

CHAPTER THREE: The True and the False Church **by Rev. Dr. Anthony Steinbronn**

The Origin of the Two Churches

From the very beginning, the Creator ordained that humankind be busy with His Word and with the forms of worship established by Him. “On the Sabbath day Adam would have taught his children; through public preaching he would have bestowed honor on God with the praises which He deserved; and through reflection on the works of God he would incited Himself and others to expressions of thanks” (LW 3:82).

It was God’s design that the tree of the knowledge of good and evil be Adam’s altar and pulpit. The tree was to be the designated place where Adam, and his household, would come to worship God. “Here he was to yield to God the obedience he owed, give recognition to the Word and will of God, give thanks to God, and call upon God for aid against temptation” (LW 3:95). Thus, God’s command regarding the tree was to be “an outward form of worship and an outward work of obedience toward God” (LW 3:109). This tree was NOT deadly by nature but became so only by the Word of God and humankind’s disobedience.

It was God’s intention that this command should provide human beings with an opportunity for obedience and outward worship, and that this tree would be a sort of sign by which human beings would give evidence that he or she was obeying God (LW 3:154).

However, as a result of Adam’s sin, unspiritual man is filled with FEAR so that, at the rustling of a leaf, he quickly hides from a punishing God. In loving response to humankind’s sin God, in His grace and goodness, enveloped Himself in a gentle breeze so that He might reveal Himself to Adam under a cover. It was a great comfort to them that, after they had lost Paradise and the tree of life, God gave them another sign of grace, namely, the sacrifices. In this sign they could know that they had not been cast off by God but that they were still the object of His concern and regard.

At that time, humankind began to CALL UPON THE NAME OF THE LORD. Shem, Seth, and Enos exhorted their descendants to wait for their redemption and to believe that promise concerning the woman’s Seed. As evidenced in the patriarchs, the TRUE CHURCH trusts in God’s mercy and hopes in the promised Christ; for ALL AGES HAD THE KNOWLEDGE OF THE BLESSED SEED.

The doctrine of the Gospel has been in the world ever since our first parents fell, and by various signs God confirmed this promise to the fathers. The earlier times knew nothing of the rainbow, circumcision, and other things that were ordained later on. BUT ALL AGES HAD THE KNOWLEDGE OF THE BLESSED SEED (LW 2:163-164).

Alongside the Gospel, the sacrifices provided an outward and visible sign of His grace. This sign reminded human beings of His mercy and kindness and provided the proper form of worship in which He could be found. Thus “Abel and Cain had been accustomed by their father to sacrifice, which at that time was the proper form for the worship of God; and they continued to offer sacrifices. In the same manner Shem had meetings, sermons, forms of worship, sacrifices, and other ceremonies, which continued in existence up to the time of Abraham” (LW 2:197).

It is with the sacrifices of Abel and Cain that we begin to differentiate between the true and false church. Cain appears to be saintly but he is ungodly and does not believe the divine promise concerning the Blessed Seed. Abel, on the other hand, is godly and believes solely in the mercy of Christ. “Abel did not rely on his own worthiness, his sacrifices or his work, but on the PLAIN PROMISE which had been given about the woman’s Seed” (LW 1:259). In Cain’s contempt for and rejection of God’s Word, he left the true church to form a special church without God’s command and promises. Tragically, when two sons had been born to Adam, two kinds of people took their origin from them. Cain left his father, established a special church without God’s command and held the true church in contempt. The same thing happens... among the sons of Noah. From Ham, as from an ungodly and wicked source, the false and lying church takes its origin (LW 2:210).

It is Ham’s descendants, especially his grandson Nimrod, who seek to build a name for themselves and persecute the true church spiritually, by means of false doctrine and ungodly forms of worship; and physically, by means of the sword and tyranny. Yet God has always counteracted the false church with a people who would cling to His Word and the forms of worship instituted by Him so that they would “be the guardian of religion, and of sound doctrine, in the world lest everything degenerate into ungodliness and there be no knowledge of God among humankind” (LW 2:228-229).

Later on, when Abraham was nearly swallowed up by the false church of Nimrod and its Babylonian religion, God called him out of idolatry through the ministry of Shem and directed him to separate from the ungodly race and seek a new dwelling place. Abraham is seized through the Word and formed into a new being; of himself, Abraham is nothing but an idolater but through God’s mercy, “he is freed from sin, death, and damnation through Christ, the Blessed Seed” (LW 2:247).

Later still, when Jacob was near his death and as he was blessing his sons, he foresaw that his descendants would continue to form two churches. The TRUE CHURCH would be saved because of faith in the promise concerning the Savior who was to descend from his flesh. The FALSE CHURCH would consist of carnal Israelites¹ who would boast that they were the seed of Abraham but have neither His Word nor the signs ordained by Him. Instead of taking hold of Him in the sign, everyone devised his own way of worshiping God and followed it to his own certain destruction.

Therefore shut from your heart and eyes the outward appearance, and see what God has commanded; do this, and you will not go wrong, even if in outward appearance it is small, ordinary, and insignificant (LW 3:216).

