

A CHRISTIAN HOLY PEOPLE

A CHRISTIAN HOLY PEOPLE

FROM MARTIN LUTHER'S
On the Councils and the Church

Translated by
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FOREWORD

At some point in the search for a church home the simplest of questions may occur to the Christian: How do I know when I have found it? How can I be sure I am really in a Christian church? Sure, weekly gatherings of Christians nowadays are embraced or abandoned for all sorts of reasons: Building location, worship times, musician quality, youth programs, educational opportunities, preaching skill-level, mission outreach and even congregational indebtedness. None of these reasons for accepting or rejecting a given community of believers, however, really touch on what constitutes the true Christian church on earth.

So what does? That is subject of the short work which follows. There Martin Luther poses this question and on the basis of Scripture, comes up with seven distinctive marks which identify the Christian church! He then goes on to explore the extent and the limit of the power of the church on earth, especially when representatives of individual Christian communities gather together to decide matters touching on the church at large. What role might Christian homes and schools play in that bigger picture? What about the government? Luther touches on these matters as well!

In short, what the following work contains is a brief primer on the essence of the Christian church in the world in these end times. As the extensive *Afterword* explains, it is

taken from a section of one of Luther's more famous works, his *On the Councils and the Church*, which first appeared in 1539. It is a brand new translation by Holger Sonntag, divided into chapters with study questions for ease of use.

Any Christian who takes a few moments to work through this text will most certainly benefit from the effort, as most assuredly have I as I prepared this edition.

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Spring Lake Park, Minnesota

June 2011

1

CHRIST'S HOLY PEOPLE

Many people talk endlessly about the make-up of the Christian church. Regardless of what is said, stick with the Apostles' creed: "I believe in a holy Christian church, a communion of saints."

The church is as the creed states: A communion of saints. It is a group of people who are Christians and holy. Put another way: The church is Christ's holy people.

***The church is Christ's
holy people***

Admittedly the meaning of the word *church* is unclear. Originally it did not have the meaning found in the creed.

In Acts 19:39–40, for example, the city clerk calls *church* that assembly or people who had come together in the city square. He says there: “Let it be settled in a regular *church*.” And having said this, he let the *church* go. In this and other places *church* means nothing other than an assembly of people—whether Christian or not.

The world contains many peoples. But Christians are a specially called people. This is why Christians are not called simply *church* or a *people* but a *Christian holy people* that believes in Christ.

Why is the church called a *Christian holy people*? The church has the Holy Spirit who daily makes it holy! The Holy Spirit makes Christians holy not only—as the Antinomians foolishly claim—through the forgiveness of sins, which Christ has purchased for them, but also by doing away with, purging and killing sins. This is why the church is called a *Christian holy people*.

The expression *holy Christian church* means “a people that consists of Christians and is holy,” or more commonly: “Holy Christendom,” or “all Christendom.” In the Old Testament the church is called simply “God’s people.”

If the Apostles’ creed had stated “I believe that there is a *Christian holy people*,” all confusion about the word *church* would have been avoided. The expression *Christian holy people* would have easily and powerfully described what is and is not church.

Whoever would have heard this expression a *Christian holy people* could then have quickly surmised: “The pope is not a people, much less a *Christian holy people*. The same is true of the bishops, priests, and monks. They also are no

Christian holy people. They do not believe in Christ or lead holy lives, but are the devil's evil shameful people. He who does not rightly believe in Christ is neither Christian nor a Christian. Whoever does not have the Holy Spirit against sin is not holy. This is why they cannot be a *Christian holy people*, that is, a holy and universal church.”

However, since we now use this ambiguous word “church” in the Apostles’ creed, the common man thinks the church is simply a building. Artists paint it that way. Or, if they are really good, they depict the apostles, disciples, and Mary as they were gathered on Pentecost, the Holy Spirit hovering above them. Even though it is a depiction of the *Christian holy people* of only one particular time, it is a good thing.

***The common man
thinks the church is
simply a building***

The expression *Christian holy people* however should not be used exclusively to describe the church during the time of the Apostles, but should be used continuously until the final judgment. A *Christian holy people* continually exists on earth. Within that people Christ lives, works and governs. Christ does so through redemption, that is, by grace and the forgiveness of sins.

Within this living *Christian holy people* the Holy Spirit also dwells. The Holy Spirit enlivens and sanctifies, that is, he daily purges sins and renews life. Why? So we do not remain in sins, but can and will lead a new life in all kinds of good works!

As St. Paul teaches, this is what the Ten Commandments demand. Christian holiness comes about when the

Holy Spirit gives people faith in Christ, thereby making them holy, Acts 15:9. The Holy Spirit creates a new heart, soul, body, work and being. He writes the commandments of God not *onto* tables of stone but *into* hearts of flesh, 2 Cor. 3:3. According to the First Table of Moses in particular (commandments 1-3) the Holy Spirit grants us true knowledge of God so that we, enlightened by him with true faith, are able to resist all false doctrine, overcome all faulty thought and error, and remain pure in faith against the devil.

The Holy Spirit also grants strength and comforts simple, despairing, weak consciences against the accusations and afflictions of sins. If he did not, souls would fall into depression or despair. They would also grow afraid of suffering, pain, death, wrath and the judgment of God. But strengthened in hope and comforted, souls boldly and joyfully overcome the devil.

The Holy Spirit also grants true fear and love of God

The Holy Spirit also grants true fear and love of God so that we do not despise God and grumble against his strange judgments, or grow angry because of them. Instead, we love, praise, thank and honor him in all things, good or bad.

This is what is called a new, holy life in the soul according to the First Table of Moses. It is also called the three chief virtues of Christians, namely, faith, hope and love (1 Cor. 13:13). It is the Holy Spirit—acquired for us by Christ—who gives, does and works this. He is therefore called the Sanctifier or Giver of Life.

The old Adam is dead and cannot do it. The Old Adam

can only learn it from the law. He would otherwise not know this about himself.

In the Second Table (commandments 4-10) and according to the body, the Holy Spirit also makes Christians holy. The Holy Spirit enables Christians to obey parents and other authorities willingly. He also moves Christians to act peacefully and humbly, not to be angry or vindictive or evil. He would that we be patient, kind, helpful, brotherly and mild. The Holy Spirit also works within us to prevent us from being unchaste, adulterers and undisciplined, but chaste, disciplined either with wife, child and servants, or without wife and child.

Moreover, the Holy Spirit would that we not steal, practice usury, be greedy and practice price gouging, but that we work honestly, earn our living decently, lend, give and help gladly wherever we can. Likewise, that we not lie, deceive or gossip, but are kind, truthful, faithful, constant and all the other things that are demanded in the commandments of God.

This is what Christian holiness is

This is what the Holy Spirit does! He makes holy and awakens the body to such new life until it is accomplished in the life to come. This is what Christian holiness is. And Christians must always be on earth, even if they are only two or three, or just children, as there are, unfortunately, only few older people who have this holiness.

-
1. What are Christians called?
 2. Who makes Christians a *Christian holy people*?

3. What is the church called in the Old Testament?
4. Who is not a Christian?
5. What does the common man think when he hears the word 'church'?
6. In whom lives both Christ and the Holy Spirit?
7. What makes Christians holy?
8. On to what does the Holy Spirit write the commandments of God?

2

LEADING A NEW LIFE

Anyone who is not like the *Christian holy people* described in the last chapter should not claim to be a Christian. Such a person should also not be comforted as if he were a Christian. This is what the Antinomians do when they preach solely the forgiveness of sins and grace in Christ!

The Antinomians, who do not understand the Ten Commandments and so reject them, preach constantly about the grace of Christ. But by doing so, they strengthen and comfort those who remain in sin. “Since all sins are forgiven in Christ,” they say, “no one should be terrified of sins.” Consequently they ignore those who continue in open

and public sin without any renewal or improvement of life.

The Antinomians even go so far as to assert that it should never be said: “Listen! You can’t be a Christian and at the same time *want to be* an adulterer, chase after prostitutes, be a gluttonous pig, be arrogant, greedy, a usurer, envious,

***They ignore those
who continue in
open and public sin***

vindictive and malicious.” Instead, this is how the Antinomians speak: “Listen! You *are* an adulterer, a fornicator, or routinely pursue knowingly sinful activity! If only you believe you are saved! Do not

worry about the law! Christ has fulfilled it all.”

Such a way of speaking destroys Christ while preaching him most beautifully! It answers “Yes” and “No” to the same question! The death of Christ was not for sinners who, having received the forgiveness of sins, do not seek to avoid sin and lead a new life.

The Antinomians truly are fine Easter preachers! But terrible Pentecost preachers! They preach nothing concerning the sanctifying and enlivening Holy Spirit. They are not concerned with being made holy by the Holy Spirit!

Antinomians preach only redemption. But Christ redeems from sin and death *in order that* the Holy Spirit might create the New Man within us out of the Old Adam. In other words: That we might be dead to sin but alive to righteousness, as St. Paul teaches (Rom. 6:2ff.).

This holy life begins and increases here on earth. It is completed, however, in heaven. For Christ has earned for us not only grace, but also the gift of the Holy Spirit. Why? So that along with the forgiveness of sin, we might also

stop sinning.

Whoever does not keep from sinning, but remains in his former evil manner of life, has received some sort of different Christ from the Antinomians. Such a person does not have the true Christ. Even if all the angels would cry “Christ, Christ!” such a person must be condemned along with such a Christ.

So see how ignorant we are of the things that are above us, in which we do not have any experience. We simultaneously affirm and deny the same thing!

In contrast, in simple things we are very good thinkers. No matter how uneducated a person may be, he quickly realizes: “The person who gives me a penny has not given me a dollar.” It is obvious! And he sees it!

Yet our Antinomians do not see that they preach Christ *without* and *against* the Holy Spirit. Even though it is evident that a Christian should have the Holy Spirit and lead a new life (or else know that he has no Christ) the Antinomians want to leave people in their old way of life while declaring them to be saved.

Well, all this has been said about a Christian holiness which the pope also does not want. He has a special holiness apparently that is much holier, namely, a life of chasubles, tonsures,¹ cowls, vestments, food, festivals, monks, nuns, masses, saints and countless other things that have to do

***They preach Christ
without and against
the Holy Spirit***

¹The practice of cutting the hair from the scalp, leaving hair on the head that looks somewhat like a halo.

with external, bodily, perishable matters.

This special holiness makes a person holier than Christian holiness itself! It works even without faith, the fear of God, hope, love and the other things the Holy Spirit truly does work according to the First Table of the law. Such a special holiness also is achieved even if there is false belief, uncertainty in the heart, doubt and anger and impatience toward God. And it certainly is not hindered by the idolatry which is a false trust in works!

Instead of trusting in the grace and merit of Christ, the pope's special holiness occurs by desiring to make satisfaction for sins through good works. It even goes so far as to sell extra good works to others! And of course, even if everyone else's possessions and money is acquired in the process of pursuing such a holiness, this does not prevent a person from being holier than Christian holiness itself.

Such a special holiness as the pope's is also acquired without the Second Table of the law. It is apparently not harmful at all that disobedience toward parents and other authorities is encouraged, murder is committed, war is waged and the innocent are hunted down. It also is of no consequence if a Christian is envious, hateful, vengeful,

***There you can be
saved without
Christian holiness***

unchaste, lies, steals, practices usury, deceives and practices all malice in the extreme. According to the Roman church's holiness, simply become a monk or nun and you are holy! There you can be saved

without Christian holiness.

But we want to leave these filthy people alone. The ef-

fort we make to change them is in vain. In the end, God's wrath will come upon them, as St. Paul says (1 Thess. 2:16).

Let us instead discuss the church among ourselves. The Apostles' creed teaches us that a *Christian holy people* exists on earth and will remain here until Christ's visible return. It is an article of faith which cannot cease until what is believed occurs, as Christ promises (Matth. 28:20): "I am with you until the end of the world."

1. What do the Antinomians do?
2. How do the Antinomians destroy Christ while preaching him beautifully?
3. About what do the Antinomians preach nothing?
4. What has Christ earned for us besides grace?
5. How do the Antinomians preach without and against the Holy Spirit?

3

HOW ARE THEY FOUND?

So how can such a *Christian holy people* be found in this world? It is supposed to exist in this life and on earth. It believes that it eventually will experience an eternal life and a heavenly existence. But such is not its current situation. Until the Last Day, it is and remains in this life and this world.

The *Christian holy people* says: "I believe in another life." Thereby it confesses that it is not yet in that life. Rather it believes, hopes, and loves that other life as its true fatherland and existence.

For the time being, however, the *Christian holy people*

***The Christian holy
people must remain
in exile and wait***

must remain in exile and wait. So we sing in the hymn about the Holy Spirit: “And from exile home we are wending; Lord have mercy.” To this topic we now turn.

In the first place, this *Christian holy people* is recognized by its possession of the holy Word of God. This remains true even though it occurs unevenly, as St. Paul says (1 Cor. 3:12-13): Some have the utterly pure Word of God, others have it mixed with dross.

