

## One Church.

Text: Eph 4:1-6

1) The Invisible Church

Suggested Hymns:

2) The Visible Church

194, 189, 191, 292, 210

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with you all. Amen.

The text for our sermon today is Ephesians 4:1-6, *<sup>1</sup> I, therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, beseech you to walk worthy of the calling with which you were called, <sup>2</sup> with all lowliness and gentleness, with longsuffering, bearing with one another in love, <sup>3</sup> endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.*

*<sup>4</sup> There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called in one hope of your calling; <sup>5</sup> one Lord, one faith, one baptism; <sup>6</sup> one God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all.* (NKJV)

Lord God, heavenly Father, sanctify us through Your truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

Dear friends in Christ,

Today we are continuing our series on the Nicene Creed. Part 13 focuses on the words, *I believe in one ... church.*

Today people often fail to distinguish between the visible church and the Invisible Church. Let us take a closer look at what *Luther's Small Catechism* says on the matter. May the Lord bless our meditation.

### 1. The Invisible Church

The first great point for us to see in Paul's message is that unity is not a human creation but the gift of the Holy Spirit. Unity among Christians is not the result of a majority decision among committees or people gathered in convention.

No, unity is the direct result of what the Spirit of God brings about. See this clearly, for Paul emphasises it very strongly when he speaks of "*the unity of the Spirit.*"

Paul had spent a number of months in Ephesus on his missionary journey into that part of the world. The nineteenth chapter of Acts is a very exciting record of

what happened when Paul proclaimed the Gospel in Ephesus. The most diverse people were called together into a partnership that they never would have dreamed of creating on their own. Jews and Gentiles, wealthy and poor, people of education and people without an education were called together and held together not by any human action, but by the work of the Holy Spirit.

He moved in on their hearts and lives as the good news of Jesus Christ was proclaimed in their midst. It was His gift of power that enabled this motley band of people to establish a congregation in a vast, hostile, heathen world in first-century Ephesus. It was a sheer miracle that it came to pass. Thus they sensed that greater than all of the things that separated them, is the one risen Lord Jesus Christ, who holds them together.

This illustrates the Invisible Church within the visible church and the Invisible Church is perfectly united by the work of the Holy Spirit. We stated our faith in that truth this morning when in the Nicene Creed we said, "*And I believe in one holy Christian and apostolic church.*"

When we said those words, we weren't just thinking about our own congregation. We were thinking about the people of Christ all over the world, here and abroad, in whose hearts the Spirit of God has wrought the miracle of faith and trust in the Lordship of Jesus Christ. That church is called the Invisible Church.

*The holy Christian Church* is one, because it is the communion of saints, that is, the whole number of believers in Christ; for all believers, and only believers, are members of this Church.

The Holy Spirit called and converted not only us, but many others; all these He "gathers" into the one holy Christian Church or the Communion of Saints.<sup>1</sup> All believers and only believers constitute this Church. This Church is compared to a kingdom in which all those and those only are citizens who have renounced the devil and all his works and ways, and have in faith acknowledged Christ their Lord and King.

It is also called the *household of God*, in which all those and only those are children who have been born again. It is the temple of God, in which all those and only those are living stones who by faith are built upon the foundation of the

teachings of the Apostles and Prophets, of which Christ is the Cornerstone, the core and centre.

The Church, in its proper sense, consists of all true believers in Christ, men, women, and children. In this spiritual temple the Christians are not only by faith resting on the foundation, but by the bond of brotherly love they are “fitly framed together” and united. This temple “grows,” as new converts are being added. The present world, therefore, merely serves as a scaffolding for the building of this temple, the Church, and at the end of time this scaffolding will be taken down, and the Church triumphant will appear in all its glory.

We say, “*I believe*” in the Church for two reasons. Firstly, because the Church is invisible, since no one can look into another’s heart and see whether he believes. We read in Luke 17:20-21 that “*The kingdom of God does not come with observation; <sup>21</sup> ‘nor will they say, ‘See here!’ or ‘See there!’ For indeed, the kingdom of God is within you.*”

Secondly, because we are nevertheless assured by the Scriptures that the Holy Spirit at all times gathers and preserves a congregation of believers.

We do not believe in the Church in the same sense as we believe in God, we do not put our trust and confidence in the Church; we merely believe that there is a Church.

