

## Church and Ministry Part 2: What and Where the Church Is

In this session we will turn directly to the doctrine of the church, giving particular attention to Augsburg Confession Article 7. I will begin with a brief background to the doctrine of the church at the time of the Reformation. Then we will look at the Augsburg Confession, examining the attributes of the church, what is the church, and where she is to be found.

Herman Sasse, the great Lutheran theologian from Germany and Australia, observed that the Third Article of the Nicene Creed on the Holy Spirit was left largely unfinished by the early church. This was particularly true of the doctrine of the church. Certainly the Apostles' Creed names the holy Christian Church, and seems to fill out this confession by adding the phrase "the communion of saints." This last phrase was historically the last one added to the Apostles' Creed. Werner Elert, in his book *Eucharist and Church Fellowship in the First Four Centuries*, makes a compelling argument that this last phrase has some ambiguity. It can mean "the communion of holy people," referring to the fellowship of the church. It can also mean "the communion of holy things," referring especially to the Lord's Supper. We will return to this question later.

In the Nicene Creed we confess one holy Christian and apostolic Church. But this phrase was not added until after the first Council of Nicea. In 325 AD the Third Article simply read, "and in the Holy Spirit." And the description of the church that was added when our present Third Article was finished simply gives the attributes of the church: one, holy, catholic, and apostolic. In the years that followed, with the barbarian invasions from the north and the dissolution of the Roman Empire, the church was unable to provide a clearer dogmatic expression of what the church is and where she is to be found.

As the papacy grew in the Middle Ages the church began to be ever more closely identified with the papacy itself, with this reasoning: Christ founded the church on Peter. Successive popes were Peter's successors. Therefore, the church was founded upon the pope. And its existence in the world, its unity, its holiness, and so on were identified with the pope. His declarations of doctrine and practice were elevated to equal authority with Holy Scriptures. The ministry of the gospel, the ministry of the church, was founded upon his office and flowed from it. In the late Middle Ages, he took over the authority not only of the church but also of the state. He claimed all of this by divine right. And he demanded that in order to be saved one must believe this doctrine of the papacy.

We Lutherans refute these assertions in our Confession, "The Treatise on the Power and Primacy of the Pope." But we recognize that the identity and unity of the

church were never secure under the papal scheme. You may remember the time of the papacy when there were two popes (beginning in 1378), and then briefly three, before the matter was finally resolved by the Council of Constance in 1417. Where then was the church? Where was her unity? These questions provoked debate among the theologians of the late Middle Ages. One solution given by the early reformer and martyr John Hus (d. 1415) identified the church simply with the elect, whose existence on earth cannot be seen. In refusing to identify the church with the papacy, Hus proposed a church that was invisible.

Luther's challenge to the doctrine and practice of indulgences in the 95 Theses was not merely a challenge to false doctrine and the beginning of an appeal to the authority of Holy Scriptures, but it was simultaneously a challenge to the papacy and to the papal doctrine of the church. In the years that followed, Luther was forced to grapple with this question: What is the church, and where is she to be found? The Roman Catholics, on the one hand, accused the Lutherans of the sin of dividing the church with their reform of doctrine and practice and with their insubordination to the pope. And at that time the enthusiasts, Anabaptists, and other radical reformers of the church were further shattering the church into many sects. All these problems were laid at the feet of the Lutherans. You can see why, in 1524 already, Luther was teaching us to sing our prayer to God the Holy Spirit in the Pentecost hymn, "Lord, by the brightness of Your light / In holy faith Your Church unite" (LSB 497.1).

In 1530, when the various German rulers were commanded by Emperor Charles V to give an account of their reforms in their various territories, the Lutherans not only prepared the Augsburg Confession as a reply to this request, but they also joined together to give a united and pure confession of their faith. They summarized Christian doctrine as it was taught in the Lutheran churches and at the same time answered the many accusations of their opponents on all sides. In Article 7, on the church, they produced what Herman Sasse called the first dogmatic definition of the church. That is, they achieved what was left undone by the fathers of the church at the time the Creeds were written.

The Augsburg Confession was written and received in two languages, German and Latin. I will be reading to you from the translation of the German text, which was the one read to the Emperor on June 25, 1530. In Article 7 we confess:

It is also taught that at all times there must be and remain one holy, Christian Church. It is the assembly of all believers among whom the gospel is purely preached and the holy sacraments are administered according to the gospel.