Those who have the pure Word of God are described as “those who build gold, silver, and precious stones on the foundation.” Those who have it impurely are described as “those who build hay, straw and wood on the foundation but are saved through fire.”

The Word of God is the most important thing and the key relic by which the Christian people is called holy. God’s Word is holy and makes everything it touches holy. In fact, it is God’s holiness itself, Rom. 1:16: “It is God’s power which saves all who believe in it,” and 1 Tim. 4:5: “Everything is made holy by the Word and prayer.”

The Word of God is wielded by the Holy Spirit himself who with the Word anoints or sanctifies the church, that is, the *Christian holy people*. This does not occur by means of the chrism¹ of the pope by which he anoints or consecrates fingers, vestments, robes, chalices and stones. Such common objects never teach a person to love, believe, praise God and to be pious. They may decorate the maggots’ bag

¹Anointing with oil.

of our body, but in the end, that maggots' bag will be torn apart and rot away—along with chrism and its holiness.

Yet the relic that is the Word of God is the true relic, the true ointment that anoints unto eternal life. This is true even if you do not have a pope's crown or a bishop's miter, but must live and die a bare, naked life in the same way as all of us are baptized: Naked and without adornment.

The topic at hand, however, is the external Word, preached orally by men. Christ left behind this Word as an external mark by which his church, or his *Christian holy people*, is to be recognized in the world. The Word that is meant is an oral word that is believed with all seriousness, and is publicly confessed before the world, as Christ says (Matth. 10:32-33; Luke 12:8): "Whoever confesses me before the people, him will I confess before my Father and his angels."

***Christ left behind
this Word as an
external mark***

Unfortunately there are many who know this Word secretly, but do not want to confess it. And many have this Word but do not believe it or act according to it.

There are indeed few who believe the Word and act accordingly. The parable of the sower in Matt. 13:4 says that all four parts of the land will receive the Word and have it, but only the fourth part, the fine good land, bears fruit in patience.

Wherever you hear such Word or see it preached, believed, confessed and acted upon, have no doubt that a *Christian holy people* (1 Peter 2:9) must be there, even if it is very small in number. God's Word shall not remain

without effect, Isa. 55:11, and must at least have a fourth of the field.

Even if there were no other mark than this one alone, it would be sufficient to show that a *Christian holy people* must be there. God's Word cannot be without God's people!

And God's people cannot be without God's Word! Who

***God's Word cannot be
without God's people***

else would preach it or hear it preached if no people of God were present? And what could or would God's people believe if God's Word were not there?

It is the Word of God that is the true relic that performs all miracles! It rights all things, preserves all things and accomplishes all things.

It is the Word of God which drives out all devils: The pilgrimage devil, the indulgence devil, the bull devil, the fraternity devil, the saints devil, the mass devil, the purgatory devil, the monastery devil, the priest devil, the rabble devil, the insurgency devil, the heretic devil, all pope devils and the Antinomian devils.

But such driving out does not happen without screeching and tearing. Christ demonstrates this in the poor men mentioned in Mark 1:23, 26 and Mark 9:26.

-
1. How is the *Christian holy people* recognized?
 2. Do all Christians have the Word of God to the same extent?
 3. Who wields the Word of God?

4. Who left behind the Word of God as the external mark of the church?
5. How many believe the Word of God and act accordingly?
6. Can God's Word be without God's people?

4

IN THE SACRAMENTS AND THE KEYS

A second way the church, the *Christian holy people* is recognized is by the holy sacrament of baptism: Wherever baptism is rightly taught, believed and used according to Christ's institution. Baptism is also a public mark and precious relic by which God's people is made holy. Baptism is a holy bath of the new birth by the Holy Spirit (Titus 3:5). In baptism we bathe and by it we are washed clean by the Holy Spirit from sin and death, as we are made clean by the innocent, holy blood of the Lamb of God.

Wherever you see the mark of baptism, know that the *Christian holy people* must certainly be there. This is true

regardless of whether the pope himself baptizes you or you are completely unaware of who he is and what he claims. Infants, of course, know nothing about the pope. Unfortunately as they grow, they learn of him and consequently are led away from their baptism, as St. Peter laments, 2 Peter 2:18: “Enticing by sexual immorality those who had escaped already but now walk in error, etc.”

Indeed, you should also not become concerned about the person who baptizes you. Baptism does not belong to the baptizer. It is also not given to him. Rather, baptism belongs to the one who is baptized. For him it was instituted by God. To him baptism is given.

Baptism does not belong to the baptizer

Similarly the Word of God does not belong to the preacher but to the disciple who hears it and believes it. To the disciple it is given.

A third way that the *Christian holy people* is recognized is by the holy sacrament of the altar: Wherever it is rightly given, believed and received according to Christ’s institution. The sacrament of the altar is also a public sign and precious relic left behind by Christ by which his *people* is made holy. By it too his *people* exerts itself and publicly confesses that it is a *Christian people*, just as it does with the Word and with baptism.

Here too you must not worry that the pope himself does not hold mass for you, when he himself does not consecrate, confirm, or anoint you, or when he does not put priestly vestments upon you. The proper reception of the Lord’s Supper is not a matter of clothing.

You also must not ask whether you are a monk or have been designated for some special purpose. Also do not concern yourself as to whether you are a man or a woman, you are young or old.

Such matters are not a concern when it comes to baptism and the hearing of sermons. So they are not important when it comes to the reception of the Lord's Supper.

It is enough that you are consecrated and anointed with the high, holy chrism of God: The Word of God, baptism, and the Lord's Supper. Then you are anointed and vested with priestly garments highly and gloriously enough.

Do not also become confused by the holiness of the man who gives it to you, or whether he is a bigamist or not. The sacrament of the altar does not belong to him who gives it. The sacrament of the altar belongs to the one to whom it is given.

Wherever you see the sacrament of the altar rightly used, know for certain that God's people is there. And as it has been said already concerning the Word of God: Where God's Word is, there the church must be. Also, where baptism and the sacrament are, there God's people must be, and vice versa.

***The sacrament of
the altar does not
belong to him who
gives it***

Such relics no one but God's people possesses, administers, practices, uses and confesses—even if some false and unbelieving Christians are hidden among it. Yet precisely because they are hidden, unbelievers do not desecrate God's people. The church or God's people does not tolerate

openly known sinners among itself. It instead disciplines them and makes them holy too—unless they do not want to be disciplined and made holy. In such a situation it casts them away from the relic by the ban and regards them as pagans, Matth. 18:17.

A fourth way God's *Christian holy people* is recognized is by the public use of the office of the keys. In other words,

***When a Christian
sins, he is to be
rebuked***

as Christ establishes it in Matth. 18:15-16, when a Christian sins, he is to be rebuked. And if he does not improve, he should be bound and expelled. If he improves, he is to be absolved. These are the keys.

The use of the keys is twofold: Public and private. There are many so timid and desperate that they, even if they are not publicly condemned, are unable to comfort themselves until they are privately absolved by the pastors. Contrariwise, there are others who are so hardened that they neither in their heart nor privately before the pastor want to stop sinning or forgive. This is why the keys have to be used both publicly and privately.

Wherever you see that sin is forgiven or rebuked in many people, be it publicly or privately, know that God's *people* is there. For where God's *Christian holy people* is not, there the keys are not. And where the keys are not, there God's *Christian holy people* is not.

Christ left the keys behind to be a public mark and relic—purchased by Christ's death—by which the Holy Spirit again makes fallen sinners holy, and by which Christians confess that they are a *holy people* under Christ in this

world. Those who do not wish to be converted or made holy again should be expelled from such a *holy people*, that is, bound and excluded by the keys, as will happen to the impenitent Antinomians.

1. What is the second way God's *Christian holy people* is recognized?
2. Is baptism the possession of the one who baptizes?
3. Does the Word of God belong to the preacher?
4. What is the third way God's *Christian holy people* is recognized?
5. What is the "use of the keys"?
6. What are the two ways by which the keys are used?
7. Why do the keys need to be used in different ways?

5

IN THE WORK OF THE PUBLIC MINISTRY

A fifth way God's *Christian holy people* is recognized outwardly is by the fact that it consecrates or calls ministers, or has offices which it is to fill. Bishops, pastors or preachers who publicly and privately give, offer and exercise the four above-mentioned parts or relics because of and in the name of the church are necessary. This is due to the institution of Christ, as St. Paul says in Ephesians 4:11: "He has given some to be apostles, prophets, evangelists, teachers, etc." The multitude cannot do such things. They must commit them, or let them be committed, to one man.

What would happen if everyone wanted to preach or

administer the sacraments, and no one wanted to submit to the other? The task must be committed to one man alone. He alone must be allowed to preach, baptize, absolve and administer the sacrament. All the others should be content with this and consent to it. Now, where you see such a thing take place, be certain that the *Christian holy people* is there.

It is, however, true that the Holy Spirit has here excluded unfit men, women and children. Except for emergency situations, the Holy Spirit has chosen only suitable men. As one reads in St. Paul's letters frequently, a bishop should be able to teach, pious and a husband of one wife (1 Tim. 3:2), and 1 Cor. 14:34: "A woman should not teach among the people."

In summary, it should be a skilled, chosen man. Other men, women and children are not fit, even though they are fit to hear God's Word, be baptized, be absolved and receive the sacrament. They too are real Christians, as St. Peter says (1 Peter 3:7).

For such difference is given also by nature and God's creation that women—much less children or fools—neither can nor shall have governing authority, as also experience

***Yet the gospel does
not abrogate such
natural law***

teaches. And Moses says in Gen. 3:16: "You shall be subject to man." Yet the gospel does not abrogate such natural law, but confirms it as God's order and creation.

Here the pope will contradict me by his propagandists and destructive devils: "St. Paul speaks not only of pastors and preachers but also of apostles, evangelists, prophets

and other exalted spiritual ranks. This is why there must be ranks in the church that are higher than pastors or preachers. What do you say now, Mr. Luther?"

Indeed, what do I say now? This I will say: If they themselves now become apostles, evangelists, prophets or—I speak foolishly—if they can show me a single person among them who is worth as much as a humble student in school or knows as much as a seven-year old girl, I will concede their point.

Now I know for a fact that an apostle, evangelist or prophet knows more than, or rather as much as, a girl of seven years of age. I speak of the Holy Scriptures and the Apostles' creed. For I firmly believe that the pope's followers hold to human teachings more firmly than I believe in God. They convince me of it by their deeds.

They are therefore truly apostles, evangelists and prophets in the same way that they are churches. In other words, they are the devil's apostles, evangelists and prophets. For the true apostles, evangelists and prophets preach God's Word and do not preach against God's Word.

Now, since the apostles, evangelists and prophets have ceased to exist, others must take their place. For the church is not to cease to exist until the end of the world. This is why prophets, apostles and evangelists must remain who proclaim God's Word and work no matter what they are called.

As with the first four ways a person recognizes the great divine relic by which the church is made holy, in this fifth way you are not to ask who and how the man is who has the office. Why?

All is given not to him who has the office of the ministry, but to him who receives that ministry through his office.

Let him be what and how he wishes to be. Since he is in the office and is tolerated by the multitude, you too let it go. After all, his person does not make God's Word and sacrament either better or worse for you.

What the pastor speaks and does is not his, but Christ's

What the pastor speaks and does is not his, but Christ's, your Lord. As long as the pastor performs the duties of his office faithfully, the Holy Spirit speaks and does it all.

Yet the church neither shall, nor can, tolerate public vices in its ministers. Be content with your pastor because you as an individual cannot be the entire group or the *Christian holy people*.

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1. What is the fifth way God's *Christian holy people* is recognized?
 2. Should the public ministry be committed to one man?
 3. What are the qualifications of a bishop?
 4. Does the gospel abrogate the natural law?
 5. What do true apostles, evangelists and prophets preach?
 6. Must the pastor be a special person or a faithful steward?

6

IN PRAYER, PRAISE, THANKSGIVING AND SUFFERING

The sixth way the *Christian holy people* is recognized is by a public prayer, praise and thanksgiving to God. For where you see and hear that, 1) the Lord's Prayer is prayed and is learned to be prayed, 2) psalms and spiritual songs are sung according to God's Word and the true faith and 3) the Apostles' creed, the Ten Commandments, and catechism are publicly promoted, know that a *Christian holy people* of God is there.

Prayer, after all, is also one of those precious relics by which all things are made holy as St. Paul says (1 Tim. 4:5). The psalms too are nothing but prayer in which God

is praised, thanked, and honored. The Apostles' creed and the Ten Commandments are also God's Word. They too are nothing but relics by which the Holy Spirit sanctifies Christ's holy people.

Here is meant only intelligible prayers and hymns which teach and improve those who use them. In contrast, the droning of the monks, nuns and priests in an obscure language¹ is not prayer nor praise of God. Why? They do not understand what they are saying and consequently learn nothing from it. Their prayers and songs are merely a burden endured to make a living. By doing so they seek neither improvement, sanctification nor the will of God.

The seventh way the *Christian holy people* is recognized externally is by the relic of the holy cross. What is that? The fact that the church must suffer misfortune, persecution, tribulation and evil from the devil, the world and the flesh.