Faith, which makes people members of the Church, is invisible to human eyes. We cannot positively tell whether a person is a member of the Church. Therefore this Communion of Saints is called the Invisible Church. But all the members of this Church are known to God.

Although we do not see the Church, we are sure there is such a Church on earth, because Christ tells us that He will build His Church, and the gates of hell shall not be able to destroy it. Kingdoms and empires have passed away and will pass away, but the Church of Christ will continue to the end of time. Peter is not himself the rock upon which the Church is built, but Christ is the foundation of His Church. By faith in Christ Peter was himself built upon this rock.

We say believe in “*the*” Church because there is only one Church; for all believers are a communion of saints, or one spiritual body, whose one and only Head is Jesus Christ. Our text says <sup>1</sup> *I, therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, beseech you to walk worthy of the calling with which you were called, <sup>2</sup> with all*

*lowliness and gentleness, with longsuffering, bearing with one another in love,<sup>3</sup> endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.*

*<sup>4</sup> There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called in one hope of your calling; <sup>5</sup> one Lord, one faith, one baptism; <sup>6</sup> one God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all.*

As all true believers the world over constitute the Invisible Church, it follows that there can be only one such Church. Therefore Christ speaks of “*one flock.*”<sup>2</sup> There are many individual Christians, but as they all have the same faith in the one Lord and God and the same hope of eternal life, they are thus by the Spirit of God united into one spiritual body.

As only those are saved, who by faith in Christ are members of this Church, it follows that the Invisible Church is the only saving Church, and no one can be saved outside of this Church. No visible denomination, least of all the Roman Catholic Church, can truthfully claim to be the only saving church.

The Church is called *holy* because it is the communion of saints, who are made holy by faith in Christ and who serve God with holy works.

The Church consists of true believers only. By faith in Christ they have forgiveness of all their sins, and are clothed with the garment of Christ’s righteousness, therefore in the sight of God they are cleansed from sin, are holy and without blemish; hence they are “*the communion of saints.*”

Because of this, every true member of the Church will earnestly strive to avoid in his life what might displease God, “*keep himself unspotted from the world,*”<sup>3</sup> and be “*zealous of good works,*”<sup>4</sup> and thus dedicate his life to the service of God.<sup>5</sup> The lives we lead are the spiritual sacrifices we offer to God.

While our holiness before God through faith in Christ is perfect, the holiness of our lives is not so, because of the old Adam we still have. Nevertheless, we should be very careful that we do not give offence to others, and by our sins bring reproach upon the Church of God. By leading a worldly life we bring dishonour not only upon ourselves, but also upon the Church, yes, upon God Himself. If we are saints before God by faith in our Saviour, let us earnestly strive also to be saints in our lives before men.

The Church is called the *Christian Church* because it is built upon Christ, its one and only Foundation. We read in 1 Corinthians 3:11, "*For no other foundation can anyone lay than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ.*" This holy Christian Church is to be found wherever the Gospel is in use; for according to God's promise His Word shall not be preached in vain.

By faith in Christ people become members of the Invisible Church. Such faith God works in them only through the Gospel. Therefore the Church can be found only where this Gospel is in use, and the Church can be built and preserved by no other means than by the Gospel of Christ.

There are Christians or believers also in those denominations which, besides teaching some false doctrines, still adhere to the fundamental truths of the Gospel. For these truths are able to produce true faith in those that receive them, even though, in ignorance, they err in other doctrines.

But where the Trinity of God and the vicarious atonement of Christ is denied or unknown, there is no real Gospel, and therefore there is no Church, because God builds His Church only by means of the Gospel.

The Word of God is never preached in vain; it will either work faith in those who hear it, or it will be preached as a witness against those who reject it.<sup>6</sup>

## **2. The Visible Church**

The visible Church is the whole number of those who use the Word of God and profess the Christian faith, but among whom, besides the true Christians, there may also be hypocrites.

As physical life is, in itself, invisible, yet manifests itself in our actions, so faith is, in itself, invisible, but it will manifest itself so that its presence may be outwardly recognised. All true believers will confess their faith;<sup>7</sup> they will also prove it by a godly life, and they will hear and use the Word of God. These manifestations of faith are the outward marks of the Invisible Church.

