

Church and Ministry Part 1: The Foundation

Dear friends in Christ, it is a great honor for me to come and speak to you about the doctrine of the church and her ministry. Your presence here demonstrates a love for God's Word and for his beloved church. It is humbling for me to teach you who have given much time and labor to study these matters in Holy Scriptures. To you, as to Mary, our Lord says, "One thing is necessary. You have chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from you." (Luke 10:42). And to the woman in the crowd, "Blessed rather are those who hear the Word of God and keep it." (Luke 11:28)

On this week of Pentecost we recall that God has sent his gospel into all the nations of the earth and that he makes one holy Christian and apostolic church out of peoples from many languages and tribes and nations. We call to mind Luther's great Pentecost hymn, adapted from the medieval text 500 years ago this month:

Come, Holy Ghost, God and Lord,
With all Your graces now outpoured
On each believer's mind and heart;
Your fervent love to them impart.
Lord, by the brightness of Your light
In holy faith Your church unite;
From every land and every tongue
This to your praise, O Lord, our God, be sung:
Alleluia, Alleluia! (LSB 497.1)

The gift of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost is an answer to the prayer of our Lord Jesus in John 17, where he prays to the Father:

"I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me." (John 17:20-21)

It is our great comfort and joy in these last days that Jesus is praying for his church. He prays that we may be one. He prays that the Christians in his beloved church be sanctified by the holy Word of God, for it is in the Word alone that the unity of the church is founded. This Word is the Word of Jesus, the Word which he received from the Father and has given to us through his apostles and prophets. By this Word he has created and established the church upon Jesus Christ, the Rock, and has appointed a ministry by which this Word should be delivered to the church and to all the nations.

In our time together, I propose the following outline. In this first session we will consider Christ and his Word as the foundation of the church and her ministry. In the second session we will turn especially to the Augsburg Confession and the Apology to explore what the church is and where she is to be found. In the third session we will discuss the fellowship of the church and its practice in the pulpit and at the altar. In the fourth session we will turn to the ministry of the church. In the fifth session we will explore matters of church governance, considering especially the practice of visitation as it was carried out by the apostles in the New Testament. In the final session we will take up matters of worship and other questions that arise in connection with the church and her ministry.

I intend to follow a theological method that focuses first on the Scriptures and second on the Confessions of the Lutheran Church. The Holy Scriptures are our only source for all doctrine. They are clear and reliable. They are the very words of God himself in which he speaks to us, teaches us, and guides us into all truth. We confess in the Solid Declaration of the Formula of Concord:

First, we confess our adherence to the prophetic and Apostolic writings of the Old and New Testaments, as to the pure, clear fountain of Israel, which alone is the one true guiding principle, according to which all teachers and teachings are to be judged and evaluated. (FC SD Rule and Norm.3, KW)

This passage in our Confession expresses how we understand the creeds and confessions of our church. Their source is the Holy Scriptures alone, not human reason, philosophy, tradition, or individual opinions. All doctrine and practice in the church must find its source and origin in the Scriptures. But what is taught in Scriptures is confessed to the world in the daily life of the church, to one another in her daily internal conflicts, and in her defense against the enemies of the church. We love our church's public Confession precisely because it is the doctrine of Holy Scriptures. We bind our pastors and our churches to these Confessions with an unconditional subscription because we thereby publicly assure ourselves that they promise before God to conduct their ministry and life according to the Scriptures alone. In our conversations together as Lutherans, and in any labors or cooperation together as Lutheran churches, we regard an appeal to the Confessions of our church, *The Book of Concord* of 1580, as an appeal to the doctrine of Holy Scriptures. It is for this reason that our Confessions speak in this way:

Concerning the division in matters of faith that has occurred in our times, we regard as the unanimous consensus and explanation of our Christian faith and confession, especially against the papacy and its false worship, idolatry, and superstition, and against other sects, as our symbol for this time, the first, unaltered Augsburg Confession, which was delivered to Emperor Charles V at Augsburg in 1530 during the great diet of the empire, along with the Apology of

this Confession and the articles that were presented at Smalcald in 1537 and were signed at that time by the foremost theologians.