For this is enough for the true unity of the Christian Church that there the gospel is preached harmoniously according to a pure understanding and the sacraments are administered in conformity with the divine Word. It is not necessary for the true unity of the Christian Church that uniform ceremonies,

instituted by men, be observed everywhere. As Paul says in Ephesians 4: “There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism.”

Let us begin our study of this article with the Scripture passage cited for support, Ephesians 4:1-6:

I encourage you therefore – I, the prisoner in the Lord – to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you were called, with all humility and meekness, with longsuffering [or patience], bearing with one another in love, being zealous [that is, being in a hurry, eager] to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

There is one body and one Spirit, just as you also were called in the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one Baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.

Let us observe, first of all, that the occasion for this great teaching on the unity of the church is an exhortation to Christian virtue and piety. In this respect, it is very similar to Philippians 2, that great text on the humiliation and exaltation of Christ. The Holy Spirit names here virtues that are particularly important for the life and well-being of the church: Humility, meekness, patience, and bearing with the sins and weaknesses of others in Christian love. He teaches us to have a zeal, an eagerness, to maintain and defend the unity which the Holy Spirit has created by reconciling us to God and to one another, the unity of the church. This unity has its source in the work of God in Christ. The substitutionary satisfaction of God's wrath by the death of his Son and the Father's absolution of the world in the resurrection of Jesus Christ are applied to the sinner by the Holy Spirit through the means of grace. This reconciliation, this bond of peace, unifies forgiven sinners and makes them into one Christian church.

Then follows the passage quoted in Article 7. Seven unities are named. The first one refers to the church, the mystical body of our Lord Jesus Christ, his beloved bride. Three name the persons of the Holy Trinity: one Holy Spirit, one Lord Jesus, one God and Father of all. One unity refers to the common hope of every Christian, as we confess: the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting. One refers to the same Baptism that every Christian has received, through which we have entered the church and been given every blessing of the Holy Trinity. The other unity is faith. This is not the personal faith of each individual Christian, the faith of the heart. Rather, it is the common faith or doctrine which every Christian believes. It encompasses all that the Scriptures teach and finds its center in Jesus Christ, through whom we have been joined to the Holy Trinity and the holy Christian Church. We Christians all hold to the same doctrine or faith.

Now we proceed to Article 7 itself. We could note that Article 1, about God, began with the attributes of God before proceeding to answer the question of who God is. In a similar fashion, Article 7 begins with the attributes of the church before proceeding to answer the question what the church is. The German text says that there must be and remain one holy Christian Church. The Latin text says that one holy church will remain forever. Here we confess three attributes of the Christian Church. First, the church is one. There is only one body of Christ, one Bride of our Lord Jesus. The unity of the church is bound up with the oneness of Christ, the church's Savior, indeed, with the Trinity itself. Despite all appearances to the contrary in the world around us, there is only one church. We confess here that the prayer of Jesus in John 17 is already fulfilled where God's name is used, that is, where the Word of God which sanctifies the church is taught in its truth and purity.

This one church is holy. Holiness is an attribute that originates within God himself. God alone is holy, as we sing in the *Gloria in Excelsis*: "Thou only art holy, Thou only art the Lord." Holiness is most easily defined in the negative. It is separation from all that is common. It is completely free of all sin and uncleanness. Luther reminds us that the church on earth is simultaneously holy and a sinner. The church as a sinner, like the individual Christian as a sinner, must first be forgiven and cleansed of all sin and uncleanness before being made holy by the sole action of God. Holiness is most easily understood by considering the worship and code of conduct in the Old Testament tabernacle worship. And, as Luther himself observes, it is the Word of God that sanctifies all things and makes them holy. The Word of God is the true relic and sanctifying gift which God has given to his church. When we pray, "Hallowed be Thy name," and explain that "God's name is holy in itself," we also confess that God's name is kept holy in our midst "when the Word of God is taught in its truth and purity and we as the children of God also lead holy lives according to it." We confess with this attribute that despite all the sin, error, division, and uncleanness that we can see and experience in the church, the church is nevertheless holy by God's divine action.