There is nothing more precious in the world than the Church where His voice is heard and where God is worshiped with true forms of worship, that is, with FAITH, INVOCATION, PATIENCE and OBEDIENCE. Therefore the TRUE CHURCH is made up of those who have the PROMISE AND BELIEVE IT. The FALSE CHURCH rejects the promises of God and concerns itself with things that He has not commanded nor promised.

¹ As they lost the Word, and the signs of grace which had been given by God, they would begin to run after the desires of their hearts and became carnal Israelites. They forgot His commandments and ceremonies and, after despising the tabernacle and temple, they brought their sacrifices under trees and groves and even sacrificed their own children (LW 1:249).

The House of God and the Gate of Heaven

Wherever the Word is heard, THERE IS THE CHURCH, for it is God's Word that establishes the Church. The Church is not confined to a place or persons, but it will be and exist wherever the Word is. Therefore, wherever the Word and the visible signs are, there the Church is established.

Wherever the Word is heard, where Baptism, the Sacrament of the Altar, and absolution are administered, there you must determine and conclude with certainty: THIS IS SURELY GOD'S HOUSE; HERE HEAVEN HAS BEEN OPENED. But just as the Word is not bound to any place, so the Church is not bound to any place...for wherever God speaks, where Jacob's ladder is, where the angels ascend and descend, there the Church is, there the Kingdom of heaven is opened (LW 5:244).

There is no reason, warns Luther, for a person to run here and there to find the Church but one need only to go to that place where the Word and sacraments are. "Direct your steps to the place where the Word resounds and the sacraments are administered, and there write the title THE GATE OF GOD...Throughout the world the house of God, and the gate of heaven, is wherever there is the pure teaching of the Word together with the sacraments" (LW 5:247).

As we gather at these external places to hear a sermon delivered through a human voice and gather at temples built of stones and wood to receive the sacraments, we must always remember that here is the HOUSE OF GOD and the GATE OF HEAVEN; for God Himself is speaking.

I hear a human being's voice. I see human gestures. The bread and the wine in the Supper are physical things. At ordination the hands of carnal men are imposed. In Baptism water is water. For the flesh judges in no other way concerning all these matters. BUT if you look at that addition with spiritual eyes, namely, at WHOSE WORD IT IS that is spoken and heard there, not indeed the word of a man...but the Word of God, then you will understand that it is the HOUSE OF GOD and the GATE OF HEAVEN (LW 5:248).

The Bed is Too Narrow

The great danger for the church is our sleeping eyes and dulls ears whereby we slight these FACES OF GOD. This is what happened to the carnal descendants of Abraham who despised the visible signs of their generation and devised their own way. Yet, in this Church, nothing should be heard or seen except what God does for it is error to rely on one's thinking alone apart from, and without, the Word of God.

Moreover, wherever the Word is, there Satan is active and seeks to spread false teaching by corrupting the Word of God in such a way that human beings doubt the goodness of God. Under the appearance of God's servant Satan, through heretical teaching and practices, seeks to rob humankind of God as he fabricates a new god who exists nowhere and to institute forms of worship in which the works are retained but emptied of their MEANING and PROMISE concerning the Gospel and the Blessed Seed.

Therefore it is essential that the Church remain firm in its adherence to pure and true doctrine. It is God's will that human beings restrain their curiosity and remain within the definite bounds which He has placed before us. Human beings are not to search for something special but are to be content with the revealed Word as handed down through the Son of God and the apostles. If we want to have and be His Church, His people must not be polluted and commingled with any Satanic doctrine. THE BED IS TOO NARROW, observed Luther, for Christ and Satan to remain together. Consequently, one of the two falls out and the short cloak cannot cover them both.

Christ Alone is the Ladder and the Way

In His goodness, God satisfied our desire to know and see Him by showing us a VISIBLE SIGN. In the incarnate Son, God could be touched and seen. It was for this very reason that, "when Scripture spoke about God as if He were a human being and attributes to Him all human qualities, He was FORETELLING the mystery of His future incarnation and was providing a "definite pattern for recognizing and taking hold of Him" (LW 4:133).

Unspiritual human beings, those who are not indwelt by the Holy Spirit but who are led and guided by unregenerate reason, cannot see that the crucified Christ is God. To make things even more difficult for humankind, Satan seeks to fight against the mystery of the Ladder as sets into motion ALL SORTS of HERESIES in order that humankind might be diverted from the true knowledge of Christ.

The chief attack of Satan, and of all heresies, is to deny His incarnation, rob human beings of God and His Word, and to fabricate a new god. This is the way that the devil goes to work: (1) one form of attack is to not allow Him to be God but just a man; (2) another form of attack is to say that He is true God but did not have the human nature; (3) and a third form is to acknowledge that He is both true God and true man but that what He did was not sufficient to save us. Each of these three endeavors seek to destroy Christ.