And because these matters also concern the laity and the salvation of their souls, we pledge ourselves also to the Small and Large Catechisms of Dr. Luther, as both catechisms are found in Luther's printed works, as a Bible of the Laity, in which everything is summarized that is treated in detail in Holy Scripture and that is necessary for a Christian to know for salvation.

All teachings should conform to these directives, as outlined above. Whatever is contrary to them should be rejected and condemned as opposed to the unanimous explanation of our faith.

In this way the distinction between the Holy Scripture of the Old and New Testaments and all other writings is preserved, and Holy Scripture alone remains the only judge, rule, and guiding principle, according to which, as the only touchstone, all teachings should and must be recognized and judged, whether they are good or evil, correct or incorrect. (FC Ep Rule and Norm.4-7, KW)

God grant us the pure teaching of his Word and a faithful confession of that teaching.

Part 1: Christ and His Word as the Foundation of the Church

In Psalm 22 we hear the bitter cry of our dear Lord Jesus Christ as he suffers the torments of hell upon the cross, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" We hear the prayer of Jesus. We hear the mockery and scorn of the bystanders: "He trusts in the Lord; let him deliver him, for he delights in him!" We hear of his thirst. We hear of the dividing of his garments. But after the transition in the Psalm, where Jesus rejoices in hope of his Father's deliverance, Jesus then announces his resurrection theme, "I will tell of your name to my brothers; in the midst of the congregation I will praise you." And at the end of the Psalm, where the worship of Christ is announced, we sing, "Posterity shall serve him; it shall be told of the Lord to the coming generation; they shall come and proclaim his righteousness to a people yet unborn, that he has done it." (Psalm 22:1, 8, 22, 30-31)

We sing in Psalm 22 that the church and her ministry are bound up with the atoning death of Jesus and are its intended outcome. The Good Friday reading from Isaiah 53, which sings so beautifully of the substitutionary satisfaction of God's wrath in the crucifixion of his dear Son, is followed in Isaiah with prophecies of the church, "Sing, O barren one, who did not bear... Enlarge the place of your tent....your offspring will possess the nations and will people the desolate cities.... For your Maker is your husband, the LORD of hosts is his name; and the Holy One of Israel is your Redeemer...." (Isaiah 54:1, 2, 3, 5)

In Ezekiel 34:11-16, God also describes the gathering of the church to Jesus the Good Shepherd.

For thus says the Lord God: Behold, I, I myself will search for my sheep and will seek them out. As a shepherd seeks out his flock when he is among his sheep that have been scattered so will I seek out my sheep and I will rescue them from all places where they have been scattered on a day of clouds and thick darkness. And I will bring them out from the peoples and gather them from the countries, and will bring them into their own land.... I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep and I myself will make them lie down, declares the Lord God. I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak, and the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them in justice.

We know this teaching best in Psalm 23:1, "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want." The crucified Savior and exalted Preacher in Psalm 22 is the Shepherd of Psalm 23, the one who makes us righteous, cares for us with his Word and sacraments, and brings us through death into life eternal. By his preaching he gathers the great congregation of his brothers to be the holy church.

These examples from the Old Testament find their fulfillment in the teaching of Jesus in John 10:11, 16:

"I am the Good Shepherd. The Good Shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.... I have other sheep that are not of this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd."

The Good Shepherd is the one who atones for the sins of his sheep by laying down his life for them. The sheep of the Good Shepherd's fold are those who believe in Jesus, that is, those who hear his voice. This is what Martin Luther means when he says that even a seven-year-old child knows what the church is, namely, holy believers and sheep who hear the voice of their shepherd (SA III.12). His voice is the divine Word and the blessed sacraments. His sheep come from the Jews and the Gentiles. They are made into one flock and are led into one sheepfold by their Shepherd. They will not listen to false teaching, that is, a strange voice and the preaching of the hirelings. Instead, they listen to the voice of the Lord Jesus in his Word (John 10:28-29),

"My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand."

John's Gospel repeats this teaching in another way in the following chapter, at the end of John 11(:50-52), where Caiaphas says,

“Nor do you understand that it is better for you that one man should die for the people, not that the whole nation should perish.” He did not say this of his own accord, but being high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus would die for the nation, and not for the nation only, but also to gather into one the children of God who are scattered abroad.”