The church must be inwardly sad, timid and terrified, while as the same time, outwardly poor, despised, sick,

***The church must be
inwardly sad, timid
and terrified***

weak and suffer. Why? So that it might be conformed to its head, Christ.

The reason for its cross must be that the church firmly clings to Christ and the Word of God and so suffers for Christ's sake, Matth. 5:11: "Blessed are those who are persecuted for my sake."

The *Christian holy people* must be pious, quiet and obedi-

¹ Worship at the time of Luther was conducted in Latin. Many of the monks and nuns memorized the services without ever knowing what they were saying.

ent. It must be ready to serve the authorities and everyone with body and possessions. It must do no harm to anyone.

Yet no people on earth must suffer such bitter hatred. The *Christian holy people* must be worse than Jews, Pagans and Muslims. In other words, the *Christian holy people* must be considered heretics, knaves, devils, cursed and the most shameful people on earth; even to the extent that they are hung, drowned, murdered, tortured, exiled and harassed by those who thereby think they are rendering a service to God (John 16:2)! No one has mercy on them, and if they thirst, gives them a drink mixed with myrrh and gall.

Yet all this is done to the *Christian holy people* not because they are actually adulterers, murderers, thieves or knaves. It occurs because they want Christ alone, and none other, to be their God.

Now, where you see or hear such things, know that the holy Christian church is there, as Christ says in Matth. 5:11-12: "Blessed are you when the people curse you and reject your name as a harmful evil thing, and all this for my sake. Rejoice and be glad: Your reward in heaven is great." By this relic of the cross the Holy Spirit not only sanctifies but also saves this people.

So do not run after the papists' relics from dead saints or from the wood of the holy cross. Often such bones from saints are simply those from garbage dumps. And wood from the holy cross is frequently that from the gallows. Hidden there is utter deceit which steals the people's money and leads them away from Christ. And even if these relics were genuine, they would still not make anyone holy.

In reality, it is precisely when you are condemned, cursed,

yelled at, blasphemed and plagued, that you are made holy. Such things kill the old Adam so that through suffering he learns patience, humility, meekness, praise, thanksgiving and gladness. This is what it means to be made holy and renewed by the Holy Spirit unto the new life in Christ. And this is how one

***Such things kill
the old Adam***

learns to believe, trust, hope and love God, as Rom. 5:4 says.

So these are the seven ways of the exalted relic by which the Holy Spirit works daily in us a sanctification and vivification in Christ. They are accomplished according to the First Table of the Law. Through them we fulfill the law, although not as fully as did Christ.

Nonetheless we follow Christ continually under his redemption or forgiveness of sin until we too are utterly holy and no longer need forgiveness. Everything is directed toward that goal.

Admittedly I could call these ways the seven sacraments. However, since the word “sacrament” is being abused by the papists and is used differently in Scripture, I let them remain the “seven chief ways of Christian sanctification” or the “seven relics”.

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1. What is the sixth way God's *Christian holy people* is recognized?
 2. What are the psalms?
 3. Are the Creed and the Ten Commandments God's Word?

4. What is the seventh way God's *Christian holy people* is recognized?
5. Why do Christians suffer?
6. If traditional relics were real, would they help anyone?
7. What kills the Old Adam?

7

IN OBEDIENCE TO THE SECOND TABLE OF THE LAW

Beyond these seven chief ways of Christian sanctification there are also additional external marks by which the holy Christian church is recognized. Put another way: The Holy Spirit sanctifies us also according to the Second Table of the Law.

The Holy Spirit does this by helping us to honor father and mother wholeheartedly. They in turn raise children in a Christian way and lead honest lives.

This occurs similarly when we serve our princes and lords faithfully and obediently and they in turn love their subjects and protect and defend them. Likewise, when we

are not resentful against anyone, bear no anger, hatred, envy or vindictiveness but gladly forgive, lend, help and counsel.

The Holy Spirit also sanctifies us according to the Second Table when he helps us not to be unchaste and drunkards, prideful, arrogant and conceited, and instead to be chaste, disciplined, sober, kind, meek, mild and humble. This also occurs when we are encouraged not to steal, practice usury, be greedy and gouge prices, but instead are mild, kind, content and generous.

The Holy Spirit also sanctifies us according to the Second Table

Finally, the Holy Spirit urges us not to be deceptive, lie and commit perjury. Instead he urges us to be truthful, constant and whatever else is taught about such command-

ments, as St. Paul richly teaches in many places.

For this is also why we need the Ten Commandments: Not simply so that they teach us in a juridical way what we are duty-bound to do, but that we might also see thereby how far the Holy Spirit has brought us with his sanctifying. By means of the Ten Commandments we also are shown how much we still lack, so that we might not become secure and think that we have now done everything perfectly.

It is along the lines of the Ten Commandments that we are constantly to grow in sanctification, always becoming more and more a new creature in Christ. The Word of God says “grow” and “abound more and more” (2 Peter 3:18; 1 Thess. 4:1, 10).

However, such Second-Table marks are not to be regarded to be as certain as the above-mentioned First-Table

marks. Why? Many pagans also do such Second-Table works. At times, pagans might even seem to be holier than Christians!

Yet the pagan manner of life is not as pure and simple from the heart for God's sake. Rather because they have neither true faith nor knowledge of God, pagans seek something else in Second-Table marks.

***Many pagans
also do such
Second-Table
works***

In the church, however, is the Holy Spirit. There he is constantly sanctifying the heart, and producing Second-Table fruit from a good, fine heart, as Christ says in the parable in Luke 8:15.

And even though the First Table is a greater and a more important relic than the Second Table, I wanted at least to summarize the contents of the latter. Otherwise, I could have divided the Second-Table as well into seven relics, chief parts, or simply according to the seven commandments.

There we now have with certainty what, where and who the *Christian holy people* is. We cannot go wrong here. Of this we are certain. Everything else beyond these parts may be absent, and it will certainly be lacking, as we shall hear in part.

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1. What are some of the other external marks by which the church is recognized?
 2. Why do we need the Ten Commandments?

3. At times do pagans seem holier than Christians?
4. Why is the life of a pagan not as pure and simple from the heart?

8

NOT IN THE DEVIL'S APING

When the devil saw that God built a holy church, he did not remain idle. The devil built his chapel right next to it, a chapel greater than God's church.

This is what the devil did: He noted that God used external things such as baptism, the Word, the Lord's Supper and the office of the keys to make his church holy. And since the devil is always aping God, wanting to imitate all of God's actions in order to distort them, the devil too used external things for the purpose

***The devil too
used external
things***

of making holy. This is what he does with rainmakers, sorcerers and exorcists of devils. There too the devil has the Lord's Prayer prayed and the gospel read so that such things might be great relics.

In this way the devil has let the popes and papists sanctify or consecrate water, salt, candles, herbs, bells, images, waxen

***The devil wants
created things to
obtain new strength
and might***

amulets with the image of a lamb on it, cloaks, altar, chasubles, tonsures, fingers, hands—who wants to count them all? The monks' cowls became so holy that when they died, they were buried in them, hoping such

clothing would save them!

Now, it would certainly be fine if God's Word, blessing, or prayer would be spoken over created things as children do at meals, before they go to bed and when they get up. St. Paul speaks about this (1 Tim. 4:5): "Everything created by God is good and is made holy by the Word and prayer."

Such action, however, does not create some new sort of strength, but confirms the strength inherent in the created thing. The devil, however, seeks something else. By his apery the devil wants created things to obtain new strength and might!

Now it certainly is true that by God's Word water becomes a baptism. It is bath unto eternal life which washes away sin and saves. That is clearly not the water's nature and power.

It is also true that bread and wine become Christ's body and blood. And by the imposition of hands sins are forgiven,

according to God's institution.

So it should be no surprise then that the devil wants his apish rituals to be powerful and accomplish something above and beyond nature's power. Holy water is supposed to eliminate sin, drive out devils, fend off poltergeists and protect women in childbirth. Such things the pope teaches us in canon law.¹

Holy salt is supposed to do this as well. Waxen images of lambs, consecrated by the pope, are supposed to do more than God himself is able to do.

Bells are supposed to drive away demons in bad weather. Knives of St. Anthony kill demons. Blessed herbs drive out poisonous worms.

There are special blessings for the healing of cows, fending off milk thieves and extinguishing fire. There are special letters that protect in war and peace, against iron, fire, water and dangerous animals. Monastic orders and masses are supposed to give more than ordinary salvation.

But who can list them all? No matter how small the need, the devil has established a sacrament or relic for it by which counsel and help is found. Additionally, the devil has also had prophetesses, mediums

***The devil's chapels
are far more
numerous than
God's churches!***

and wise men who have been able to reveal secret things and restore stolen possessions.

Oh, the devil is far, far better equipped with sacraments, prophets,

¹Canon Law was the law of the church which because of the church's dominant role in society in the 16th century, was part and parcel of daily life in the Holy Roman Empire.

apostles and evangelists than God! And the devil's chapels are far more numerous than God's churches! The devil also has more people pursuing his kind of holiness than God. The devil is also more easily and fervently believed in his promises, in his sacraments, and in his prophets than Christ.

The devil is the great god of this world, as Christ calls him "prince of the world" (John 12:31; 14:30; 16:11). And Paul calls him in 2 Cor. 4:4 "god of this world."

By means of such apish rituals the devil draws people away from Christ's faith and causes Christ's Word and sacraments to be despised. Moreover, the devil makes Christ's Word and sacraments almost unrecognizable because everything—such as forgiving sins, help in time of need, rescue from trouble—can be produced more easily by the devil's sacraments than by Christ's sacraments.

Christ, after all, wants to make people holy and pious in body and soul by his Holy Spirit. Christ does not allow them to remain in unbelief and sin.

This is too difficult for those who would not like to be pious or stop sinning. After they have learned how they can be saved more easily by means of holy water, waxen lambs, papal proclamations and letters, masses and monks, such people can easily do without the work of the Holy Spirit. This is why they do not search for or respect something else.

***He continues to
seek to abolish
God's Word***

The devil does not stop there. By his aping of the church he continues to seek to abolish God's Word and sacrament altogether! Why? The devil thinks this way:

“When someone appears who attacks my church, my sacraments and my bishops, teaching that such external things do not save, then God’s own Word and sacraments need to be attacked and destroyed. For they too are external marks, and Christ’s bishops and church are also men with bodies.

If my things are not to be valid, then Christ’s things must be made to appear even less valid, especially because my church, bishops and sacraments work and help immediately in this life in a way that people can see and grasp. For I myself am present and help quickly, as requested.

Yet Christ’s sacraments work in the Spirit towards a future and invisible existence. Accordingly, his church and bishops can hardly be smelled from afar. And the Holy Spirit acts as if he were not present, allowing his people to suffer all sorts of misfortune. They even have to be considered heretics by my church.

Contrariwise, not only is my church so close that one can readily grasp it, but also my works follow quickly, so that everybody thinks that it is the true church of God. Such advantage I have and command.”

So the thinking of the devil.

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1. Where does the devil build his church?
 2. Is the devil’s church larger or smaller than that of Christ?
 3. What does the devil seek?

4. What are monasteries and masses supposed to give?
5. Who is the great god of the world?
6. What is the purpose of the devil's apish games?
7. How does Christ want to make people holy and pious?
8. Who can do without the work of the Holy Spirit?
9. What makes the devil's promises so attractive to people in need of help?

9

BUT IN PLEASANT FORMS

What I described in the last chapter is exactly what happened when I began to teach by the gospel that such external things cannot save. Why? They are simple, created things which the devil often uses for sorcery.

The people, even many great and learned people, ended up believing that baptism was nothing but that external thing known as water. They also came to believe that the Word of God was just human speech, that Scripture was simply letters printed with ink and that the Lord's Supper was only bread and wine.

Their slogan? Spirit, Spirit! The Spirit must do it! The

letter kills!

Accordingly, Thomas Müntzer (c. 1488-1525) called us Wittenberg theologians doctors of Scripture, while he called himself the doctor of the Spirit. Many others after him did the same thing.

Here you see how the devil armed himself and built
his defenses. As soon as there was
Their slogan?
Spirit! Spirit!
an assault upon his own external doctrine and sacraments (which quickly provided visible comfort!), the devil responded by attacking Christ's eternal Word and sacraments (which slowly and imperceptibly provide invisible comfort).

This is why the church, the *Christian holy people*, does not have as large of an assortment of external words, sacraments or works as does Satan, God's ape. Instead, the church has only those words, sacraments and works which God has commanded, ordained and established. God himself—not even an angel!—operates through them by the Holy Spirit. They are therefore fittingly called God's own Word, God's baptism, God's sacrament, God's forgiveness, God's work and not those of an angel or man or creature.

Why does God work in such a way? In order to comfort and assist us poor, weak and timid men, God would that he not work among us with his bare, revealed, radiant majesty. For how could such poor, sinful flesh endure God's majesty even for a moment? As Moses says (Exodus 33:20): "No man will see me and live."

Accordingly, the Jews could not endure the soles of God's feet on Mt. Sinai, Exodus 20:18-19, that is, his majesty

hidden in the storm and the clouds. How should they have endured the radiance of his divine majesty and his glorious face with their simple eyes?

