

MINISTRY BY MAIL
Lutheran Conference of Confessional Fellowship
www.lutheranlccf.org
Sexagesima Sunday, February 19, 2017

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(Hymns found in The Lutheran Hymnal, CPH, 1941)

Hymns: 477, 460:1-2, 478, 464, 465.

Lessons: Psalm 149, Ephesians 5:25-32, Matthew 28:16-20,

Sermon Text: Acts 2:36-47.

Sermon by Pastor Robert Mehlretter

In the name of Jesus Christ, Dear Fellow Redeemed,

You were assured last week that faith is what gets one into heaven. Your confession is “I believe in the Holy Ghost; the Holy Christian Church, the communion of saints.” You cannot see the Holy Ghost but you can understand the results of his work. You cannot see faith itself but you can see fruits of faith, that is, good works. Likewise, you cannot see “the Holy Christian Church, the communion of saints.” So today we talk about

THE HOLY CHRISTIAN CHURCH, THE COMMUNION OF SAINTS

- 1. This is what we call the “invisible church”.**
- 2. We gather together into “visible churches”.**
- 3. Does the Holy Ghost desire to work faith in everyone who hears the Gospel?**

We confess in the catechism that the Holy Ghost “calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies the whole Christian Church on earth and keeps it with Jesus Christ in the one true faith.”

What the Holy Ghost has done and is doing for me, he has done and is doing for many others, for the whole Christian Church, whom he has brought to Christ and keeps with Christ in the one true faith.

The Holy Christian Church is the Communion of Saints. So what is it? Let’s start by making sure we understand what “saints” are. Saints are those who are holy, in whom the Holy Spirit has worked his work of sanctification. They are not especially good or holy people who have a surplus of what the Roman Catholic Church calls “good works”. Last week we talked about what is really a “good work”, that is, everything that a believing child of God does in the fear and love of God. We – and the creeds – do not use the word “saints” to mean someone whom the Roman Catholic Church has formally designated “saints” because they have a surplus of good works and because prayers to those humans have resulted in at least two verified miracles.

We use the word “saints” to mean all believers in Jesus Christ as their Savior from all their sins. That group of people includes people still living on earth and all those who have died and whose souls are in heaven awaiting the resurrection of the dead to join their souls with their glorified bodies.

It is holy because the Holy Spirit has done his work of sanctification in all of them. For those in heaven he has completed his work. For those on earth he has begun and is continuing his work of sanctification. They are called ‘holy’ and ‘saints’ because by faith in Jesus their sins are all washed away.

Let’s talk for a moment about saints on earth. Paul begins his letter to the Romans in this way: ***“To all in Rome who are loved by God and called to be saints: Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ.”*** Romans 1:7 (NIV) He writes to the Corinthians in a similar way: ***“To the church of God in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus and called to be holy, together with all those everywhere who call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ--their Lord and ours: Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.”*** 1 Corinthians 1:2-3 (NIV) John addresses the book of Revelation to his readers in this way: ***“Grace and peace to you from him who is, and who was, and who is to come, and from the seven spirits before his throne, and from Jesus Christ, who is the faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth. To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood, and has made us to be a kingdom and priests to serve his God and Father--to him be glory and power for ever and ever! Amen.”*** Revelation 1:4-6 (NIV)

All believers everywhere are also called ‘Christian’ because their entire hope is founded on Christ. Paul writes to the Ephesian Christians: **“Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's household.”** Ephesians 2:19 (NIV) The foundation of the Holy Christian Church is Jesus Christ. **“For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ.”** 1 Corinthians 3:11 (NIV) We also read that **“The disciples were called Christians first at Antioch.”** Acts 11:26 (NIV) Paul and Barnabus had spent a year in that city preaching the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

It is called a “communion of Saints” and a “church” because by faith in Christ the Holy Spirit gathers all believers into one spiritual body. He has sanctified or set them apart from the unbelieving world. It is a gathering – a gathering invisible to human eyes, but still a gathering.

Members of the Holy Christian Church are found only where the Gospel is preached and the sacraments are used. What is it that makes one a member or part of the Holy Christian Church, the Communion of Saints? Faith. All who believe are members. It is not a matter of ‘paying your dues’ or having a membership card or having your name on the membership list of a human organization. No one can see faith. We can see fruits of faith, but not faith itself. And faith makes one a member of the Holy Christian Church. God alone knows the members of the Holy Christian Church because he alone knows who has faith in his heart. That is why it is called “the invisible church”. Only God knows for sure who is a member and belongs to the Holy Christian Church.

But you may be gathered in a building called a ‘church’ today and may formally be members of a ‘church’. This is what is called a ‘visible church.’ We call a group of people who come together to hear the Gospel a church because we know the Holy Spirit will use the Gospel to bring people in that group to faith. That can be a congregation, a gathering of people to worship the true God, or a church body or conference or organization such as a “synod”. Such a visible assembly, or denomination, or church body is called a church because in its midst there surely are members of the invisible church, even though we do not know them.

Believers gather and they want to gather to do religious things together. This is called “church fellowship”. Church fellowship includes such things as worship, praying, singing, and supporting religious activities with our contributions.