Here, the Holy Spirit teaches that the death of Jesus is not only for the Jewish nation, but also for all people. The purpose and the outcome of his substitutionary death is the creation of the church, that is, gathering the children of God who are scattered throughout the world into one holy Christian Church. They are called the children of God because they are gathered hear the voice of Jesus and believe in him.

In John 17 Jesus prays first for the eleven remaining disciples, who will be tested severely on that night and who will also become the first of his ministers upon his resurrection. He prays for them before he dies for them. But he also prays for the whole church,

“I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. The glory that you have given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one [literally, reach their final purpose or goal in one/unity], so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me.” (John 17:20-23)

The unity of the church is a unity of faith, “those who will believe in me,” that is, those who trust in the atoning work of Jesus’ death on the cross. It is a unity of God's doing. The origin and source of that unity is in the Triune God, “that they may be one even as we are one, I in them and you in me.” This is not the unity of the ecumenical movement among the churches, a pseudo-unity of “reconciled diversity” that strays ever further from the Holy Scriptures. It is a unity rooted in the pure, unadulterated truth of God's Word, “Sanctify them in the truth; Your Word is truth.” (John 17:17) It is God's Word that convicts us of our sin and that leads us to repentance. It is God's Word that reveals the vicarious satisfaction of Christ’s death on the cross and his resurrection from the dead. It is God's Word which announces the forgiveness of sins and life in Jesus. It is through God's Word that the Holy Spirit convicts us of these truths, creates and strengthens faith in our hearts, and brings forth in us the fruit of love, every virtue, and works of service to our neighbors. In short, the Word of Truth sanctifies us and makes us one holy church, even as the three Persons of the Holy Trinity are one God.

The Apostle John, by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, returns to this teaching in his first epistle. He begins with the incarnation of our Lord Jesus Christ, the divine and

eternal Word, who was with God the Father from eternity, and who in time was made flesh and dwelt among us. John writes,

That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we looked upon and have touched with our hands, concerning the Word of life – the life was made manifest, and we have seen it, and testify to it and proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and was made manifest to us – that which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you so that you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. (1 John 1:1-3)

The flesh and blood of Jesus, his humanity, reveals to us the divine life, eternal life. To hear the man Jesus is to hear life itself. To touch him is to touch God. His blood “cleanses us from all sin.” (1:7) “He is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world.” (2:2) He is the content of our preaching. Those who hear and believe this preaching partake of this life. They enter into a divine communion or fellowship which begins in the Persons of the Holy Trinity and includes the church, “And indeed our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ.”

We come now to the passage of Scripture in which Jesus names the church explicitly, Matthew 16:(15-19). His teaching begins with his own person and work, “Who do you say that I am?” Peter gives the answer which runs through every Christian's faith and every Christian creed and confession. “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” Christ, the Anointed One, is not an empty title. In Psalm 2, we hear of Jesus Christ, the Anointed One:

Why do the nations rage and the peoples plot in vain? The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together against the Lord and against his Christ (his Anointed One), saying, “Let us burst their bonds apart and cast away their cords from us.” He who sits in the heavens laughs; the Lord holds them in derision. Then he will speak to them in his wrath, and terrify them in his fury, saying, “As for me, I have set my king on Zion, my holy hill.” I will tell of the decree: the Lord said to me, “You are my son; today I have begotten you. Ask of me, and I will make the nations your heritage, and the ends of the earth your possession. You shall break them with a rod of iron and dash them in pieces like a potter's vessel.” (Psalm 2:1-9)

“You are the Christ,” the Anointed One. You are the eternal Son of God, the rightful King of all creation. To you all the kings and rulers of the earth must pay homage. You, the Christ, have been anointed with the oil of gladness above your companions (Psalm 45:7). You are God's chosen one, God's elect. God is well pleased with you (Matthew 3:17). You are the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world (John 1:29).

You are the Son of the living God. The living God is the source and giver of all life. He is the creator of the world. He is as much different from the many idols of this world as a true wife is from all the perverse images of pornography. The living God has begotten a living Son from eternity. "In him was life, and the life was the light of men." (John 1:4) "I am the resurrection and the life." (John 11:25) A living God for a living church, as we shall hear.