Rather, God wants to work through kind, friendly, bearable means which could not have been chosen better by ourselves. For example, a pious, kind man speaks to us, preaches, places his hand upon our heads, forgives sins, baptizes and distributes bread and wine for us to eat and to drink.

***God wants to work
through kind, friendly,
bearable means***

Who can be afraid of such pleasant forms? Who will not instead rejoice in them wholeheartedly?

Well then, God works in this way for the benefit of us timid people. Here we see truly how God deals with us as with dear children. Although he has the right to do so, God does not want to act majestically with us. And yet, under these pleasant forms he carries out his majestic, divine works, his might and his power, such as forgiving sins, driving out sin, taking away death and bestowing grace and eternal life as gifts.

The church and sacraments of the devil are missing these things. In the devil's church no one can say that God has commanded, ordered, instituted or established it. And it certainly could not be said that God himself wants to be there and do everything himself.

Rather, this is what one must say in the devil's church: God has prohibited it! Men have dreamed it up! Or rather: God's ape has dreamed it up and so seduced the people.

The devil, after all, works only temporal things. And where his church is supposed to be spiritual, there it is utter deceit. For the devil cannot forgive sins eternally and save—as he falsely claims—by means of holy water, masses and monasteries.

***The devil, after
all, works only
temporal things***

In summary, if God commanded you to pick up a straw or pluck out a feather and promised that in so doing you would receive the forgiveness of sins, grace and eternal life, would you not accept, love and praise such a command with all joy and thankfulness? Would you not consider that straw or feather to be of much greater value to you than heaven and earth? For no matter how plain the straw or feather would be, you would receive through both benefits far greater than either heaven or earth, or even all the angels, could give to you.

So why do we do not consider the water of baptism, the bread and wine, and the imposition of a man's hands for forgiveness to be a relic as important as we would consider such a straw or feather to be? Have we not learned that God himself works through them so that they truly are his water, his Word, his hand and his bread and wine? Through specifically these things God wants to make us holy and save us in Christ—who has purchased such holiness for us and has given us the Holy Spirit from the Father for such work.

Again, if you went on a pilgrimage to the church of St. James in Santiago de Compostella in Spain, or starved yourself by the strict discipline of the Carthusians, the Franciscans, or the Dominicans in order to be saved, what

would it help you? God has not commanded any such things! God does not know anything about them! You and the devil, however, have dreamed such things up as special sacraments and priestly classes.

And if you could bear heaven on earth on your shoulders in order to be saved, still all would be lost. Even if you could carry ten worlds, the person who picked up the straw (if God had commanded it!) would do more than you.

Why? Because God wants man to obey his Word, to use his sacraments and to honor his church. Then he will act graciously and mildly enough, even more graciously and mildly than we desire! For the Word says (Exodus 20:2-3): “I am your God. You shall have no other gods.” It also says (Matt. 17:5): “Him you shall hear,” and no one else.

***God wants man to
obey his Word, to use
his Sacraments***

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1. What does the devil often use for sorcery?
 2. How does the devil attack the eternal sacraments and words of Christ?
 3. Which words, sacraments and offices does the church have?
 4. Does God want to work among us with his revealed majesty?
 5. Through what does God work among us?

6. What are the church and sacraments of the devil missing?
7. By which things does God want to make us holy and save us in Christ?

10

AND USEFUL EXTERNAL CUSTOMS

Beyond such external marks and relics the church also has external customs. These customs do not make the church holy in either body or soul. They neither are commanded nor instituted by God. Still, such customs have an external necessity and usefulness and are proper and good.

An example of such external customs is the observation of certain holy days for preaching or prayer. Certain times such as morning or evening that are set aside for the same purpose should also be noted. Also included here are such things like church buildings, altars, pulpits, baptismal fonts, candlesticks, candles, bells, priestly vestments and the like.

Such things do nothing more than what is their nature to do. A meal of food and drink does not become more nourishing physically by saying grace beforehand. So it should be no surprise that godless and coarse people who do not say grace before a meal become just as big and strong from eating and drinking as do Christians.

Christians can still be made holy and remain holy without such external customs. Preaching and forgiving can take place on a street without a building or pulpit.

***A baptism can
take place
without a font***

The Lord's Supper can be celebrated without an altar. A baptism can take place without a font. All such things can take place in a private home, for example, when pastors make calls on parishioners.

Yet for the sake of children and simple people it is proper to observe such external customs. The result is good order. Christians then have a certain time and place to gather together, as St. Paul says in 1 Cor. 14:40: "Let everything be done decently and in order."

And let no one—as no Christian will do!—despise such order! Such opposition is unreasonable, arising from a pride which seeks simply to establish disorder!

Instead, observe such order communally for the benefit of the many. Or at least do not confuse or hinder it. For that would be acting against love and kindness.

Nonetheless, these things shall remain free. If, for example, we could not (because of an emergency or another good reason) preach at six, seven, twelve or one o'clock on Sunday or Monday in a certain town or church, then let us

preach at a different time, or a different day, in a different town. In any case the multitude should not be confused, but brought along in such change.

These things are totally external. They are therefore to be subjected to and governed by reason (as times, places, and persons require it). God, Christ and the Holy Spirit do not dictate such things, just as they do not concern themselves with what or where we want to eat, drink, wear, live, marry, walk or stand. No individual, however, should take up something special without reason and confuse or hinder the multitude.

It is similar to a wedding where no one should do something strange that interferes with the occasion and annoys the bride or those who have gathered for the celebration. Rather all should behave, sit, walk, stand, dance, eat and drink like the multitude. The bride, after all, cannot arrange for a unique table, meal, drink and servant for each and every person. If an individual is missing something, let him get up from the table and allow the others to sit and remain in peace.

So too in the church should everything take place in a peaceful, orderly manner. And yet the church is free if the times, persons or other reasons call for a change. Then the multitude follows en masse because, as has been said, such things do not make a Christian more or less holy.

Such external free things we want to regard like a special outfit or even the diaper in which an

***In the church should
everything take
place in a peaceful,
orderly manner***

infant is clothed for baptism. For the infant is not baptized or made holy by an outfit or a diaper but by baptism alone. Yet reason suggests that the baby should be wrapped for the baptism in some type of clothing. If a diaper becomes soiled, or an outfit torn, different clothing is used. And certainly the diaper and the outfit worn for baptism contribute nothing to that child's growth! Nonetheless, moderation should certainly be practiced lest the child being brought to baptism be smothered by too many layers of diapers and outfits.

In the same way, moderation should also be used when it comes to ceremonies in the church. They should not become a burden or a labor. Let them remain so light that they are not even noticed. They should be similar to a wedding where no one feels a burden or labor when he acts and behaves like everybody else.

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1. What does the church have besides external marks and relics?
 2. Do the church's external customs make it holy?
 3. Are they commanded and instituted by God?
 4. Can preaching and forgiving take place without an altar?
 5. From what does opposition to order in the church arise?
 6. Should everything in the church take place in a peaceful and orderly fashion?

7. When it comes to ceremonies in the church, what should be used?

11

CONVENTIONS CONDEMN NEW BELIEFS AND EVIL WORKS

All this being said about the external marks and customs of the church, the question must now be posed: What can a convention of the church actually do? Some claim that whatever a church convention decides is an article of faith. Consequently obedience to that article is a work necessary for salvation. This means that whoever disregards a resolution of a church convention cannot be saved. Why? Such a person disobeys the Holy Spirit, the church convention's Master (Acts 15:18).

In contrast, I can assert with a clear conscience that no church convention has ever had the power to establish new

articles of faith. The four chief conventions in the history of the church certainly did not do so.¹ And for this reason I state my opinion here in answer to the question just raised.

First, a church convention does not have the power to establish new articles of the faith. This is true even though the Holy Spirit is present with it.

The apostles' convention in Jerusalem in Acts 15:11 did not establish anything new in the faith. Rather, as St. Peter concluded, merely reaffirmed the article which all their ancestors believed, namely: A person is saved only by Christ's grace without the law.

Second, a church convention does indeed have the power (and is also duty-bound to exercise it!) to reprove and condemn new articles of faith. It does so only according to Scripture and the ancient faith.

***... to reprove and
condemn new
articles of faith***

So the convention at Nicaea in A.D. 325 condemned the new article of Arius (c. 250-336) who taught that Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is not the one true God, but a creature. The convention at Constantinople in 381 condemned the new article of the Macedonians who taught that the Holy Spirit is not God. The convention at Ephesus in 431 condemned the new article of Nestorius (c. 386-451) who taught that there are two full persons in Jesus Christ, one human and one divine. And the convention at Chalcedon in 451 condemned the new article of Eutyches (c. 380–c. 456) who taught that

¹ Nicaea (A.D. 325), Constantinople (A.D. 381), Ephesus (A. D. 431), Chalcedon (A. D. 451).

there is only one divine-human nature in Christ.

Third, a church convention has no power to command new good works. Why? All good works have already more than sufficiently been commanded in Holy Scripture.

What types of works are needed beyond what the Holy Spirit has taught in Scripture? Here we are thinking of humility, patience, meekness, mercy, faithfulness, faith, goodness, peace, obedience, discipline, chastity, giving, serving (Gal. 5:22) and, in summary, love (Rom. 13:8; 1 Cor. 13:13).

What good work is not commanded by love? And if such a work would be outside of love, what kind of good work would it be? Love, according to St. Paul's teaching (Gal. 5:14), is the fulfillment of all commandments, as Christ also says in Matt. 5:44.

***What good work
is not commanded
by love?***

Forth, a church convention does indeed have the power (and is also duty-bound to exercise it!) to condemn evil works that stand against love according to Holy Scripture and the ancient manner of the church. A church convention also has the power to reprove persons engaged in such works, as the decree of the convention at Nicaea reproved the bishops and deacons guilty of pride and other vices.

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1. Do church conventions establish articles of faith?
 2. Is the Holy Spirit present with a church convention?
 3. Can a convention condemn new articles of faith?

4. How does a convention do that?
5. Can a church convention command new types of good works?
6. What types of works are commanded by the Holy Spirit in Scripture?
7. Can any good work be “outside of love”?
8. Does a church convention have the power to reprove evil works?
9. Can it also reprove the people engaged in such evil works?

12

WHAT ARE EVIL WORKS?

Yet here we should mention two particular kinds of evil works. Firstly there are those which are called (and are!) evil, such as greed, murder, adultery, pride and the like. Since these are clearly condemned in Scripture, they have also been condemned by past church conventions. Moreover, such evil works of this first kind are usually punished by the civil government's laws.

Secondly, there are evil works that are not called evil, but good, their evilness being covered by impressive appearance. These are special vices, holy idolatries, dreamed up by obscure saints some of whom were simply insane. They are

nothing more than Satan appearing as an angel of light.

Such evil works, even though they are called “good” and “new” should be condemned by church conventions most loudly and definitely. Why? They are harmful to the Christian faith and offensive to Christian life. They represent a deformation or mockery of both.

An example? What happens when a weak Christian

***There are evil
works that are not
called evil***

hears or sees a holy hermit or monk who follows a particularly strict and unique way of life beyond that of the ancient common way of Christians? That weak Christian takes offense! He thinks that in

comparison to this new saint, the ancient Christian way of life is worthless, worldly and even harmful!

The result? Even though a common Christian has a true, pure faith in Christ and practices the true, ancient, and good works commanded by God in Scripture (such as humility, patience, gentleness, chastity, love and faithfulness toward his neighbor, diligence and care in his service, office, vocation and estate) he is not considered to be a true ancient saint and Christian. Instead, in comparison to the new and unique way life of the hermit or monk, the common Christian is considered to be offensive and worthless.

Of course, hidden beneath such impressive clothing, foods, diets, housing, actions and similar new works, is an arrogant, prideful, angry, impatient, hateful, lustful, haughty, false Christian. St. Paul himself calls such people arrogant and haughty saints (2 Tim. 3:2ff.). Such people choose for themselves a new peculiar existence and worship (which has

not been commanded by God) instead of the ancient, true, common existence and worship of the Christian church (which has been instituted and commanded by God).

The elect may be preserved in such new offensive works, but they were forced to shed this new skin and be saved in the old Christian skin. Such a thing happened to St. Anthony (c. 251-356) who was forced to learn that a shoemaker or tanner in the city of Alexandria was a better Christian than he was living as a hermit in the wilderness. Anthony also confessed that he had not progressed in sanctification as far as that shoemaker.

The same thing happened to St. Bernard (1090-1153), Bonaventure (1221-1274), and without a doubt to many other pious people. When they finally realized that their new holiness and monastic life was not a sufficient defense against sin and death, they crawled to the cross and were saved without such new holiness in the old Christian faith, as St. Bernard's writings testify in many places.

***They crawled
to the cross and
were saved***

Unfortunately, such new "good works" were not condemned by any church convention, at least not by the four major ones. Only one or two smaller conventions did something about them. For the most part, the church conventions of the past allowed this new holiness to gain the upper hand so that the Christian church was in the end no longer recognizable.

