

Oculi
Luke 11:14-28

“My eyes are ever toward the Lord for He will pluck me out of the net.” Jesus is the stronger Man who has come and overpowered the strong man and plundered his evil kingdom. Jesus plucked you out of Satan’s net of evilness and saved you. And then Jesus established His own kingdom, the church. With the coming of Jesus comes the kingdom of God and with the kingdom of God comes the church. The church is where God distributes His grace which forgives sinners and makes them full members of God’s kingdom.

The wicked Pharisees accuse Jesus of casting out demons by the power of Beelzebul. Jesus refers back to our Old Testament reading when Moses was showing Pharaoh the power of God with the Ten plagues. The magicians of Egypt were successful at first in mimicking the power of God, but they finally had to admit, “This is the finger of God.” (Exodus 8:19) That is, Moses is the finger of God manifesting God’s awesome power that man cannot duplicate. As you know, Pharaoh hardened his heart until it was hardened by God Himself and Pharaoh was lost.

Jesus exhibits the power of God that no man can duplicate, especially in His resurrection. Miracles like Jesus did were done by the prophets of old and the apostles, even resurrecting the dead. Elijah raised the dead son of the widow of Zarephath. A dead man was thrown into the grave of Elisha and was raised from the dead. Peter raised Tabatha, also known as Dorcas, from the dead. Paul raised Eutychus from the dead. They showed they were prophets of God, but none of them raised themselves from the dead. Only Jesus did that. He shows that He is the Prophet, capital ‘P’ who is God in the flesh. He establishes a kingdom that will never fail, the church.

In the third century, there was a terrible persecution of the church. At this time, it was illegal to be a Christian. To avoid persecution and death, many Christians sacrificed to idols. Many repented, but what was the church to do. I imagine it is a similar question of a spouse who finds out her spouse has been unfaithful. The crime of idolatry by these Christians was just as bad, if not worse, than infidelity in marriage, but they actually repented.

A heresy arose out of this time that wanted to keep these repentant Christians outside of the church, and naturally splinter churches arose. Novatian was the bishop who headlined this heresy. The church eventually disciplined Novatian and order was restored to the church. A great quote came out of this troubled time. Cyprian said, “No one can have God for his Father, who does not have the church for his mother.”¹ Cyprian was defending the united, catholic, church. At this time there was not really a “Western” or “Eastern” church as we think about it today. There were five geographical centers of Christianity and the bishops of each geographical center were hypothetically equal.

I bring this up to highlight that, at one point in our history, there was the semblance of a united church. East and West divided in 1054 A.D. The Western church shattered in 1517 A.D, or however you want to date the Reformation. In the eyes of the world, the church appears to be a house divided. The church, more often than not, is united by charisma and family ties, instead of Christ who is its head. This is a question that has plagued the church since the beginning and will continue to plague the church until Christ returns. I believe it’s an important question to ask, “What is the Church?”

This question is important because we should be concerned whether we’re in the right church or not! Sadly, many Christians move for college or work and rarely give a thought to whether there is a good church there or not. It’s much better that you go to a mediocre college or work a mediocre job and go to a great church than the opposite. I have heard accounts of many Christians who have moved and have been sorry because there wasn’t a good church there. So, what is a great church? There are many ways we can approach this question. I want to approach it from a treatise Dr. Luther wrote in 1539 called “On the Councils and the Church.” (AE 41) He’s wrestling with the question of authority in the church. In it, he looks at the marks of the people of God, or the marks of the church.

“First, the holy Christian people are recognized by their possession of the holy word of God.” (AE 41, pg. 148) I love that. It’s so Lutheran, isn’t it? To be a people of God, you must have the Word of God. The Word of God is our authority in the church. And it is the possession of all Christians. The Elders are reading a great book, “The Hammer of God” right now.

¹ Cyprian, “The Unity of the Church.”