And Jesus answered him, "Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven." (Matthew 16:17) This is to say that the living God in heaven himself reveals the great confession to man. It is a divine revelation, inaccessible to human flesh and blood. It comes about only by divine appointment, by the action of God himself. It is as we confess in the Augsburg Confession, Article 5,

To obtain such faith [that is, justifying faith] God instituted the office of preaching, giving the gospel and sacraments. Through these, as through means, he gives the Holy Spirit who produces faith, where and when he wills, in those who hear the gospel. (AC 5.1-2, German text)

Jesus continues his answer to Peter, who has spoken on behalf of all the apostles, "And I tell you, you are Peter (*petros*, masculine), and on this rock (*petra*, feminine) I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against her." (Matthew 16:18) This is, of course, the great passage on which the Roman Catholic Church bases its teaching of the papacy. We reject their misinterpretation vigorously in "The Treatise on the Power and Primacy of the Pope," as Luther also did in many places.

In this passage, Jesus is actually saying something far more profound. Every Christian who knows his Old Testament recognizes the rock as a title for God. Jesus himself is called the rock, the stone, the cornerstone, the foundation. "For no one can lay a foundation other than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ." (1 Corinthians 3:11) The church,

the household of God, [is] built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit. (Ephesians 2:19-22)

Our Confessions, however, remind us that the church and the rock upon which she is founded are not vague abstractions. We call this rock Peter's confession, or better yet, the ministry of Peter's confession. It is as Saint Paul says, "We preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God." (1 Corinthians 1:23-24)

Jesus teaches us that he himself, he alone, builds the church. We hear echoes of the creation of Eve, who was “built” from Adam's rib to be his bride (Genesis 2:22). The church is the bride of Christ. She is built from the side of Christ, from the blood and water which flowed from Jesus’ side (John 19:34), by the Holy Spirit who testifies with the water and the blood (1 John 5:7-8). She is the bride who is also the temple of the Holy Spirit, the temple of the living God, a holy habitation in which God dwells. She is founded and built upon Christ the Son of the living God, her husband and Lord, and upon the preaching of Christ crucified. He is her builder and founder. He is her Lord.

And he adds this, that the gates of hell shall not prevail against her. With this one word, hell, Jesus puts before us all that is opposed to us. Here is our sin, the source of all its power. Here is Satan our accuser, who accuses us before God day and night. By our sin and guilt we were forever separated from God, alienated from life, and without hope. Here is death, the final enemy to be conquered. Here also is the habitation of the cursed, those who by their unbelief and evil deeds will one day hear the judgment of the Lord, “Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.” (Matthew 25:41) Jesus grants to his church victory over all these evil powers. He atoned for our sin; by the forgiveness of sins his atonement becomes ours. In the forgiveness of our sins our consciences are cleansed and we stand righteous before the judgment throne of God, now and on the last day. In the resurrection of Jesus, the Father declares the justification of the world, reconciliation, and life. Because we are baptized into Christ, into his death and resurrection, we also have life. Because he lives, we shall live also.

In the words that follow, Jesus foretells the coming ministry of the New Testament. What he says to Peter as the representative of the apostles here, he repeats in Matthew 18:18 and institutes in John 20:23. “I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.” (Matthew 16:19) By the ministry of Peter’s confession of the Christ, the Son of the living God, Jesus builds his church, prevails over all the powers of hell, opens the Kingdom of heaven to all believers, and closes heaven to the unrepentant.

Let us, at this point, pause to collect our thoughts and reflect on what we have heard. It is fitting that we should begin the doctrine of the church and her ministry in a way that expresses her living unity with all that Scripture teaches. When we trace the church back to her source and origin, we find that her life, her holiness, her unity, her very existence begins within the Holy Trinity. From eternity the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit have dwelt in an eternal communion of love. In time the Triune God created man to participate in this eternal fellowship. We were made in the image and likeness of God, in true righteousness and holiness.

But man sinned against God, thus meriting for himself the eternal wrath of God and the corruption of body and soul. He lost God's image. He became alienated from God, an enemy in his mind and spirit. Because of this native and inborn sin he was unable by nature to fear God, love God, or trust in him. He was condemned to hell forever unless He was born again through baptism and the Holy Spirit.