As lazy gardeners those conventions let poisonous vines gain the upper hand so that at last the old tree suffered damage and almost perished. Just like in a garden when

such vines or suckers grow much higher than the true fruit-bearing branches, so it also occurred in the garden of the church. These new saints attached themselves to the church here and there, wanting to be Christians, feeding on the sap of the tree, growing much faster than the true old saints of the Christian faith and life.

But the world wants to be deceived. Why? We always crave something new! Christ's death and resurrection as well as Christian faith and love are ancient and now common stuff. They are therefore ignored.

We must, after all, have something new to hear, as St. Paul says in 2 Tim. 4:3, and we deserve it! Our ears itch so much that we can no longer endure the ancient truth!

***The world wants
to be deceived***

Instead we weigh ourselves down with huge piles of new doctrines.

This has happened before and will happen again and again. New doctrines always seem good at first. In the end, however, they become terrible monstrosities to which everyone has added one thing or another.

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1. What are the two particular kinds of evil works?
 2. What type of evil work is particularly harmful to Christian faith and life?
 3. What did a shoemaker teach St. Anthony?
 4. Why does the world want to be deceived?
 5. Do new doctrines always look good at first?

13

CONVENTIONS AVOID DICTATING CEREMONIES AND PUBLIC POLICY

Fifth, a church convention does not have power to impose new ceremonies upon Christians. In other words, a convention may not declare that it would be damnable or even dangerous to the conscience not to observe them.

Examples of such ceremonies include days of fasting, saints days, special diets, drinks or clothing. But “Observance of such matters is free,” St. Augustine of Hippo (354-430) wrote, “Christ instituted few ceremonies.”

Since conventions do not have the power to impose such things, Christians have the power to abstain from observing them. In fact, Christians are prohibited from

observing such things by St. Paul in Col. 2:16: “Do not let your consciences be captured concerning a particular holy day, fasting, food, or drink, etc.”

Sixth, a church convention does indeed have the power (and is duty-bound to exercise it!) to condemn such ceremonies according to Scripture. Such ceremonies are

***Such things are
unchristian***

unchristian and establish a new idolatry or worship which has not been commanded by God. They in fact have been forbidden.

Seventh, a church convention does not have power to insert itself into public policy and government. As St. Paul says (2 Tim. 2:4) whoever wants to serve God in spiritual warfare should abstain from worldly business.

Eighth, a church convention does indeed have the power (and is duty-bound!) to condemn such usurping of the powers of the government by the church, according to Holy Scripture. In other words, a church convention should rid the church of canon law.

Ninth, a church convention also does not have power to enact such rules and regulations that seek nothing but tyranny. Put simply, conventions should not grant bishops the power and authority to do as they please so that everyone obeys them out of fear. Rather, a convention indeed has the power (and is duty-bound!) to condemn such abuse of authority according to Holy Scripture, 1 Peter 5:3 “Not lording it over the people.” And Christ says (Luke 22:16): “Not so among you, but he who wants to be in charge should be your servant.”

Tenth, a church convention also has the power to estab-

lish some ceremonies provided that they do not strengthen the tyranny of a bishop. Such ceremonies must be necessary and useful for the people, resulting in fine orderly discipline and existence.

For example, it is necessary to have certain days and places where Christians come together. Likewise, there must be specific hours for preaching, offering the sacraments publicly, praying, singing and praising God, as St. Paul says in 1 Cor. 14:40: "Let all things be done in order and decency."

***...also has the power
to establish some
ceremonies.***

Such days and hours do not serve the tyranny of a bishop, but the people's necessity, benefit and order.

One certainly must have such order and cannot do without it if the church is to remain. However, when someone out of necessity, or because of illness or some hindrance, is unable to take part, it must not be considered a sin. Such an order is for his good. If he is a Christian, he will not seek his own harm in this matter. God does not care about those who do not want to be part of such a group or existence, as everyone will find out for himself.

In summary, a Christian is not bound by such an order. Yet when he can do so without hindrance, he gladly observes it, rather than leaves it unobserved,

This is why no law can be established for a Christian in this matter. A Christian gladly wants and does more than such a law demands.

However, ignore the person who arrogantly and maliciously despises such an order. For such a person will

certainly despise the higher law, be it from God or man.

1. Does a church convention have the power to impose new ceremonies on Christians?
2. Does a church convention have the power to condemn such ceremonies?
3. Should a church convention insert itself into public policy and government?
4. Should a church convention condemn the abuse of authority in the church?
5. What types of ceremonies should a church convention establish?
6. What is a Christian's attitude toward common orders of worship?

14

So WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF A CONVENTION?

You might be tempted to ask at this point: “What will become of church conventions if you eliminate so many of their duties? If what you suggest would occur, a pastor, a teacher, let alone parents, would have more power over those under their care than a church convention over the church!”

Answer: Do you think that a pastor or teacher has such an insignificant office that neither can be compared to church conventions? If there were no pastors or bishops, who would be called together for a church convention? If there were no schools, from where would pastors come?

I am now speaking of such teachers who teach the children not only how to read and write, how to speak well, how to do math and science, how to sing, but teachers who additionally raise children in a Christian way of life, faithfully impressing it upon them. Likewise, I am speaking of such pastors who teach God's Word faithfully and purely.

It can easily be proven that the poor, lowly pastor at Hippo, St. Augustine, taught more than all church conventions combined. More is also taught in the children's creed—the Apostles' Creed—than in all church conventions. Similarly, the Lord's Prayer and the Ten Commandments teach more than all church conventions. Moreover, they not only teach what they should, but prevent new things from being preached against the ancient doctrines.

***More is also taught
in the children's
creed***

Now let us, you and I together, consider this matter: What can church conventions do? What is their proper job? Listen to their own words: *Anathematizamus* is the name of their office: "We condemn."

In reality, they speak in a much humbler manner. They do not say: "We condemn." They say: *Anathematizat ecclesia*, that is, "the holy Christian church condemns."

The condemnation of a church convention alone would not terrify me. But the condemnation of the holy church would kill me in an instant for the sake of the Man who says (Matth. 28:20): "I am with you until the end of the world." Alas, this Man's condemnation cannot be endured!

So church conventions, since they refer to the holy Christian church as the true high judge on earth, bear wit-

ness to the fact that they do not judge according to their own pleasure. They instead serve the church that preaches, believes and confesses Holy Scripture.

In a similar fashion, a criminal is able to withstand a certain judge when he thinks of him as a fellow human being. But a judge understood to be the servant of the law and the kingdom is another matter. These two the criminal must fear.

Accordingly, a church convention is nothing other than a consistory, a royal court, a supreme court, or something like this, where the judges, after interrogating appropriate parties, pronounce the sentence of judgment. Yet they do so humbly: According to law.

That is to say: Their office is *anathematizare*, to condemn, but not according to their own ideas or will, or based on new, made-up laws, but according to the ancient law that is considered law in the entire realm. Therefore, a church convention does not condemn a heretic according to its imagination but according to the law of the realm, that is, according to Holy Scripture, as they confess it to be the law of the holy church.

Such law, realm and judge are truly to be feared by eternal condemnation. For such law is God's Word. The realm is God's church. The judge is the officer or servant of both.

***For such law is
God's Word***

But such a servant or judge of this law and realm is not only the church convention but also every pastor and teacher. For a church convention cannot be in session perpetually, exercising such judicial office without ceasing. Bishops cannot remain

permanently assembled but must convene only in times of emergency and anathematize or be judges.

Imagine someone like Arius becomes too powerful for his own pastor or bishop in Alexandria. He then gathers people around himself and wins support from pastors and people in the surrounding areas. His pastor in Alexandria is then defeated. In his office of judge, he can no longer defend the law of this realm, that is, the true Christian faith.

In such an emergency the other pastors and bishops should quickly come together with all might to help the pastor at Alexandria defend the true faith against Arius and to condemn Arius to save the others lest the misery get out of hand. And if the pastors are unable to assemble, the pious Emperor Constantine (c. 272-337) should contribute with his power to bring the bishops together.

The same thing occurs when a house catches on fire and its occupants are unable to put it out. At that point all neighbors should come together and help to extinguish it. And if they do not come together, then the government should help and order them to come together in order to anathematize or condemn the fire for the preservation of the other houses.

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1. Can a pastor or teacher be compared to a church convention?
 2. What is the proper job of a convention?
 3. What is the difference between the condemnation of a church convention, and the condemnation of the holy

church?

4. Does a church convention judge matters according to its own pleasure?
5. On what basis does it judge?
6. Other than the church convention, who also is the servant or judge of the Word of God?
7. To what does Luther compare a fire that a homeowner cannot put out, and so must call for assistance?

15

WHAT ARE THE LIMITS OF A CONVENTION?

Accordingly, then, the church convention is the great servant or judge in this realm and law. However, when the emergency is over, its office is done. The same thing occurs in the secular world when higher courts come to the assistance of lower courts which have become too weak to resist a certain evil. That evil finally reaches the highest, greatest court, the diet.¹ It too cannot be permanent

¹The Imperial Diet was a meeting of the political entities of the Holy Roman Empire. Much like the government of the United States before Washington D.C. was established as the seat of government, the Imperial Diet did not have a permanent home but would meet at irregular intervals in various cities throughout the empire.

but its participants must go their separate ways once the emergency is over. Then the members of the diet again must commit matters to the lower courts.

Yet even a diet from time to time must create new laws, change or improve old laws, or even do away with ancient laws. One cannot in perpetuity judge according to an eternal law. A secular rule oversees temporal matters that are constantly changing.

This is why laws that apply to changeable matters also must change. For where a matter for which a certain law was meant is no longer in existence, the law has ceased to have meaning. The city of Rome, for example, now no longer has the social castes and way of life which it had in antiquity. This is why the laws, which were directed at those social castes, now also are dead and are no longer in force. Perishable matters have perishable laws.

***Perishable matters
have perishable laws***

the social castes and way of life which it had in antiquity. This is why the laws, which were directed at those social castes, now also are dead and are no

longer in force. Perishable matters have perishable laws. However, in this realm of the church the motto is: "God's Word remains forever" (Isa. 40:8). One must judge according to the Word of God and not fabricate new or different words of God, establishing new or different articles of the faith.

This is why pastors and teachers are the lowly but daily, abiding, permanent judges who anathematize without ceasing. In other words, it is they who permanently fend off the devil and his raging. Yet a church convention, as a great judge, must either move habitual evildoers to repentance or condemn them. But it cannot produce new Christians. Pastors and teacher deal with little, young evildoers and

continually make new people into bishops and church conventions, as it is necessary to do.

A church convention chops off the big branches of the trees, or even tears out the bad trees altogether. Yet pastor and school teacher plant and produce utterly new trees and bushes in the yard. Indeed, they have a precious office and are the noblest treasures of the church. They preserve the church.

This is why all governments should see to it that pastors and schools are maintained. For if we cannot have church conventions, the parishes and schools are permanent, useful (albeit small) church conventions.

In summary, a church convention should deal solely with matters of faith. It convenes when the faith is in danger.

Common evil works can be condemned at home by secular authorities, pastors and parents. They also promote good works.

***It convenes when the
faith is in danger***

Yet false good works belong to the matters of faith. Why? They destroy the true faith.

This is why, if pastors are ineffectual, such false good works should be on the agenda of a church convention. Conventions in the past, as has been said above, did not normally pay attention to these false works.

Ceremonies should be dealt with exclusively in the parishes, or even in the schools, so that the school teacher would be the master of ceremonies alongside the pastor. For all the other Christians learn from the students, without any imposition or effort. Whatever the educated do in terms of Christian discipline and gestures, the multitude

imitates even without preaching on them, as moved by living examples. For even under the papacy all ceremonies came from the schools and parishes, except those where the pope sought his tyranny, as in food, fasting, holy days, etc.

Yet here too one must observe moderation lest there be too many ceremonies in the end. First of all, however, one must see to it that they are not regarded as necessary for salvation but merely as conducive to external discipline and order. One may change them at any time.

One must not command them as eternal laws in the church—as the papacy does—and write them up with tyrannical threats in books. For they are an utterly external, bodily, perishable, changeable matter.

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1. When is the work of the church convention finished?
 2. Why must rules and laws be changed from time to time?
 3. Perishable matters have perishable laws, but how long does God's Word remain?
 4. Can a church convention produce new Christians?
 5. How is a school comparable to a church convention?
 6. What is the chief concern of church convention?
 7. Why are false good works matters of faith?
 8. Why should moderation be observed when it comes to ceremonies?

16

WHAT ABOUT SCHOOLS, HOMES AND GOVERNMENTS?

I have written much about schools. They should be maintained firmly and diligently. Granted, in that they provide instruction in languages and other subjects they are in reality a pagan and external matter. Still, they are to be considered highly necessary. Why? Experience teaches us that where there is no formal education, there are no pastors and preachers.

Schools must provide students for the church who are then made into apostles, evangelists and prophets, that is, into preachers, pastors and governors. Such good people are needed everywhere to take up positions within govern-

ments. Moreover, when a school teacher is God-fearing, and teaches students to understand, sing and practice God's Word and the true faith rightly, the school—as has been said above—is a young, permanent church convention that provide benefits greater than many other church conventions.