The first chapter deals with a guy named Sevonius who just obtained his doctorate of theology. He just received an assignment to a parish so he could get some “real-world” pastoral experience before he continued on in a much more prestigious post. The first night, out of a room full of clergy, his supervisor sends him to a deathbed in the country because his supervisor knew how inexperienced young Sevonius was. And this is the peasantry in Sweden in the early 1800’s. He goes and is totally unprepared for the deathbed of a man who is terrified by his sin. He’s utterly unable to help this man. He’s so overwhelmed, he goes outside to be sick. When he’s outside, a lady named Katrina arrives. She is something of a spiritual leader in this small farming community. She gives full-force gospel to the dying man so that he finally reaches peace of conscience. She then has the pastor administer the office of the keys and the Lord’s Supper. The man dies in peace. It highlights the wonderful fact that the Word of God belongs to all Christians and not just the clergy. Oh, I might know a little something more than you about Greek or Hebrew, but we have fine translations and you are able to understand the Word of God just as much as I am. The Word of God is a prized possession of the people of God and Jesus attaches a wonderful promise to it:

“Heaven and earth will pass away, but My words will not pass away.” (Mt. 24:35)

“Second, God’s people or the Christian holy people are recognized by the holy sacrament of baptism, wherever it is taught, believed, and administered correctly according to Christ’s ordinance.” (AE 41, pg. 151) This is our entrance into the kingdom of God. It is a wonderful gift of God that belongs to all Christians. I like how Luther explains it: “Baptism does not belong to the baptizer, nor is it given to him, but it belongs to the baptized. It was ordained for him by God, and given to him by God, just as the word of God is not the preacher’s (except in so far as he too hears and believes it) but belongs to the disciple who hears and believes it; to him is it given.” (AE 41, pg. 151) And since it belongs to all in the church, infants are baptized.

Nowadays, the “correct administration” means that Baptism is administered to infants. And now we must face a harsh reality. Many so-called churches today do not baptize infants. And where this is true, they are really not the church. That doesn’t mean there aren’t Christians in the Baptist church because they do have the word of God which works faith when and where the Holy Spirit wills. But no Christian should go to such a place. They are not building their house on the rock but on sand.

“Third, God’s people, or Christian holy people, are recognized by the holy sacrament of the altar, wherever it is rightly administered, believed, and received, according to Christ’s institution.” (AE 41, pg. 152) I don’t have to convince you of the wonderful comfort of the Lord’s Supper. You know it well. It is the visible grace of God for the sinner beat up by sin, death, and the devil so that he or she might continue in their faith. But Luther rightly emphasizes that it must be administered, believed and received according to Christ’s command. Today that means we must continue the historic, loving practice of closed communion. Paul makes abundantly clear that the Lord’s Supper is extremely dangerous for someone who takes it wrongly or as if it is nothing special. If we see a toddler reach for a heated element on a stove, would we really not care if he touches it or not? I daresay, we might even yell if we needed to get the toddler’s attention so he doesn’t hurt himself badly. How much more should we be concerned if someone is doing eternal damage to themselves? Paul doesn’t mince words with the Corinthians over their misuse of the Lord’s Supper: “This is why many of you are weak and ill, and some have died.” (1 Corinthians 11:30) At the same time, we rejoice that believing in the presence of the Lord’s body and blood for our good is what makes us worthy to partake of His Supper and not any external preparations.

Fourth, God’s people or holy Christians are recognized by the office of the keys exercised publicly.” (AE 41, pg. 153) This is so much more than corporate confession and absolution that we do before the Divine Service. That is one side of the keys. But there are two sides. Jesus says to the apostles and, therefore, pastors, “If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld.” (Jn 20:23) We love the first part, and rightly so, but we don’t like the second part. We actually have a rite in the Pastor’s Agenda book for “Excommunication from the Holy Christian Church.”

I wonder what would happen if we used this when needed, even if rarely? This is, of course, meant to lead a sinner to repentance. This rite is immediately followed by the rite “Restoration to the Holy Christian Church.” Excommunication is never meant to get rid of unrepentant sinners to create some mythical perfect christian community, but to encourage the unrepentant to repent.

