

# THE CHURCH

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How would you define the church? Is there a difference between 'the church' and your congregation? What makes the church the church?

## Basic Differences

Lutheran thinking on the nature of church differs from Catholic, Episcopal, Reformed (Presbyterian, United Church of Christ, Christian Reformed, etc.), Baptist, Methodist, Anabaptist (Amish, Mennonite, etc.) and nondenominational understandings. Because theological reflection about the nature of church is called 'ecclesiology', we can say that Lutherans have a distinctive ecclesiology.

Lutheran ecclesiology must be distinguished from that of the Catholic, Anglican, and Orthodox who have historically tended to understand church as a *visible* institutional and hierarchical organization existing through space and time. In opposition to this, Lutherans have traditionally emphasized the notion of the *hidden* church. While Catholic thinking has historically claimed that "there is no salvation" outside the grace available through the visible, institutional church, Lutheran theology has emphasized that salvation is available through Christ alone to anyone having the gift of faith. Thus, the true church is comprised of all people having this gift. While God knows it, it is essentially hidden to human eyes. Only in the gathering around Word and Sacrament is this hidden church revealed to human beings.

What is the difference between "visible" and "revealed?" In the idea of the 'visible' church, who makes it visible? In the idea of the 'revealed' church, who reveals it?

Lutheran ecclesiology must also be distinguished from the Reformed view. While the Reformed have traditionally tended to speak *both* of an *invisible* church of the elect,

and a *visible* church ordered by divine right yet filled with many hypocrites, Lutherans have tended historically to talk about *one* church in two aspects: hidden and revealed. Furthermore, while Anabaptists and many contemporary nondenominationalists spiritualize church such as to reject the visible church entirely, Lutherans have always stressed that the historical church is the one true church as it is revealed in space and time. Just as the divinity of Christ is revealed historically (but ambiguously) in Jesus of Nazareth, so the true church of God's elect is revealed historically (but ambiguously) in those who gather around Word and Sacrament.

How does the Lutheran understanding of church differ from the Reformed understanding?

## The Traditional Lutheran Understanding of Church and Unity

Melanchthon (1497-1560) gives classic expression to the Lutheran notion of church in the *Apology to the Augsburg Confession*, one of the principal confessional documents of Lutheranism:

However, the church is not only an association of external ties and rites like other civic organizations, but it is principally an association of faith and the Holy Spirit in the hearts of persons. It nevertheless has its external marks so that it can be recognized, namely, the pure teaching of the gospel and the administration of the sacraments in harmony with the gospel of Christ (7:5).

The terms principally (*principaliter*) and nevertheless (*tamen*) are important, for they clearly declare that the church as the "association of faith and the Holy Spirit in the hearts" is *logically prior* to the church as em-

Lutherans speak of one church in two aspects.

- **Hidden** - those who have faith and the Holy Spirit in the heart. Known only to God.
- **Revealed** - the gathering of believers around Word and Sacrament.

pirically displayed in the "pure teaching of the gospel and the administration of the sacraments," that is, the reason the church can be visible in word and sacrament is that it already exists as the association of true believers. Luther (1483-1546) unmistakably privileges this *hidden church*, claiming, "if I were the only one in the entire world to adhere to the word, I alone would be the church" (*Luther's Works*, 42:344). For Lutherans, the unity of this church has never been fundamentally a matter of institutional, visible unity, but rather a unity of faith.

What is the difference between visible unity and unity of faith? What are the external marks of the church?

Later in the *Apology* Melancthon writes:

We are speaking about a true unity, that is, a spiritual unity, without which there can be no faith in the heart nor righteousness in the heart before God. For this unity we say that it is not necessary to have similar human rites, whether universal or particular, because the righteousness of faith is not a righteousness tied to certain traditions . . ." (7:30).

Lutherans have generally taught that visible unity is *not* a necessary condition for true unity. Johan Gerhard (1582-1637), perhaps the greatest Lutheran dogmatic theologian, succinctly describes evangelical ecclesiastical unity:

The church is said to be *one*, because it is gathered by one Lord, through one baptism, into one mystical body, under one head, governed by one Spirit, bound together in the unity of a common faith, hope, and love . . . acknowledges one faith, and is called by one calling to one celestial inheritance (XI, 35, Schmidt 590).

What are some implications of the statement that true unity is not connected to similar rites and traditions?

### ***Theological Connections and Ramifications***

The *theological* reason Lutherans define the church this way is grounded in our doctrine of justification: Just as the sinfulness of human beings is logically prior to the external display of particular sins, so too their justification by God's grace is logically prior to the outward manifestation of just and sanctified lives. In other words, just as we are sinners even before particular sins become apparent, so, too, we are made right with God

before we show any signs of being righteous. Moreover, just as God's gift of hidden righteousness (justification) in the believer is revealed in acts of love, so too the hidden church reveals itself in its love of gathering around word and sacrament.

In addition, Lutherans have always stressed that just as we cannot infer from acts of love that an individual has that justifying faith from which such acts normally flow, so we cannot infer from the fact that a group gathers around word and sacrament, that every member of that group has the inner righteousness (the justification by faith) that properly drives that gathering around word and sacrament. The Lutheran theological tradition has always been cognizant that those who belong to the hidden church are a subset of those belonging to the visible institution of church.

Not only is the visible, institutional organization not principally church, it is only called 'church' by way of a *figure of speech* because some within it are members of the true church of those with justifying faith. For Lutherans, the institutional, visible organization called 'church' exists to get the gospel preached and the sacrament administered so that the true church of believers might increase.

This understanding of the true, hidden church revealed in humble gathering around word and sacrament has important ramifications for Lutheran ecumenical thinking and for its understanding of the nature of ordination. For Lutherans, notions of churchly faithfulness and continuity are tied immediately to the presence of faith, and not to external, ecclesiastical rites and practices (e.g., the recent ELCA adoption of the historic episcopate). Furthermore, if the church is defined primarily in terms of faith, then it seems that ecclesiastical offices must be understood more in terms of earthly *function* than divine *institution* and ordering.

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How is the understanding of 'church' presented here similar to what you thought before reading this? How is it different? What are some of the implications of this understanding of church? What does it mean for your church?