***The school must
be second only to
the church***

In summary, the school must be second only to the church. In it young preachers and pastors are brought forth who then take the place of the preachers and pastors whom have died.

Next in importance to the school is the house or home. From it comes the students.

Then comes the government. It must protect its citizens so that they can bring forth children for the school, which in turn brings forth children for the congregation. Pastors can then form God's children (be they citizens, princes or the emperor) and the church.

Yet God, who preserves church, school and government from the devil, must be the highest and most important. God must do everything in all estates—indeed, in all creatures.

Accordingly, Ps. 127:1-2 says that the only two bodily governments on earth are house and city: "Where the Lord does not build the house," and: "Where the Lord does not protect the city."

The first is the house. From it come the people. The other is the government, that is, the country, people, officials and authorities. These two account for everything: Children,

possessions, money, animals, etc. The house must nurture. The government must guard, protect and defend.

Then the third realm follows: God's own house and city, which is the church. It receives people from the house and enjoys protection and defense from the government.

These are the three hierarchies ordained by God. No one needs more than these.

We have enough, and more than enough, to do with living rightly in these three against the devil.

The house must nurture.
The government must guard.

Just consider all the things that need to be done in the house! Parents must be obeyed! There is also feeding, rearing, governing and providing for children and servants in a godly way. Even if nothing else needed to be done, we would have enough to do with the demands of the house!

After that, the government also gives us plenty to do when we are faithfully obedient; when we, in turn, judge, protect and foster our subjects, land and people. The devil gives us enough to do, and by him God has certainly given us plenty of sweat of the brow, thorns and thistles. In this way, we have more than enough to learn, live, do and suffer in these two laws.

After them, there is the third law and government, the church. Where the Holy Spirit rules, Christ calls it a comforting, sweet, light burden (Matt. 11:30). Where this is not the case, it is not only difficult, bitter and terrible, but also impossible, as Paul says in Rom. 8:3, "What the law could not do," and, "The letter kills" (2 Cor. 3:6).

What is, then, the purpose of the blasphemous, illusionary law or government of the pope, which is above and beyond these three lofty divine governments, above the three divine, natural, secular laws? It wants to be everything and yet it is nothing. Instead it seduces and tears us from these three blessed divine estates and laws! It dresses us in a mask or cowl, makes us into fools and impotent jugglers over against the devil, and we in turn walk along idly no longer knowing these three hierarchies or laws of God.

This is why we no longer want to put up with it, but act according to the doctrine of Sts. Peter, Paul and Augustine and be free from it turning Ps. 2:3 against them: “Let us break their bonds asunder and cast away their cords from us.” Yes we want to sing with St. Paul (Gal. 1:8): “Let him be anathema who teaches differently, even if it were an angel from heaven” and say with St. Peter (Acts 15:16): “Why do you tempt God by imposing such a burden?”

In this way, we shall be the papacy’s lords, trampling it underfoot, as Ps. 91:13 says: “You shall tread on the lion and the adder and will trample the young lion and serpent underfoot.” And this we want to do in the power and with the aid of the Seed of the woman who crushed the serpent’s head underfoot (Gen. 3:15), and still crushes it, even if we have to run the risk that he bruises our heel in return.

To the same blessed Seed of the woman be praise and honor, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one true God and Lord forever. Amen.



1. Even though schools are a pagan, external matter, why should they be maintained?
2. Schools train children for what purpose?
3. Schools are second in importance to what?
4. What are the only two bodily governments here on earth?
5. What does the home do?
6. What does the government do?
7. What are the three hierarchies ordained by God?

AFTERWORD

The booklet at hand is an abridged version of a 1539 treatise by Martin Luther (1483-1546), in which he lays out his understanding of the nature of the church and the purpose and role of conventions of parish pastors and bishops, called councils at the time. This book was part of the preparations for a general church convention that was to address the major theological issues that had come to the fore due to the reformation writings by Luther and others.

After having appealed for a council early on in his career, by the mid-1530s it seemed that this call of Luther and others might actually bear fruit. In 1536, the pope, Paul III (1468-1549), called a general council to Mantua, Italy, for the coming year. For this purpose, Luther prepared the Smalcald Articles, now contained in the Christian Book of Concord of 1580. In the preface to this confession, he mentions the main topics in church and society that, in his view, needed to be addressed by that council. The Articles themselves treat the chief theological points of controversy (cf. AE 41:139-140).¹ Yet it would take until December, 1545, for the council—it would meet without Lutheran presence until 1563—to convene at Trent, Italy.

This back and forth during Luther's lifetime is part of a larger debate: The time of the 14th through 16th centuries saw a major conflict in the Western European church concerning who should and could legitimately govern the church on earth.

¹ Luther's works are here quoted according to *Luther's Works: American Edition*, 55 vols. (St. Louis; Philadelphia: Concordia Publishing House; Fortress Press, 1957-1986).

This is known as the conflict between papalism and conciliarism, that is, between those favoring the exclusive rule of the popes of Rome over the entire church and those subjecting popes to the judgment of the entire church, represented by a council, the assembly of the Christian church's bishops.

Woven into this conflict was the dispute between the pope and the ruler of the Holy Roman Empire for political supremacy that reached as far back as the 11th century: Understandably from a political angle, the emperor was more interested in a conciliarly weakened papacy. This is why it is not surprising that one of the leading imperial advisors of his age, William of Ockham (c. 1288 - c. 1348), is often mentioned as one of the first proponents of conciliarism. William's writings show that conciliarism is based on a different understanding of who or what the church is: not simply the college of cardinals with the pope as its head, but all believers in Christ.

During the first half of the 15th century (most notably during the Councils of Constance (1414-1418) and Basel (1431-1449)), it appeared as if the conciliarist party had carried the day and effectively limited the power of the papacy. Yet at the beginning of the 16th century, just before Luther nailed his 95 Theses to the door of the Castle Church at Wittenberg in 1517, the papalist party emerged victorious out of the struggles in the church and between the papacy and powerful European rulers (at the Fifth Lateran Council, 1512-1517).

Luther met one of the most vocal proponents of papalism in the person of Thomas Cardinal Cajetan (1469-1534), who, as emissary of the pope, was to bring Luther to his senses during a 1518 meeting at Augsburg. In his own account of this meeting, Luther noted that he heard the papalist claim for the first time from Cardinal Cajetan. He rejected it as an innovation (cf. AE 31:262).

However, while Luther in his early years repeatedly appealed to a free general council or church convention to address the

important theological and political issues of the day, he was by no means a pure conciliarist. From early on he had pointed out that councils too could err – and for Luther the most glaring example of this fact was the condemnation and burning of John Huss (c. 1369-1415), a Czech priest in whose writings one finds ideas of reform similar to those set forth a century later by Luther, by the conciliarist council of Constance in 1415.

Accordingly, the highest authority in the church on earth ought to be occupied, neither by the pope nor by the council, but by God himself by means of his infallible Word of Holy Scripture – a teaching already asserted by Huss in his 1413 treatise on the church (and by John Wycliffe (c. 1328-1384) some decades before).²

Additionally, the politicking and papal delay tactics surrounding the calling of a council had made Luther realize that one should not put too much stock in such an endeavor. A church convention's main task of preserving the Christian faith had to be carried out regardless of the willingness or unwillingness of the pope or this or that powerful political leader. And, as Luther asserts in the booklet at hand, it is carried out when pastors and teachers on the local, congregational level faithfully teach and enforce God's Word concerning the faith and lives of their flocks.

Luther was also not a pure conciliarist in that for him all Christians had the authority and duty to evaluate pronouncements made by such assemblies as to their agreement with God's unchanging Word of the bible (cf. AE 39:306-307). Every Christian is to do so at least for himself, while the incumbents of the ministry judge them publicly for the benefit of the whole church (cf. AE 33:90-91). This is one important reason why Luther insisted that all Christians have a basic and biblically correct understanding of the chief parts of the Christian faith

² Cf. J. Huss, *De Ecclesia: The Church*, tr. D. S. Schaff (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1915).

in order to distinguish correctly between the ancient faith and good works that come from God's Word and some new, humanly devised faith and good works. After all, each lives, believes, and dies for himself (cf. AE 51:70). The Small and Large Catechisms were written by Luther in 1529 to provide for such instruction of every Christian and pastor.

The Book and Its Importance for Today

What can Christians learn from Luther's writing today? Luther's writing touches on a number of subjects that have not lost any of their relevance during the past five centuries. First of all, there is the basic question: how is a person to know whether he is a member of the right congregation or which congregation or church to join?

To answer this important question – since no one can be saved outside of Christ's church (cf. Large Catechism II, 45) – Luther, in a pun on superstitious Christian practices and beliefs, points to seven chief “relics.”

Relics are traditionally the remains of a saint's body, but also items worn, used, or touched by saints, especially by those who were killed for their testimony for the faith, the martyrs. To this day, altars in Catholic churches contain a relic of the patron saint of that particular altar or church (cf. Rev. 6:9). They are seen by Catholics as powerful representations of a given saint, ensuring his or her intercession before God for those gathered around that altar. Pilgrimages are undertaken to those churches and places where the intercession of a particular saint is experienced most powerfully to the point of healings and other miracles.

Relics, in other words, were familiar guideposts for the Christians at the time of Luther: where the relics of Christ's saints are there is Christ's holy church. But what are the true relics? And what are therefore the distinctive features and marks of the true church by which a person might identify it?

Luther knew the veneration of relics in his age very well. Not only had he, during his visit to Rome in 1510/1511, gone to the preeminent relics of that city to obtain benefits for his parents. Moreover, the Castle Church at Wittenberg contained one of the biggest collections of relics at the time and was properly dedicated to All Saints. On the day dedicated to All Saints in the church calendar, November 1, the collection would be opened for pilgrims.

Saints also play a major role in the business of granting indulgences, that is, when it comes to the forgiveness or commutation of certain good works imposed by a Catholic priest in confession in order to counterbalance sins committed. The saints' excess of good works, it is taught by Rome, constitutes with Christ's good works the "treasure of the church," out of which such indulgences are granted by local bishops or the pope.

It is then no accident that Luther's 95 Theses dealing critically with the granting of indulgences were also nailed to the door of the Castle Church, and that this was done on the eve of All Saints Day, October 31, 1517. Rejecting that the merits of Christ and the saints are the treasure of the church for indulgences, Luther asserted instead in Thesis 62 (AE 31:31, cf. also AE 31:230-231): "The true treasure of the church is the most holy gospel of the glory and grace of God."

Luther, ever the discerning pastor, had also detected that in common belief and practice indulgences were often offered and sought – even sold and bought – to avoid the hard business of daily repentance demanded by Christ's words recorded in Matth. 4:7 (cf. AE 31:25), that is, of daily beginning anew to follow the crucified Christ in thoughts, words, and deeds.

Accordingly, the saints, instead of being examples for such following of Christ (cf. the 1531 Apology of the Augsburg Confession, art. XXI, 4-6), had often – due to belief in their miracle-working intercession in heaven connected to their relics – become tools in a quest to avoid such Christian living. In

other words, they had become guarantors of the comfortable, worldly life instead of beacons leading men to the divine life of holiness.

It is therefore not surprising that Luther discarded such “veneration” of the saints’ relics, as it honored neither Christ nor the saints (cf. Apology XXI, 7) and also did not advance the holiness of the church and the Christians. The alternative to such relics, however, had already been hinted at in the 95 Theses: If the gospel of God’s grace and mercy in Christ is the true treasure of the church, then it is also the true miracle-working relic of the church, as by it all things are made holy (cf. Large Catechism I, 91-93).

This teaching is developed in the booklet at hand: relics are primarily everything that is God’s biblical Word in law and gospel, namely, preaching, the sacraments of baptism and the Lord’s Supper, the private and public reproof and forgiveness of sins (“the keys”); secondarily everything that conveys this biblical Word of God, namely, the male incumbent of the ordained ministry as well as public worship including prayer and teaching the catechism; and finally everything that inwardly and outwardly agrees with God’s Word, namely, patiently following the Crucified and humbly serving the neighbor in one’s allotted vocations according to the Ten Commandments.

The Christians’ vocations take place in three distinct areas of life that are established by God himself: the household, comprehending both family and the workplace as at Luther’s time, the home or the farm was the workplace for most people; the city or the political sphere; and the church. All Christians have vocations in all three spheres or realms, as becomes clear from the Table of Duties included in Luther’s Small Catechism. Through them as God’s masks, God gives his gifts in this world (cf. Large Catechism I, 26-27; AE 31:364-371; 54:446).

Luther, in the booklet at hand, calls these areas the three “hierarchies.” He does this in opposition to the then highly

popular speculations on three “hierarchies” of angels and church offices (cf. AE 1:234-235; 4:23; 5:138-140). These speculations are founded upon the 4th/5th-century writings falsely circulated under the name of Paul’s disciple, Dionysius the Areopagite (cf. Acts 17:34). Hence the anonymous author is typically called Pseudo-Dionysius.³

To be sure, according to the Fourth Commandment, all three biblically founded “hierarchies” or holy orders and realms are organized “hierarchically” by God: Those representing God – i.e., parents / masters; government officials; pastors – by virtue of their vocations are their earthly heads. As human masks of God’s own rule and majesty, we owe them not just love but also honor (cf. Large Catechism I, 105-108, 141-142, 158-160).