However, hypocrites, who have no faith in their hearts, can simulate all these outward marks. And as we cannot distinguish these tares from the wheat, they are counted in with the Visible Church.

Hence the Invisible Church is the total number of those that HAVE true faith in their hearts, and the visible Church is the total number of those who PROFESS

the faith. Generally speaking, the Invisible Church is hidden in the visible Church.

The Visible Church is made up of religious denominations. A religious denomination is a church organisation with a distinct name and distinctive doctrines.

The visible Church, which includes all those people in the world who profess adherence to the religion of Christ, spreads out, like a tree, in three main branches, the Roman Catholic, the Reformed, and the Lutheran, each branch again dividing itself into distinctive bodies or denominations.

These denominations differ from each other not merely in name, but principally in doctrine, each asserting that its teachings are true. Now it is foolish to say, when one denies what the other affirms, that both are true. There can only be one truth, and whatever does not agree with this one truth must of necessity be false.

Truth is intolerant, it will not compromise with error; as little as light can have communion with darkness, there cannot be a communion between right and wrong.

Any merger that recognises or tolerates error beside the truth destroys the truth. There can only be one true doctrine concerning the creation of the world, the redemption of mankind, the conversion of sinners, etc., and whatever does not agree with this one true doctrine is false. It is, therefore, foolish to say that all churches, no matter what they teach, are right.

*Which denomination is the true visible Church?* That denomination is the true visible Church which has, teaches, and confesses the entire doctrine of the Word of God and administers the Sacraments according to Christ's institution.

Scripture says in Matthew 28:20, <sup>20</sup> ***“teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the world.”*** And in Jeremiah 23:28, ***And he who has My word, let him speak My word faithfully. What is the chaff to the wheat?” says the LORD.***

The doctrinal position of any denomination can be learned only from its public confessions and practices, but whether these are true and right can be learned only from the Bible.

Hence it is the duty of every person to examine for himself whether the teachings of his church agree with the plain statements of the Bible.<sup>8</sup> He must not take anybody else's word for it. To be true, a church doctrine does not need to agree with human reason, modern science, public opinion, etc., but it must in all parts and points agree with the Word of God.

On examination we find that the teachings of the Lutheran Church, as laid down in the Book of Concord, 1580, and explained in *Luther's Small Catechism*, which supports these teachings with many Bible texts, agree with the Word of God in every respect.

The Church, then, which confesses and teaches these doctrines is the true, orthodox visible Church. This does not mean that it is the only saving Church, or that all its members are true Christians at heart, and that there are no Christians in other denominations, but it does emphasise that all the teachings of the Lutheran Church agree with the Word of God, and are, therefore, positively true, and that all doctrines differing from these are erroneous and false.

Churches holding doctrines that are at variance with the Word of God are called heterodox or false churches. However, we do not pass judgment on the personal faith of their members, but solely upon their public doctrines as laid down in their Confessions.

Luther did not found a new church, but throwing out the errors that had crept in, he re-established it on the foundation of the Apostles and Prophets. As far as the doctrine is concerned, the Lutheran Church is the old Apostolic Church.

A local church, or congregation, is a group of professing Christians who regularly assemble for worship at one place.

*So, when do we use the doctrine of the Church properly?* We use the doctrine of the Church properly; when we take heed to be and remain members of the invisible Church by sincere faith in the Redeemer; when we adhere to the Church which teaches the Word of God in all its purity; when we do all in our power to maintain, promote, and extend this Church by prayer, personal service, and financial support; and when we avoid all false churches and all other organisations that profess a religion that is false.

So in summary, “*the one holy Christian and apostolic Church*” refers to the Invisible Church which is perfectly united and is one. The visible church, on the other hand, has tares among the wheat and it not perfectly united.

Therefore we look forward to the day when finally the Church Militant will be the Church Triumphant. Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep our hearts and minds, in Christ Jesus. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> John 10:16; Acts 2:41, 47

<sup>2</sup> John 10:16

<sup>3</sup> James 1:27

<sup>4</sup> Tit. 2:14

<sup>5</sup> Rom. 12:1, 2

<sup>6</sup> Matt. 24:14

<sup>7</sup> Rom. 10:9, 10; Matt. 10:32

<sup>8</sup> Acts 17:11