

The True Church

The word “church” is only used twice on the Gospels. After Peter confessed His faith in Christ as the Son of the God, Jesus said, *“on this rock (Christ) I shall build My church”* (Matt. 16:18), and again, *“tell it to the church”* (Matt. 18:17).

We need to understand that when we speak of the true Church, it consists of only those who are true believers. For that reason we say the Church is invisible. Only God can see the heart and know those who truly believe. Our Lutheran Catechism defines the Church as *“The congregation of saints, that is, all Christendom, the whole number of all believers; for only believers, and all believers, are members of the Church.”*

In a figurative sense we also speak of visible churches. Our Catechism defines the visible Church as *“The whole number of those who profess the Christian faith and are gathered around God’s Word, but among whom besides the true Christians, there are also hypocrites.”*

All of us need to recognise the danger of falling away from the faith. We are surrounded today on every side by the temptations of this present world. John speaks of *“the sinful desires of the human nature, the sinful desires of the eyes and pride in one’s possessions”* (1 John 2:16). Peter tells us that *“the Devil, is prowling around like a roaring lion, looking for someone to devour”* (1 Peter 5:8). We are told how Demas, a co-worker of the apostle Paul fell away from the faith, *“because he has loved this present world”* (2 Tim. 4:10). We need daily contrition and repentance to turn to Jesus for forgiveness. Paul urges us to *“Examine yourselves, whether you are in the faith! Test yourselves!”* (2 Cor. 13:5). We need to use God’s Word and Sacraments to grow and be strengthened in our Christian faith. Jesus says, *“If you remain in My Word, you are truly My disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free”* (John 8:31-32).

As we look around us in the church today, we see many changes taking place. The church has become very complex and businesslike. It often functions more like a corporation than a gathering of Christians.

God never intended His Church to be like that. Jesus says, *“I shall build My church, and the gates of Hades will not overpower it”* (Matt. 16:18). Too many Churches today are being designed and built by men. Christ’s blueprint and design for construction is ignored and the results are often disastrous.

In Revelation 3:1, the resurrected Christ looked at the church at Sardis and warned them to repent. They were an active church with all kinds of church programs and plans for outreach and church growth, but they were neglecting the one thing needful – the pure teaching and preaching of God’s Word and the condemnation of false teaching. Jesus says, *“I know your deeds, that you have a reputation that you are alive and yet you are dead.”* Despite all the external activity, Sardis was an ecclesiastical corpse because it had departed from the divine blueprint.

But the early church in Jerusalem was different. Acts 2:42 tells us, *“They continued steadfastly in the teaching of the apostles and in the fellowship, in the breaking of the bread and in the prayers.”* They understood the great commission which says, *“by teaching them to keep all that I have commanded you”* (Matt. 28:20).

Faithfulness to God’s Word is absolutely essential if we want God’s blessing. God will build His Church with or without us. But if we fail to preach and teach His Word faithfully, that Word will be taken from us and given to others. Luther warned the Germans this would happen, and in the course of time Germany lost God’s Word of Truth. Luther says, *“Let us remember our former misery, and the darkness sin which we dwell. Germany, I am sure, has never before heard so much of God’s Word as it is hearing today; certainly we read nothing of it in history. If we let it just slip by without thanks and honour, I fear we shall suffer still more dreadful darkness and plague. O my beloved Germans, while the market is at your door; gather in the harvest while there is sunshine and fair weather; make use of God’s grace and Word while it is there! For you should know that God’s Word and grace are like a passing shower of rain which does not return where it has once been. It has been with the Jews, but when it’s one it’s gone, and now they have nothing. Paul brought it to the Greeks; but again when it’s gone it’s gone, and now they have the Turk. Rome and the Latins also had it; but when it’s gone it’s gone., and now they have the pope. And you Germans need not think that you will have it forever, for ingratitude and contempt will not make it stay. Therefore, seize it and hold it fast, whoever can; for lazy hands are bound to have a lean year.”*

May God preserve us from such a fearful loss!