The basis for membership in the Holy Christian Church, which we cannot see, is faith. The basis for doing or exercising fellowship activities with people we can see is different. What is the basis for fellowship? Paul writes to the Corinthian Christians: **“I appeal to you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another so that there may be no divisions among you and that you may be perfectly united in mind and thought.”** 1 Corinthians 1:10 (NIV) Agreement. No divisions. Unity in mind and thought.

But you can surely see as you look around your communities that there are many visible churches. The differences between some of them and this church are sometimes pretty obvious. Baptist churches, for example, insist on baptism by immersion and do not teach baptism of infants. You know that is not what Scripture demands, and we shall in future sermons teach what Scripture says about baptism. Other differences are not always so obvious or open.

Scripture makes it clear that in all “church work” and in all religious matters, there is to be genuine, complete unity in speaking and doing what God teaches in the Bible, his Word. In addition, Matthew 28:20 makes it plain that Jesus says that we are to teach men **“to obey everything I have commanded you.”**

We are to examine every visible church that teaches his Word as John writes in his first epistle: **“Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world.”** 1 John 4:1 (NIV)

When can we say of a visible church that it is a correct, God-pleasing church? When it proclaims the Gospel and administers the Sacraments in their truth and purity. Such a visible church we call an orthodox church, that is, a correct-teaching church. And of course, a church’s practice must agree with its doctrine. Scripture condemns hypocrisy.

If a church does not proclaim the Gospel and administer the Sacraments in their truth and purity, we must say that it is a false church, a false-teaching church, a heterodox church, that is, a church that teaches or tolerates in its midst doctrine and practice other than the pure Word of God. We read in Scripture: **“To the Jews**

who had believed him, Jesus said, 'If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.'" John 8:31-32 (NIV)

What does God want us to do when we find people who hold to his pure word? God wants us to join in fellowship activities with all those who hold to his pure Word. The basis for this is the Word of God, as we also read from John's first epistle: ***"We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ."*** 1 John 1:3 (NIV)

On the other hand, we may not belong to or stay with a false church, a heterodox church or any antichristian society or organization because God expressly forbids us to do so. So many people feel and think that all those who claim to be Christians should do religious things together. After all, they reason, isn't the gospel the important thing? Yes, the pure Gospel is essential to salvation. But there is the opposite side of God-pleasing joining together and agreeing together and speaking the same thing. This we call 'unionism'. In our communities today are many examples of churches and people joining together for religious activities when they are not agreed on doctrine and practice. Other examples of the sin of unionism include 'agreeing to disagree' and 'union without unity' and 'forgetting our doctrinal differences' in order to do religious things together. The words from Romans 16 surely apply: ***"I urge you, brothers, to watch out for those who cause divisions and put obstacles in your way that are contrary to the teaching you have learned. Keep away from them. For such people are not serving our Lord Christ, but their own appetites. By smooth talk and flattery they deceive the minds of naive people."*** Romans 16:17-18 (NIV)

We are not condemning to hell everyone who attends a heterodox church, but that will be the ultimate result of believing what a false-teaching, heterodox church teaches. There may be believers wherever the Gospel is heard. For that we thank God. But we cannot join in religious activities with them because by their membership and association with false-teaching churches they are approving of the unscriptural teachings and practices of those churches.

God brings people to faith in Jesus Christ in different outward ways, but it is always true that ***"faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ."*** Romans 10:17 (NIV) The external circumstances around the conversion of individuals may differ. Paul came to believe in Christ on his way to Damascus in a blinding flash of light. Most of you and I were brought to Jesus as infants through Baptism. Yet it is the same Spirit of God that works in all, and he uses the same means of grace, follows the same method of grace, works the same faith and spiritual life in all. The way of salvation is the same for all. Whoever tries to get to heaven by another way will not get there.

Scripture is clear that the Holy Ghost desires to bring all men to salvation by the Gospel. ***"As surely as I live, declares the Sovereign LORD, I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that they turn from their ways and live. Turn! Turn from your evil ways!"*** Ezekiel 33:11 (NIV) Peter writes: ***"The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance."*** 2 Peter 3:9 (NIV) Unfortunately, many in unbelief stubbornly resist the Word and the Spirit of God and are thus lost by their own fault. Hosea writes: ***"You are destroyed, O Israel, because you are against me, against your helper."*** Hosea 13:9 (NIV) Stephen boldly proclaimed Jesus Christ as the only way of salvation, and spoke to those who murdered him: ***"You stiff-necked people, with uncircumcised hearts and ears! You are just like your fathers: You always resist the Holy Spirit!"*** Acts 7:51 (NIV) All men always by nature resist the Holy Spirit and his work!

God must get the credit for saving man, but man must take the blame for being damned. It is a fact that not all men are saved because they ***"would not"*** Matthew 23:37 (KJV) come when Christ called them. They ***"resist the Holy Ghost"*** Acts 7:51 (NIV) when he works on their hearts. They "deny the Lord that bought them" (2 Peter 2:1) and thus destroy themselves. Whatever may be the causes and reasons why a man does not come to Christ to believe in him, they all lie within him and not in God; hence it is his own fault if he is lost. If, on the other hand, he is converted and saved, he may not claim the least credit for himself, for it was God, and God alone, who redeemed him, turned him to Christ, and kept him in the faith unto salvation. We rejoice in the grace and glory of God and earnestly pray that he may bring more people to faith in their only Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.