The third attribute of the Christian church is that it is permanent and enduring; she will be and remain forever. This is not merely a historical question, though much can be learned about the church by studying her history. Nor is it merely a prediction of the future. It is, rather, a confession that her destiny and future is completely bound up with his destiny and future. The church will be and remain forever because Jesus Christ, who is the same yesterday, today, and forever, will also be and remain forever. She has a blessed and eternal future because she is joined to him forever. The Nicene and Apostles' Creeds use the adjective catholic (often translated "Christian") to describe this aspect of the church. We should understand our Lutheran Confession here to imply not only the extension of the church through time, but also through place. The church is found among all peoples, languages, tribes, and nations, wherever the Christian holy people may be found. Christ will preserve this church through the end of time into all eternity.

One might ask why the fourth attribute of the church from the Nicene Creed is missing. Why does the Augsburg Confession not mention that the church is apostolic? But we should observe here that the true meaning of apostolicity is that this church has the apostolic doctrine (Acts 2:42), that is, purity of doctrine and right administration of the sacraments. "They – the church – devoted themselves to the Apostles' doctrine." We will return to these means of grace in a moment.

I should observe here the contrast between the Lutheran understanding of these four attributes and that of the ecumenical movement in the churches around us. Modern scholars often call these attributes the marks of the church. That is to say, the church is marked or found where these attributes are in evidence. This was essentially the argument of the papacy in the Middle Ages. This teaching characterizes the pressure of the ecumenical movement to force unity and conformity of practice among churches whose doctrine does not agree with Holy Scriptures, not to speak of each other. They call it "reconciled diversity," basically "agreeing to disagree." And then they call that disagreement in doctrine the unity of the church. They seek to realize the church on earth through these ecumenical endeavors. But our Lutheran Confession categorically rejects this reading, as we shall see.

The attributes of the church are, by and large, articles of faith. We believe the church is one, even though we cannot see her unity. We believe that the church is holy even when her holiness is not evident. We believe in the catholicity of the church, that she will be and abide forever throughout the earth (and in heaven), though this is not our present experience. We believe and confess these attributes because this is what the Holy Spirit teaches us in his Word.

After confessing the church's attributes, Article 7 provides the dogmatic definition of the church. "It is the assembly of all believers among whom the gospel is purely preached and the holy sacraments are administered according to the gospel." The church is an assembly. It is not a mere individual Christian. Where God has made Christians through the Word and sacraments, he also gathers these Christians together in an assembly. The Word creates the assembly, or better, the Holy Spirit creates the assembly through the Word that is taught. Our description draws together both the seen and the unseen, the church as we enjoy it in a local congregation and the church catholic distributed through place and time. The saints are hidden because faith cannot be seen. The saints are revealed because the gospel by which they were sanctified is external and manifest to all. The assembly of these saints can be found and seen.

The church is the assembly of believers, or in the Latin text, saints. These are the living members of the body of Christ, branches in the one vine. On earth, they are the sinners in Augsburg Confession Article 2 for whom Christ came in Article 3, who are justified by grace for Christ's sake through faith in Article 4, and who came to faith by

the working of the Holy Spirit through the pure preaching of the gospel and the right administration of the sacraments in Article 5. Believers in Christ, and only believers in Christ, are members of this church, properly speaking. They are saints because they are justified by faith, cleansed of all sin, and sanctified by the Holy Spirit.

Then comes the pivotal element in this definition. This church is created by and is to be found where the Word of God is taught in its truth and purity and the sacraments are administered according to the Word of God. This part of the definition not only identifies the means by which God creates and sustains his church, but also locates it for us, since we could not know its place otherwise.

The accusation of the Lutheran opponents was that the church, for Lutherans, was a platonic church, a mere idea, functionally invisible. Because faith cannot be seen in the believers and the holiness of the saints is hidden, the church itself is also completely hidden. The church is seen and known by the external gospel around which believers gather. Our Lutheran Confession holds these two things together and will not allow them to be put asunder. The church is simultaneously invisible according to faith and the presence of the Holy Spirit, while at the same time visible in the means of grace. To work the problem backwards, we know that faith is present wherever the pure Word and sacraments are being given out to sinners. We confess this with confidence, knowing that God fulfills his promises. His Word will not return void (Isaiah 55:10-11). Baptism saves (Mark 16:16; 1 Peter 3:21). The Lord's Supper gives the forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation won by Christ's atonement (Matthew 26:28). While we may not know which members of the congregation are saints or believers, we have complete confidence and faith that believers are present because of the promise God has attached to his Word, Baptism, and the Lord's Supper.