In His incarnation, with the eyes of faith, believers are able to see that HEAVEN IS OPEN and that God the Father is speaking to us through His Son. "When you are baptized, partake of the Holy Communion, receive the absolution, or listen to a sermon, heaven is open, and we hear the voice of the Heavenly Father; all these works descend upon us from the open heaven above us" (LW 22:202). Therefore where His Word is preached and made known in its purity and the sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper are administered in accordance with His institution, there HEAVEN IS OPEN and can never be shut.

The Efficacy and Power of the Visible Signs

The efficacy and power of the visible signs is found in His blood. "It is all the beautiful red blood of Christ, so that everything we have through the Holy Spirit in the Word, Baptism, the Lord's Supper, absolution, consolation, and whatever pertains to the remission of sins and eternal life has been gained through the power of the blood of Christ" (LW 8:258).

Larvae Dei and the Harlot at the Gate

Human beings cannot ascend to God therefore God, in His mercy, ordained to put before us an image of Himself so that He can be grasped. In these signs, He deals with us within the range of our comprehension so that we are able to meet a God whom we can bear. These are the

common and public appearances for all Christians; and, in these MASKS OF GOD, God Himself is present. “Those who believe the promise and make use of these signs become the people of God and are saved” (LW 3:110). These signs are also given so that those who do not believe in Him might be attracted to Him and obtain salvation to those who make use of them in faith.

In contrast to these fatherly appearances of God, the HARLOT AT THE GATE looks for more attractive externals² which appeal to reason and the human eye. Satan ignites many new lights, all of whom presume to show the people the right way to heaven. These false lights³ began with Marcion and have continued in the labors of all false apostles and prophets. Yet, despite the presence of these false lights, God has given humankind the LARVAE DEI as His agents to direct us to the Light. “We shall be safe from these dangers if we follow that visible form (the Son of God) or those signs (Baptism, Eucharist, and the spoken Word) which God Himself has set before us” (LW 3:108-109).

The Marks of the Church

“Thank God,” exclaimed Luther in the Smalcald Articles, “a seven-year-old child knows what the Church is, namely, holy believers and sheep who hear the voice of their Shepherd” (Tappert 315). Its holiness does not consist in surplices, tonsures, albs, or other ceremonies which have been invented over and above the holy Scriptures but it consists of the Word of God and true faith (Tappert 180).

Luther was accused of Johann Eck, and others, of radical individualism in his attack and reform of the Church. This, however, was not so. Luther urged reform on the basis of WHO and WHAT THE CHURCH REALLY IS, namely, “where the Word is, there is faith; and where faith is, there is the true Church” (LW 39:xii). The Church is a holy Christian people, both a hidden community and a visible fellowship gathered around the MARKS OF THE CHURCH. Those who are evangelical, in contrast to the false church of Rome, are “the true, ancient church, one body and one communion of saints with the holy, universal Christian Church” (LW 41:199).

Luther stressed that the certain mark of a Christian congregation is wherever the pure Gospel is being preached (LW 39:305). If the Gospel is present, THERE MUST BE CHRISTIANS. Thus, the true marks whereby a person can find a Christian Church are: (1) the Word of God; (2) Baptism; (3) the Lord’s Supper; (4) Confession and Absolution; (5) called ministers of the Gospel; (6) prayer and worship; and (7) the sacred cross. (LW 41:148).

In his treatise Against Hanswurst, Luther is very concerned with the question where the church is and who it is. It is the evangelical Lutheran church which is the true, ancient church because its essence is the same. Both the EVANGELICAL and the ANCIENT, APOSTOLIC CHURCH possess the same essence as evidenced in: (1) Baptism; (2) Lord’s Supper; (3) Confession and Absolution; (4) the preaching office; (5) the Apostles’ Creed; (6) Lord’s Prayer; (7) temporal authority is honored and respected; (8) marriage is honored and praised; (9) Christian suffering; and (10) the cross is borne as believers pray for one another.

² Christ must be sought where He has manifested Himself and wants to be known, as in the Word, in Baptism, and in the Supper; there He is certainly found, for the Word cannot deceive us. But it generally happens that reason disregards those signs and turns aside to the harlot at the gate (LW 3:108).

³ Satan ignites many new lights, all of whom boldly presume to show the people the right way to heaven; each one claims to be the light and each false light attracts people to himself, asking them to follow him (LW 22:67).

In contrast the Roman Catholic Church is a false church because it did not possess the same essence as the ancient and true Church of the apostles. Instead, it had become an apostate whore that had abandoned the true marks of the Church and replaced them with these false marks: (1) new baptisms; (2) indulgences; (3) holy water and salts; (4) pilgrimages; (5) brotherhoods; (6) innovations in the Lord's Supper; (7) new skeleton keys of sin and murder; (8) a different gospel; (9) the substitution of a bodily head for Christ; (10) the worship of the saints; and (11) their attempts to rule the temporal kingdoms.

The key distinction between the two churches can be understood in this way: the true, ancient, apostolic and evangelical church is BUILT UPON GRACE whereas the false church is BUILT UPON WORKS (LW 41:213).