“Fifth, the church is recognized externally by the fact that it consecrates or calls ministers, or has offices that it is to administer. There must be bishops, pastors, or preachers, who publicly and privately give, administer, and use the aforementioned four things or holy possessions in behalf of and in the name of the church, or rather

by reason of their institution by Christ, as St. Paul states in Ephesians 4 [:8], ‘He received gifts among men ...’—his gifts were that some should be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some teachers and governors, etc. The people as a whole cannot do these things, but must entrust or have them entrusted to one person.” (AE 41, pg. 154) I purposely quoted longer on this one than the others. This is not a popular one today. Many find it offensive that a man has this responsibility and privilege. I like how Paul says it, “This is how one should regard us, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God.” (1 Cor. 4:1) Pastors are servants and stewards. Servants have no authority on their own. Stewards watch over someone else’s stuff. It’s not theirs. When pastors try to act on their own authority is when real problems occur in the church. There are enough public examples of this, I don’t believe I have to elaborate.

“Sixth, the holy Christian people are externally recognized by prayer, public praise, and thanksgiving to God. Where you see and hear the Lord’s Prayer prayed and taught; or psalms or other spiritual songs sung, in accordance with the word of God and the true faith; also the creed, the Ten Commandments, and the catechism used in public, you may rest assured that a holy Christian people of God are present.” (AE 41, pg. 164) In other words, the church has always done what it has done in Acts 2:42: “They devoted themselves to the apostle’s teaching [also known as preaching], and the fellowship [or congregation which is the Bible Word for church], to the breaking of the bread [also known as the Lord’s Supper], and the prayers.” We rightly understand that our praise and thanksgiving always comes in response to God’s good gifts of grace received in Word and Sacrament. Far too many so-called Christian churches focus on the praise part. When you focus on *Gottesdienst* or God’s service to you, the praise and thanksgiving happen naturally.

“Seventh, the holy Christian people are externally recognized by the holy possession of the sacred cross. They must endure every misfortune and persecution, all kinds of trials and evil from the devil, the world, and the flesh (as the Lord’s Prayer indicates) by inward sadness, timidity, fear, outward poverty, contempt, illness, and weakness, in order to become like their head, Christ.” (AE 41, pg. 164) To the eyes of the world, Christians and the church look weak and afflicted. God has so many amazing promises for His people. Many young and immature Christians get caught up in these promises and expect life to go really well. The mature Christian knows that if you stand with Christ, you will suffer.

Those promises are sure and certain eternally. You may have to suffer for a time, but you know that God will work it for your good and you know that it's conforming you to the image of your Lord and Savior. As Paul says, "God's power is made perfect in weakness." (2 Corinthians 12:9)

So, in summary, the signs of the church are 1) the Word of God, 2) Holy Baptism, 3) the Lord's Supper, 4) the Office of the Keys, 5) ordained pastors, 6) the Divine Service, and 7) the cross or suffering. If you have these signs you have the church. If you have the church, you have the kingdom of God. If you have the kingdom of God you have everything, that is, forgiveness, life, and eternal salvation. This is why we care about the marks of the church. We want the real deal and not some cheap substitute. It's also good for us to contemplate whether we are that kind of church. Are the marks of the church evident at Grace?

I love what Pastor Mark Preus said in a podcast: "A seven year old with the Word of God can correct me."² He was making the confession that we are governed by the Word of God, both written and visible as seen in the Sacraments. And all of us, pastor and layman alike, are bound to it. The only man we are bound to is Jesus Christ who rules us with His Word. Just as Jesus says, "Whoever is not with Me is against Me." (v. 23) And to be with Jesus is to be in the Kingdom of God. And if you are in the kingdom of God, you have everything, now and forevermore.

May God continue to bless you with His Word and Sacraments until you join Him in the Kingdom of Glory.

² <https://www.gottesdienst.org/podcast/2022/3/9/tgc-175-the-gods-of-our-age-information>