It is for this reason that we Lutherans identify the purely preached gospel and the rightly administered sacraments as the marks of the church. We don't necessarily get hung up on the numbering of the marks. In the Confessions they are simply the Word and the sacraments: preaching, Baptism, Absolution, the Lord's Supper. Luther expands or contracts this listing as seems appropriate to his occasion. In his later treatise, *On the Councils and the Church*, he includes also ordination (or the office of the ministry), prayer, and the cross and suffering of the Christian (AE 41.148-166). But any of the marks listed by a Lutheran will have its root in the Word of God and the sacraments, for only by these does God make Christians, create faith in the heart, and thereby create and sustain his church. "Faith comes by hearing...the Word of God." (Romans 10:17)

Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the Word, so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish. (Ephesians 5:25-27)

Let me emphasize here that the means of grace are bodily and external, as Luther often remarks. The Word is the oral Word, written by God's command and preached publicly according to his institution. The sacraments are administered to the body, the body receiving Baptism in the only way it can and the mouth eating the flesh and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ in his Supper. Faith believes what the body receives. The church is a church not merely of disembodied souls, but it is also a church of the bodies of persons, body and soul, who gather together and receive the same external Word and sacraments.

Here let us give attention to two terms in this dogmatic definition of the church. First, we speak of the gospel as being pure. Purity, however, is not an added extra to the gospel. It simply describes the fact that the gospel, or the Word of God, is unadulterated, that it does not have impurities added, nor has it been reduced in its content. It is just simply, merely, the Word of God. "Purity" marks the difference between pure water and polluted water. For example, pollution in water contributes nothing to the health and well-being that water itself gives; in fact, the impurity may bring sickness or death. When we demand purity of doctrine in the church, we are simply requiring our pastors and congregations to teach only what God teaches, nothing more and nothing less. The sacraments are to be administered within the church by this same standard. This is what the Holy Spirit means in the Pastoral Epistles by "sound doctrine" (for example, 1 Timothy 1:10).

Second, confusion over the term "gospel" has caused great anxiety in European and American churches, just as it did at the time of the writing of the Formula of Concord. You recognize that the word "gospel" is used in a narrow and in a broad sense in Holy Scriptures, as it is also in our Confessions, Formula of Concord, Article 5. Gospel in the narrow sense refers to the saving work of God in Christ, including the Holy Spirit's work of bringing sinners to faith in him. Gospel in the broad sense refers to the entire Christian teaching, including the full contents of both the Old and the New Testaments, both law and gospel (in the narrow sense).

In Article 7, when the confessors speak of the gospel purely preached, and the sacraments administered according to the gospel, they are using this term in the broad sense. The German text makes this clear, where, in the second reference to the administration of the sacraments, it uses the term "divine Word" instead of "gospel." This broad sense of "gospel" is what our Lutheran fathers mean in the Confessions when they call the "doctrine of the gospel" "the doctrine and all its articles" (FC Ep X.7; FC SD X.31) and summarize them as "the chief articles of our Christian religion" (FC SD Rule and Norm.1ff). It is the gospel in the narrow sense that creates and sustains faith; however, the gospel presupposes the law and is accompanied by the law throughout its proclamation. Otherwise, when the law is removed from the church's proclamation, in the end even the gospel is lost. We can observe this in the churches throughout the

ecumenical world who disregard selected portions of the law and also deny basic articles of our creed. The distinction between the law and the gospel, as taught in the Formula of Concord, is an especially bright light for pastoral care and the application of the Word of God. This distinction was never meant to be a sermon outline, or an occasion to remove either the law or the gospel from the church's teaching. The gospel purely preached is the whole body of doctrine taught in Holy Scriptures, with Christ at its center.

Article 7 then continues by rejecting what is not necessary for the true unity of the church, that is, what does not belong to the church, properly speaking.

For this is enough for the true unity of the Christian Church that there the gospel is preached harmoniously according to a pure understanding and the sacraments are administered in conformity with the divine Word. It is not necessary for the true unity of the Christian Church that uniform ceremonies, instituted by men, be observed everywhere. (AC 7.2-3, German text)

Here we see again the emphasis upon the purity of the gospel, the divine Word, for the unity of the church. The Word of God, and only the Word (including the sacraments), constitutes and sustains the church. The sentence that follows eliminates ceremonies instituted by men from this definition. Our Lutheran forefathers certainly intended to eliminate the many Roman Catholic practices that had accumulated in the church over the ages. But the emphasis should remain on the phrase, "instituted by men." We make clear elsewhere in our Confession that we are not eliminating rites and ceremonies as such. But just as the church is not a creation of man, so also the church's unity is not a creation of man. It is the work of God.

