form with sorrowful eyes."⁷⁴ While his proposals for reforming the church can be properly understood and appreciated, for example, his call for "more extensive use of the Word of God among us,"⁷⁵ for "the establishment and diligent exercise of the spiritual priesthood,"⁷⁶ for wider recognition that "it is by no means enough to have knowledge of the Christian faith, for Christianity consists rather of practice,"⁷⁷ yet, there is always the implication that it is not really the truth of the Word that does it, but the inner, loving attitude of the person as he practices his Christianity that is most important. Even in controversy, while there must be instruction in the truth, he hopes to win the opponent particularly through the love that is shown him. "If only we Evangelicals would make it our serious business to offer God the fruits of his truth in fervent love, etc..... If only the erring ... would make an effort ... to begin to

⁶⁸ Ibid., p. 216.

⁶⁹ Ibid., p. 228.

⁷⁰ Ibid., p. 216.

⁷¹ Ibid., p. 216.

⁷² Ibid., p. 216.

⁷³ Ibid., p. 229.

⁷⁴ Philip Jacob Spener, *Pia Desideria*, trans, by Theodore G. Tappert (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1964), p. 67.

⁷⁵ Ibid., p. 87.

⁷⁶ Ibid., p. 92.

⁷⁷ Ibid., p. 95.

serve God, in love of God and fellow man, at least to the extent of the knowledge which they may still have from Christian instruction! There is no doubt that God would then allow us to grow more and more in our knowledge of the truth, and also give us the pleasure of seeing others, whose error we now lament, alongside us in the same faith.”⁷⁸ The interest of Pietism thus was to cause the invisible church to become more or less visible in the outward organization, as a kind of *ecclesiola in ecclesia*. The presence of the church is thus recognized not so much by right teaching but by right living. The whole approach is more subjective, less objective. The objective, outward, visible body called the church was less important and was separated from the subjectively felt and ethically evident, although in some respects still invisible, church. In fact, the true Christians are not necessarily to be sought only in the external fellowship of the visible church.⁷⁹ In the whole process, the visible church assumed less and less importance.

This emphasis in Pietism on right life rather than right teaching tended to downgrade the function of the means of grace. Love will do what the Word has failed to accomplish. Love, not necessarily the true Gospel alone, will build the true church.

There are striking similarities here to today’s religious thinking, oriented in a false ecumenicity, although its other roots, not included in the scope of this essay, are not to be forgotten. The emphasis again is on deeds, not creeds. We are to get together to learn to love one another; that will overcome our doctrinal estrangements. Visible church bodies and organizations are to be disregarded. This thinking, of course, has no room for a true visible church. In fact, it not only wants to erase any reference to a visible or invisible church; it wants to eliminate any distinction between the church and the world, in its extreme, ultimate conclusions. In the process the Gospel is lost, and the church is destroyed.

IV

What conclusions have we arrived at? On the subject of the invisible and visible church Luther and the dogmaticians of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries are in substantial agreement. The dogmaticians present their material in a more systematic, organized manner, but they by and large teach what Luther taught. Both speak of an invisible church and recognize this as the church *proprie*, in its essential meaning, consisting of all true believers, the saints, the elect. Both recognize that in speaking of a visible church they are speaking synecdochically, calling it church because the visible *corpus mixtum*, which includes hypocrites, does have as its essential element the *una sancta*. Thus the invisible and visible are not two different churches. Both identify the true marks of the church by which the presence of the true church can be established as the means of grace. Both distinguish between true and false visible church bodies, based on the purity of the marks.

Let us in conclusion make a few practical observations that are of concern to us who are pastors in the church of our Savior. I believe this is what we can learn from Luther, a man of God steeped in Holy Scripture, about the church.

1. There is only one church, that is the gathering of all believers, God’s holy people, the invisible, spiritual fellowship of all Christians, with Christ as its head. We will do well to begin our thinking about the church with Luther’s simple definition of the church in the Smalcald Articles. This one church is scattered throughout the world, among all nations, peoples, races, denominations. This church must be our first concern, our first love; into its service we have been called. This *is* the true ecumenical perspective we never want to lose. That is the church. There is no other. This you know by faith.

2. We find this church, and no other, in our visible gatherings, which we for that reason call churches. What makes our congregation and our synod, these visible bodies, important to us is that in them we find and are in direct contact with the *una sancta*. We will speak of our “beloved congregation” or our “beloved synod,” not because we have learned to love it as an organization and find certain desirable qualities in it, but we love it

⁷⁸ Ibid., p. 102.

⁷⁹ Cf. Philip Jacob Spener, *Erklärung der christlichen Lehre nach der Ordnung des kleinen Katechismus* (Berlin, 1846), p. 240, qu. 750.

because this is where Jesus is bringing us into direct contact with His church. And in love we will consider all who confess themselves to the truth of the Gospel as saints in Christ's church.

3. As pastors, our great concern will always be to serve not simply a church organization, to build not simply a congregational or synodical organization. Our interest must be in the church of our Lord Jesus. Our congregation, our synod is not simply an incorporated body to carry on business. It is rather a visible group in which I am in touch with and work with and worship with the saints of God. This should prevent us from becoming too taken up with petty externals or to become organizationally isolationist.

4. We must always remember that the only thing that permits us to view our synod and congregation thus is the presence of the Word of God. The "in season" and "out of season" preaching and teaching of that Word is what marks our organizations with the glorious epithet: the church of our Lord Jesus Christ. While the faith of each saint remains hidden so that we cannot identify individual members with certainty, the Word of the Gospel is a sure visible sign that we are rightly called the church. We must remember that only the Word has brought the church among us into existence and is the only reason for its existence. The existence and mission of the church centers in the Gospel.

5. The concern for true doctrine must always continue. This must not flow from a spirit of *Rechthaberei*. It must not become *Lehrgerechtigkeit*, against which we are properly warned. It must flow from a concern for souls, a concern for the church. Error, heresy, false teaching destroys faith, destroys the church. Heresy must be identified with the skull and cross bones and avoided like poison. We sometimes hear it said that our Wisconsin Synod went through a decade or two during which it was engaged in a struggle to preserve the doctrine pure. With that done, we can now direct our total energy to the work of missions. If we ever think that the work of preserving the true doctrine is done, we are on the way to the doctrinal complacency that is a large step to its deterioration. It must be our ongoing concern that we in Luther's sense may be a true church, one where the *pure* marks are *unquestioning* evidence that the *una sancta* is present.

The church: invisible or visible? We can say both. The questions that have been raised against these terms, the problems that men have seen in them lie not simply in the terms; they go much deeper. As to the terms, Luther used them, and he was convinced that what he said was scriptural. We can use them too, as long as the doctrine of Scripture dominates the terms, and not the terms the doctrine.