However, as Luther points out repeatedly in the volume at hand for pastors, their personal character or inherent quality of holiness is not the decisive factor when it comes to “mediating” holiness to those under them. God’s ordering and the power of the Holy Spirit by means of his unchanging relics are (cf. Augsburg Confession VIII). This means, the heads of the heavenly hierarchies on earth are not necessarily closer to God as far as their personal lives and holiness is concerned than those who are placed under them.

In fact, since all men are sinners by nature and justified by faith in Christ’s work alone, not based on their position in the

³ They are found in English translation in *The Works of Dionysius the Areopagite*, vol. 2, tr. J. Parker (London, Oxford: J. Parker, 1899). In his work on the heavenly, angelic hierarchy, Pseudo-Dionysius offers this definition: “Hierarchy is, in my judgment, a sacred order and science and operation, assimilated, as far as attainable, to the likeness of God, and conducted to the illuminations granted to it from God, according to capacity, with a view to the Divine imitation” (13). Simply put, the higher one stands in the holy order, the more one is deified or like God. And those qualitatively higher up in the hierarchy mediate God’s graces and powers to those on the lower rungs. This, according to Pseudo-Dionysius, is true for angels as well as for the members of the hierarchically organized church on earth.

world, all, while unequal before men by God's ordering due to their respective offices and vocations, are equal before God as far as their persons are concerned, as Luther points out in our treatise in the context of rejecting females, children, and unfit men as pastors, based on 1 Peter 3:7.

In his exposition of the Sermon on the Mount from the early 1530s and elsewhere, Luther distinguishes in one individual between person and divinely established office, or between the "natural person" and the "divine person." Both are called to follow the ethos proper for a particular relationship: What a natural person – relating to his neighbors as equal – may not do, an office holder might be commanded to do, as he relates to his neighbor as superior. And while the respective works may look very different on the surface, both kinds of ethos are comprehended under the command to love one's neighbor (cf. AE 21:23, see also Large Catechism I, 180-181, 274).

Luther works into these three hierarchies the notion, found already in Plato's *Republic*, that there are three estates or classes among men: those providing for the body's life and nourishment (the household); those providing for the defense of the body (the government), and those providing for the salvation of the body (the church).

However, unlike Plato and the Platonizing doctrine of the church and the Christian life found in the works of Pseudo-Dionysius with which Luther grew up (cf. AE 36:109), the mature Luther upheld the equal spiritual dignity of all three realms (cf. Augsburg Confession XXVIII, 4) and of all Christians serving in them: Merchants or soldiers, e.g., are not in principle of an inferior (spiritual or anthropological) quality than pastors. All these vocations are necessary in a fallen world. In fact, as those who believe in Christ, they are all equally priests before God, anointed by the Spirit who operates through the means of grace (cf. AE 31:355-356).

This means, then, contrary to what the traditional notions

on holiness and hierarchy entailed (and what has often been imitated by the sharpest critics of these traditional notions, from the Anabaptists of Luther's age to the liberation theologians of our age), Luther places all divinely ordained realms and vocations on an equally sacred footing: one need not – in fact, one must not – leave the world and its orders to become a holy Christian. All one needs is faith in Christ and the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit through his true relics within God's three holy hierarchies on earth (cf. Augsburg Confession XVI). The church on earth is of the greatest importance in this scheme, not because holding an office of leadership in it is especially pleasing to God and gets one closer to him, but because here the gospel of free salvation in Christ is proclaimed (cf. Apology XV, 42 with IV, 310).

In summary, all these things are considered true relics by Luther because they, not particles of Christ's cross or a drop of his blood of questionable authenticity, are the true remains and relics of Christ according to God's Word of the bible. That is, they have been certainly and purposely left behind by Christ so that his holy people on earth might be recognized by these marks (cf. Augsburg Confession VII; Apology VII/VIII, 5). This also means that they are, in their respective ways, tools in the hand of the Holy Spirit by which he makes sinners holy, as he thereby crushes our sinful nature, the old Adam, in us and conforms us in soul and body to Christ crucified on earth so that we might become glorious like him in heaven also (cf. Rom. 8:17, 29-30; Large Catechism II, 40-60).

It is important to point out that this holiness is chiefly the "imputed" gift of Christ's perfect holiness and forgiveness that is conveyed by the means of grace and grasped by faith in the gospel. Yet it is also the (on earth) still imperfect, albeit growing holiness that conquers more and more of the Christian's life in soul and body for his Lord Jesus Christ (cf. AE 32:203; Small Catechism IV, 10-14, 20; IX, Table of Duties; Large Catechism

IV, 64-73).

Luther emphasizes the second point strongly, perhaps even more so than in his earlier catechisms, because around the mid-1530s, a group had emerged in Wittenberg that claimed that the moral law of God – that is, the Ten Commandments – belonged to city hall and not in the pulpits of Christian congregations. Christians, these teachers asserted, were to be governed by the gospel alone. Luther titled these teachers Antinomians, that is, those who were teaching against the law of God because they misunderstood the gospel’s message that Christ had fulfilled the law for all to mean that no one but Christ needed to fulfill it.⁴

This is why Luther called them, in this book, fine “Easter preachers” but terrible “Pentecost preachers.” When speaking of Pentecost, he did not have tongue-speaking, modern-day Pentecostalists in mind but the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit who was visibly given on Pentecost.⁵ By the gospel, the Spirit not only brings Christ’s grace but also the power to lead a new life of increasing holiness in thoughts, words, and deeds according to the Ten Commandments (cf. Large Catechism II, 1-3; III, 1-2).

The Spirit’s true relics and their effects are on earth so that they can be perceived with one’s senses, namely, by one’s hearing and sight. And they are on earth permanently. There will always be an audible, visible community of saints on earth that features these hallowing, saving relics, as Luther asserts based on Matth. 28:20 and the Apostles’ Creed (cf. Augsburg Confession VII,

⁴ On the Antinomians, see the following Lutheran Press publications: *Don’t Tell Me That!*, featuring Luther’s theses against the Antinomians in a highly readable format; and *Only the Decalogue Is Eternal*, featuring – for the first time in a modern language – not only the theses but also the disputations of Luther against these teachers. The latter book is also available in a bilingual, Latin-English edition, titled *Solus Decalogus Est Aeternus*.

⁵ Cf. the Lutheran Press book *Convicted by the Spirit*, featuring a sermon by Luther on the work of the Holy Spirit.

1; Apology VII/VIII, 5, 9-10; Large Catechism II, 53). Only as such can they answer the question posed by Luther in the tract at hand: how can a confused person at any given time find Christ's holy people on earth and thus be saved? In other words, only as such can they serve as the external marks of the church of Christ on earth.

It should be noted that the church of Christ on earth is not identical with a single outward church organization. To be sure, the marks of the church ought to be "pure," that is, taught and used according to Christ's biblical Word and institution. However, as Luther notes in relation to God's Word, the chief relic, this is not always the case (cf. Apology VII/VIII, 20-21). This explains why Luther, on the one hand, denied that those teaching (and believing) the false gospel of salvation by works were (living) members of Christ's church, even though he never denied that they were externally in that church. This includes the pope who – as the antichrist who, as Luther points out in this book, due to his false gospel undermines *all* of God's "hierarchies" or holy orders in this world, not just the church – must be in God's temple, the church (cf. 2 Thess. 2:4; Apology VII/VIII, 4, 12-19; Treatise 39-59).

This also explains why Luther, on the other hand, firmly held that there are genuine Christians even under the spiritual tyranny of the pope, even though they may be mostly children and others who take God's Word in its simple meaning, and not in its meaning twisted by the pope and his disciples (cf. AE 41:206-211). As later Lutheran teachers would repeatedly state: the ears of the hearers are sometimes purer than the mouths of the teachers in the church.

The perceptible nature of these relics and effects needs to be explained in greater detail by following the argument in Luther's book. While these relics and their effects can be perceived by one's senses, to the unbeliever they are not perceptible as the true relics and effects of the Holy Spirit. Instead, as Luther points

out, due to their humble and ancient, unchanging form, their positive and effective connection to the one true God is denied by the unbelieving world. For in its spiritual blindness due to sin, the world connects “spiritual” and “divine” with attributes such as exalted, glorious, and new.

And such are indeed the external “relics” Luther detects in the opponent of Christ’s church on earth, that is, in the church of the devil. As God’s perennial ape, Satan also comes up with externally visible markers for his church which, at times under the ancient name of the real thing but unlike God’s relics, promise (and deliver!) immediate, physical help – the feature that Luther found objectionable in the veneration of the saints already in 1517.

To this attractive offer, the unbelieving world is drawn in greater numbers than to Christ’s seemingly ineffective, primarily spiritual relics. Hence, the “chapel” of the devil is greater than God’s church next door because the former is perceived by the world as more divine and religious than the latter.

The humbleness and externality of God’s relics, in Luther’s analysis, also prompts the devil to devise a second attack plan: those unbelievers that are not drawn to his own shiny, new external things he leads away from external relics altogether to the illusion of a direct communing with the Holy Spirit. While the first line of attack is represented by the Catholic Church, the devil’s “Plan B” against Christ’s church and relics is represented by those churches that, following the teachings of Ulrich Zwingli (1484-1531) and John Calvin (1509-1564), to this day assert a direct operation of the Spirit on man instead and thereby reduce the means of grace to being no more than spiritually ineffectual external marks of the church (cf. Augsburg Confession XIII, 1; Apology XXIV, 68).⁶

⁶ See, e.g., Luther’s 1527/28 letter on rebaptism, published by Lutheran Press as *Did My Baptism Count?*, and his 1526 sermon on the Lord’s Supper and

If this is so, why does God “hide” himself in such humble, unattractive, even despised forms? Why even is the church hidden in this sense (cf. AE 33:85-89; 41:211)? Does he not want everybody to find the salvation offered in and by his church on earth? Luther’s simple but profound answer is that God hides his crushing Majesty (cf. Exodus 20:18-19) in such lowly forms for the sake of, and out of kind regard for, the lowly people.

In other words, as Christ hid his divine glory in a humble form during his life on earth because he wanted to save sinners, and not the righteous, so he continues to work on earth in his humble holy people, the Christian church, by means of his humble, unchanging means of grace because that continues to be his purpose: save sinners (cf. Solid Declaration VIII, 87).

Those who are terrified and humbled and crushed by the accusation and condemnation of God’s moral law will appreciate that God now kindly speaks to them the gospel’s word of forgiveness and eternal salvation through the mouth of a humble man. They will also gladly, and daily more and more, embrace the humble lifestyle of service laid out for them by God in his own unchanging Word, the Ten Commandments, because serving the neighbor according to God’s Word has been the lifestyle of their Savior. Those who are not so humbled will despise all this – as they despised Christ during his visible ministry on earth. This is how the foolish, weak word of the cross continues to exalt the low and humble the proud (cf. 1 Cor. 1-4).

If the church, then, is constituted and visibly marked by such relics, it is easy to arrive at the answer Luther gives to the second main question treated in the booklet at hand: what are the duties of a church convention or council? If the Holy Spirit has tied himself to the specific relics left behind by Christ, which Luther enumerates based on the bible, then the chief task of a church convention is the defense and preservation of these relics against

confession, published under the title *How Is Christ There?*

any and all innovation or change that can only be of the devil.

In other words, because the Christian faith and life are based on God's unchanging word of the bible (cf. Smalcald Articles II, II, 15), there can be no "development" of doctrine or an "evolution" of the Christian way of life in the course of the history of the church – a position worthy of consideration not only when it comes to writing the history of the church from a "Lutheran" perspective.

The four historic church conventions discussed by Luther, therefore, do not mark "important breakthroughs" in the course of the ever-changing teaching of the Christian church. They, caused by ever-changing challenges and innovations, are merely the affirmation of what has already been taught by the prophets and apostles of Christ, who represent the true and unchanging consensus of Christ's church (cf. Apology XII, 66, 73). And their decisions derive their spiritual authority only from their agreement with the pronouncements of that one holy Christian church.

In keeping with his rediscovery of the centrality of the biblical doctrine of justification by faith in Christ's work alone, Luther in this context points to a class of new good works that had been mostly overlooked by the church conventions of the past because they have been held up by many in the church as good and noble, even as better and nobler than the common Christian way of life guided by the Spirit according to the Ten Commandments. However, because they – e.g., monastic vows, liturgical ceremonies, and mandatory fasting – were not commanded by God in the Ten Commandments and were even given saving merit in God's judgment by teachers in the church, they are actually terrible sins and idolatry. Moreover, with their highly attractive glitter they make unrecognizable both the ancient Christian faith and the ancient Christian way of life (cf. Large Catechism I, 22-23, 311-318).