You may have recognized by now that we are working our way through the articles of the Augsburg Confession. In Article 1 we confess the Holy Trinity, as we do in the creeds of the church. We confess original sin in Article 2. In Article 3 we confess Jesus Christ, true God and true man, having the divine and human natures inseparably united in the one person of Jesus. We confess his entire work of salvation, that he is a "sacrifice not only for original sin but also for all other sins and to conciliate God's wrath." (AC 3.3, German text) We continue, "moreover, the same Christ descended into hell, truly rose from the dead on the third day, ascended into heaven, is sitting at the right hand of God in order to rule and reign forever over all creatures, so that through the Holy Spirit he may make holy, purify, strengthen, and comfort all who believe in him, also distribute to them life and various gifts and benefits, and shield and protect them against the devil and sin." (AC 3.4, German text)

So we trace the creation of the church from the Holy Trinity, through the alienation brought about by original sin, to Christ, our Redeemer and Lord. In the next two articles we confess how the work of Christ is applied to us.

Furthermore, it is taught that we cannot obtain forgiveness of sin and righteousness before God through our merit, work, or satisfactions, but that we receive forgiveness of sin and become righteous before God out of grace for Christ's sake through faith when we believe that Christ has suffered for us and that for his sake our sin is forgiven and righteousness and eternal life are given to us. For God will regard and reckon this faith as righteousness in his sight, as Saint Paul says in Romans 3 and 4. (AC 4, German text)

Here is the doctrine of the justification of the sinner before God.

It is through faith that the saving work of Christ is appropriated by the sinner. But how is this faith obtained? We hear again Article 5,

To obtain such faith God instituted the office of preaching, giving the gospel and the sacraments. Through these, as through means, he gives the Holy Spirit who produces faith, where and when he wills, in those who hear the gospel. It teaches that we have a gracious God, not through our merit but through Christ's merit, when we so believe. Condemned are the Anabaptists and others who teach that we obtain the Holy Spirit without the external word of the gospel through our own preparation, thoughts, and works." (AC 5, German text).

With this article, we are almost ready for a close reading of Articles 7 and 8 on the church. Article 5 teaches us that the Holy Spirit produces justifying faith only through the word and the sacraments. God himself instituted these means of grace and the office by which they are to be delivered to us. Just as our merits are rejected in the article on justification, so our own preparation, thoughts, and works are excluded from the ministry of the church, through which the Holy Spirit works faith in us. In Article 6 we confess, nevertheless, that such saving faith is neither barren nor fruitless.

It is also taught that such faith should yield good fruit and good works and that a person must do such good works as God has commanded for God's sake but not place trust in them as if thereby to earn grace before God. (AC 6.1, German text)

In the later articles of the Augsburg Confession, we return to each of these topics of Christian doctrine: saving faith, the ministry of the church, Baptism, Absolution, the Lord's Supper, good works, and the like. All of these are bound up with the doctrine of the church and her ministry.

But before we turn to this confession of the church, let us listen to Martin Luther in the Large Catechism:

I believe that there is on earth a holy little flock and community of pure saints under one head, Christ. It is called together by the Holy Spirit in one faith, mind, and understanding. It possesses a variety of gifts, and yet is united in love without sect or schism. Of this community I also am a part and member, a participant and co-partner in all the blessings it possesses. I was brought into it by the Holy Spirit and incorporated into it through the fact that I have heard and still hear God's Word, which is the beginning point for entering it. Before we had come into this community, we were entirely of the devil, knowing nothing of God and of Christ. The Holy Spirit will remain with the holy community or Christian people until the Last Day. Through it he gathers us, using it to teach and preach the Word. By it he creates and increases holiness, causing it daily to grow and become strong in the faith and in its fruits, which the Spirit produces.

Further we believe that in this Christian community we have the forgiveness of sins, which takes place through the holy sacraments and absolution as well as through all the comforting words of the entire gospel. This encompasses everything that is to be preached about the sacraments and, in short, the entire gospel and all the offices of the Christian community. (LC 2.51-54)