For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility. (Ephesians 2:14-16)

Or as he introduces the passage quoted in Article 7, "Be zealous to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace."

In the text of Augsburg Confession Article 7 we hold two things together in maintaining the unity of the church: agreement in the pure doctrine of Holy Scriptures and the faithful use of that doctrine in preaching and the sacraments. The Latin text focuses on the consensus: "And it is enough for the true unity of the church to agree concerning the teaching of the gospel and the administration of the sacraments." This agreement in the doctrine of the gospel is publicly expressed in confessing and subscribing to the Creeds and Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church. And we



are zealous in rejecting confusion or deception in this point. We require our pastors and congregations to give an unconditional subscription to *The Book of Concord* of 1580.

Do you believe and confess the three Ecumenical Creeds, namely the Apostles', the Nicene, and the Athanasian Creeds, as faithful testimonies to the truth of Holy Scriptures, and do you reject all the errors which they condemn? Answer: *Yes, I believe and confess the three Ecumenical Creeds because they are in accord with the Word of God. I also reject all the errors they condemn.*

Do you confess the Unaltered Augsburg Confession to be a true exposition of Holy Scripture and a correct exhibition of the doctrine of the Evangelical Lutheran Church? And do you confess that the Apology of the Augsburg Confession, the Small and Large Catechisms of Martin Luther, the Smalcald Articles, the Treatise on the Power and Primacy of the Pope, and the Formula of Concord – as these are contained in the Book of Concord – are also in agreement with this one scriptural faith? Answer: *Yes, I make these Confessions my own because they are in accord with the Word of God.* (LSB Agenda pp. 165–166)

Take note of this key word, “because.” We believe and confess the teachings of *The Book of Concord*, not “insofar as” they agree with Scripture, thereby leaving us room to change or deny their teaching in actual practice. We use the word “because.” Those who confess and subscribe to the Book of Concord are convinced in their hearts and have freely bound themselves in the public ministry of the church to exercise the doctrine and practice of the church in accordance with these Confessions. Let me restate the matter simply: We freely bind ourselves to these public Confessions because they are in accord with the Word of God.

The German text of Article 7 focuses upon practice, the actual and daily ministry of the gospel in the church. “The gospel is preached harmoniously according to a pure understanding.” Preaching and teaching are synonyms here; they refer to the active use of God's Word in the congregation. “The sacraments are administered in conformity with the divine Word.” Baptism is administered according to Christ's command. Absolution is bestowed by the pastor upon the repentant sinner. The pastor examines the doctrine and life of the communicant before admitting him to Holy Communion. The entire life of the congregation is informed and guided by the divine Word.

“It is not necessary for the true unity of the Christian Church that uniform ceremonies, instituted by men, be observed everywhere.” This is to say that the unity of the church is not disturbed by differences in the church year, in the liturgical practices of the church, in forms of church governance, and the like, so long as they do not confuse, add to, or take anything away from the pure doctrine of God's Word. We must use such rites and ceremonies as teach this doctrine, even when they are not identical in every place. It is, in fact, deeply desirable to use the same faithful rites and ceremonies

among the congregations of the church, especially within a given region or country, because they help to reinforce the public exercise of the church's unity. But the ceremonies instituted by men are not necessary for this unity, teaching us consider these matters with charity and wisdom.

In the next session we will continue our study of the church by looking at Article 8, "What the Church Is," and the Apology of the Augsburg Confession, which defends Articles 7 and 8 together. We will especially consider the practical application of this doctrine in the fellowship of the church. Let me close this session with the daily plea of the church in the Lutheran hymn, "Lord Jesus Christ, the Church's Head."

O Lord, let this Your little flock,  
Your name alone confessing,  
Continue in Your loving care,  
True unity possessing.  
Your sacraments, O Lord,  
And Your saving Word  
To us, Lord, pure retain.  
Grant that they may remain  
Our only strength and comfort. (LSB 647.2)