Although not commanded by God in his Word – and hence

only to be dealt with by a church convention with great restraint – the worship forms of the Christian church share an important feature with the Christian faith and life commanded by God: they ought to be humble, simple, and common. Just as Christian faith and life provide no opportunity for individuals to stand out and “make their mark,” so also Christian worship should be something for and with every Christian.

Even though not commanded by God – only agreed upon by Christians, with reasonable changes from time to time – every Christian, as a humble follower of Christ and servant of his neighbor will gladly embrace these common forms out of love and concern for the neighbor. As Luther saw it, whoever disregards common Christian forms of worship to do his own thing will also disregard the laws of God and man.

Just as the divinely ordained humble relics will be despised by the unbelievers, so will the forms of worship that provide their correspondingly humble “setting” (cf. AE 35:97) or “dress” (see this book) be overlooked, disregarded, and despised by them. Either the splendor of the ceremonialism of the medieval church or the informality suggesting spiritual immediacy advocated by Zwingli’s heirs seem to be the better, more religious, more reasonable alternatives for unbelieving man.

Can we today still recognize our congregations and church bodies in what Luther laid out concerning the church? Can we still recognize our church conventions and assemblies in Luther’s prescriptions?

It seems that every major teaching of Luther in the booklet at hand has become largely unknown and highly controversial even among Lutherans. There is, first of all, the visible yet hidden nature of the church’s marks. Where is the congregation or church body that “advertises” with the relics Luther lists? The fact that hardly anyone does this is perhaps proof that Luther was right: these relics do not lend themselves for flashy advertising campaigns designed to draw in the skeptics or unchurched.

They just do not make sense to unbelievers not yet crushed by God's law.

Of course, the void is filled by all sorts of other worthwhile activities that are promoted on websites and fliers: schooling and tutoring for the kids, meaningful discussions for the adults, caring communities for the poor, the sick, and the aged, and wholesome advice for successful relationships for all – but also upbeat worship for the young at heart or those new to the faith, “classic” worship for those with different tastes or a longer history in the congregation.

These offerings are not only more expensive than the features Luther considered essential for the church's existence, they require ever larger, wealthier congregations that are able to compete successfully on the religious marketplace. However, given that Luther predicted Christ's holy people to be small, where is God's promise for such large congregations?

More importantly, as in the church of the devil described by Luther, so often these items are designed to meet this-worldly needs, and to meet them quickly. “Your best life now,” some leader of a prospering congregation once promised. That is what unbelievers understand so well. Yet the crosses in the vocations of this life followed by the glory of the life of the world to come, because such is not an unbeliever's vision of “the good life,” are deemphasized to the point of denial.

While Luther's description of the church gives much food for thought when it comes to reshaping Lutheran evangelism, mission, and outreach, it also should trigger discussions involving those already in the church: these have to do with the shape of the Christian life in general. Is it still defined exclusively by the Ten Commandments, or have other, more abstract concepts – such as “love,” “peace and justice,” or “following Jesus” – taken their place, perhaps with the (flawed) justification that the “third use of the law” (as a guide) is not a Lutheran concept? Where are people still carefully instructed to uphold the three holy

orders of God – the household (family and economy); the city (political order); and God’s city, the church – and work diligently within them in their concrete but possibly boring, menial vocations? Is what is specifically Christian not often redefined as volunteering for this or that new, exciting charity or mission project organized by the congregation in the neighborhood or on another continent? Is this the world-flight of our age?

It should be noted in this context that within the Large Catechism, Luther’s concrete exposition of the Ten Commandments makes this part the longest. Along these commandments he, according to his own advice given in the Preface to the Small Catechism (17-18) and expounding the biblical texts gathered in the Small Catechism’s Table of Duties, also wrote books and letters with concrete, even casuistic advice for those merchants and workers, rulers and citizens including soldiers,⁷ husbands and wives, parents and children, pastors and congregants who desired to discharge the duties of their vocations in a Christian manner. This agrees well with the concreteness of sermons at the time (cf. Apology XV, 43).

What is unfolded in these publications is only briefly listed by Luther in this book, since the “relics” corresponding to commandments four through ten are not as unmistakably characteristic of the Christian church as the relics corresponding to commandments one through three. Unbelievers also can be good husbands, presidents, and workers, even though their heart seeks something else because they are not moved by the Holy Spirit through the gospel. However, this does not mean that these latter relics are optional for the Christian.

Often, perhaps out of fear to appear legalistic, in today’s sermons God’s law of the Ten Commandments is treated, not as a concrete direction for living an increasingly holy life, but only as a brief introduction to the main part, the gospel, which

⁷ See the Lutheran Press volume, *Christians Can Be Soldiers*.

is about Christ's holy life and death for us sinners. And while the gospel is most important because by it we are saved, how do Christians learn about the concrete shape of their lives in their vocations according to God's Word? If they are not taught by God's law, then other rules and norms will fill the void. In other words, ethical instruction in the church should cover the full range of God's law and the full range of a Christian's life within the three hierarchies ordained by God. It should not be limited by one's partisan preferences, such as being "pro-life" and against homosexual marriage for "conservative" Christians, and being pro-social justice for "liberal" Christians.

A related question is whether "judging" in the church is ruled out of order in principle as unloving or "judgmental," perhaps along with God's law. Can God's Word still be understood in its totality as the law of God's realm, the church, by which he certainly judges us, but by which the church and especially its ministers also judge all doctrines and lifestyles and by which they condemn everything not in agreement with God's Word – in order to save the sinner from the judgment on the Last Day?

Even more concrete questions jump off the pages of this book: what about women in the ministry? Luther rejected this idea that is very popular today, not because it was against the church's longstanding tradition or because males are the better human beings, but because the Holy Spirit, in God's clear Word, has excluded women from being pastors – without, as Luther hastens to add, implying any spiritual or anthropological inferiority of those excluded. This is often overlooked today, as if not ordaining women is sexism. Yet Luther is not Plato.

To be sure, churches especially in more patriarchal societies in the certain areas of the world might feel enticed by Western advisors to make ending the exploitation of women in society indistinguishable from promoting the ordination of female pastors in the church. However, here it would be wise to distinguish carefully: is it unjust oppression of women not to ordain them to

the office of the church from which the Holy Spirit has excluded them? Does the non-ordination of women, therefore, belong to the same category as a woman's not having the ability to own property? After all, early Christian women were not ordained but they did own property (cf. Acts 16:14).

It also needs to be remembered that the gospel does not overthrow, but rather confirms, the natural order of creation, as Luther points out in the treatise at hand. Furthermore, Christians are called to serve within a given political order so long as this can be done without sin (cf. Augsburg Confession XVI, 5-7). In other words, the Christian church is not a social-revolutionary movement but gratefully lives within what God has ordered.

Worship is another sore spot in the church today. Luther's position, set forth in this treatise and capping his statements on the issues over the previous 20 year,⁸ very likely will please neither of the most vocal parties on the issue. For those promoting "contemporary worship" Luther will put too much emphasis on maintaining Christian commonality in worship within and among congregations. Especially if worship is used as a premier outreach tool, one must ask: is that even possible, given that the unbeliever understand nothing of what is going on in a truly Christian worship – not because it is "so old-fashioned," but because it is spiritually hidden from him (cf. Rev. 14:3; AE 10:154; 53:332-333)? Is there not an urge to replace what is truly a sanctifying relic of the Spirit by what glitters in the eyes of sinners? For those promoting liturgical commonality or even uniformity by appealing to "the historic liturgy," the "old" Luther

⁸ Luther opened the discussion on proper Christian worship in 1520 by his treatise on Christian liberty, available from Lutheran Press as *How to Live a Christian Life* Cf. H. Sonntag, "Freedom Shall Be and Remain a Servant of Love: Distinguishing Faith and Love as a Criterion for Liturgical Practice in Luther's Theology," *Logia* 18, 1 (Epiphany 2009): 37ff., and *The Unchanging Forms of the Gospel: A Response to Eight Theses on Worship* (Minneapolis: Lutheran Press, 2010).

with his plea for dignified simplicity in worship will doubtlessly be too simple-minded in liturgical matters, too open to change, too little anchored in “tradition.”

Finally, church conventions! Luther lays out very specific tasks and purposes for these emergency gatherings in the life of the church. And he does so based on his study of God’s Word and of the history of the Christian church. As to who should attend as delegates, it was of paramount importance for him that only people well-versed in the Scriptures and with a sincere concern for God’s honor and man’s salvation attend. As he saw it, the majority would be faithful pastors and bishops, but “there should also be a few intelligent and reliable laymen (for this is also a matter that concerns them)” (AE 41:140).

What is left of it today? Are first things given priority, or are they taken for granted in order to avoid open conflict? Have they been replaced by administrative busyness and bureaucratic necessities? Is the preservation of the sameness of the Spirit’s relics still at the top of the agenda, or have personnel matters and elections, the promotion of the exciting new visions and agendas of leaders, the public recognition of deserving people and organizations, and the adjustment of bylaws in order to integrate new beliefs or practices long since taken precedence?

Moreover, is being well versed in God’s Word still the key qualification for delegates, or has quarrelling over proper quotas among the attendees by gender, representation of certain (theological or political) positions or well-established constituencies in the church, or classification on the church’s rosters such as lay, commissioned, ordained (cf. AE 41:140, alluding to Luke 14:7ff.) taken its place?

Given that church conventions, as Luther saw it, are primarily charged with authoritatively condemning false teachings and teachers according to the bible (and therefore in the name of the holy Christian church), not with legislating in the vast realm of matters neither forbidden nor commanded in Scripture, it is

a serious question whether women – regardless of their theological acumen or views – should be admitted as delegates at all (cf. 1 Tim. 2:12).

Furthermore, are church conventions still truly supportive of the local pastor, teacher, congregation, school struggling to maintain the Spirit’s relics pure and unchanged in their place, or is the faithful local congregation left to its own devices while the unfaithful local congregation is given free rein – predictably soon outgrowing its faithful neighbor? Have conventions, since they are now held regularly, developed a dynamic of their own that eclipses the local congregation in its vital spiritual significance asserted by Luther? Have church assemblies even become the tools to drive social change deep into the heart of the church, thereby altering the Spirit’s relics in significant ways? Women’s ordination and the question of homosexuality are current issues that come to mind here.

It often seems that since the ancient Christian faith and life are often no longer defended in the congregation and Christian schools (and colleges!) – Luther called these institutions small but permanent church conventions – or at least not defended by the weapons of the Spirit, they will also no longer be defended (in the proper way) on the regional or national (let alone global) level. Political and psychological considerations have often replaced the open theological argument.

These are just some of the important issues raised by Luther’s book on the nature and character of the church and the purpose of church conventions.

Editorial Note

The translation presented in this booklet is based on the German text of Luther’s treatise in volume 21 of the St. Louis edition of Luther’s works. In order to be suitable to be published in this Lutheran Press series, the treatise was significantly

shortened: The entire first part of the original writing – it argues against basing the reformation of the church on early theological teachers and decisions of church conventions – has been omitted. The discussion of the decisions and procedures of the first four general church assemblies in post-apostolic times – Nicaea (325), Constantinople (381), Ephesus (431), and Chalcedon (451) – which make up the major part of the second part on church conventions, has also been omitted. Various digressions of Luther from the second and third parts have been omitted as well. Finally, the order of the second and third parts has been reversed: Our edition begins with a discussion of who and what the church is and concludes with a discussion of the tasks of church conventions and schools in this context.

It is hoped that, despite these changes, the main teachings of Martin Luther on this important subject have been preserved faithfully. They are offered here in a concentrated form that preserves his wording as closely as possible, so that they might once again serve as a call to faithfulness and watchfulness to the Christian church on earth, Christ's holy people.

Those readers desiring to read the entire treatise in English are directed to volume 41 of the *American Edition*.

The Translator

NOTES

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Lutheran Press

is a non-profit corporation established to publish and promote the theology of Martin Luther. Although many of Luther's works are already available to the general public, their publication as part of collected works editions has prevented them from being widely disseminated. Of special interest to Lutheran Press are the smaller topical works of Luther that continue to address the Christian Church today, but nonetheless, remain effectively unknown. The mission of Lutheran Press is to make such works available on the internet free of charge and by mail at a minimal cost, with proceeds used to publish additional works.

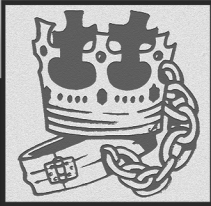
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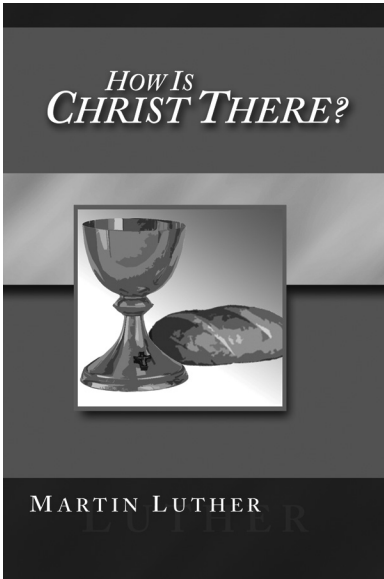
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