

The Augsburg Confession 8

Lesson Eight: Articles VII, VIII The Congregation of Saints

Introduction

At the time leading up to the Reformation there was “One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church” that had its seat in Rome. Nearly everyone in western Europe equated the Roman Catholic Church with “the Church.” Certainly there were Christians to the east, and the Orthodox Church held sway over much of eastern Europe and Russia, but by the time of Reformation the split between East and West, dating from 1054 AD, had been in place for nearly five centuries. People in the West knew little about the church in the East and vice versa.

Now western Europe itself was split by division. Congregations in the Reformation sphere had no interest in starting a new church body; they just wanted to return to preaching the gospel according to Scripture. They refused to submit to corrupt and theologically inept Roman-appointed bishops who had gained their position through money, favors, or connections, and who used their office for acquiring personal wealth. They also knew from Scripture that “the Church” was not to be equated with an outward, visible organization.

For reflection: What aspects of your church life have been seriously disrupted by the recent world pandemic? What aspects of your church life have not been disrupted at all? What does this tell you about the nature of the Church?

Article VII: The Church

¹ It is also taught among us that one holy Christian church will be and remain forever. This is the assembly of all believers among whom the gospel is preached in its purity and the holy sacraments are administered according to the gospel. ² For it is sufficient for the true unity of the Christian church that the gospel be preached in conformity with a pure understanding of it and that the sacraments be

administered in accordance with the divine Word. ³ It is not necessary for the true unity of the Christian church that ceremonies, instituted by men, should be observed uniformly in all places. ⁴ It is as Paul says in Ephesians 4:4, 5, “There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call, one Lord, one faith, one baptism.”

The Church will continue forever and will never perish. See **Daniel 7:27**.

- A. Appearances are often to the contrary, e.g., in times of persecution, when false doctrine becomes rampant, when worldly spirit invades the Church. **2 Timothy 3:1-5**. Sometimes God’s people become despondent or demoralized. Recall Elijah (**1 Kings 19:18**).
- B. Jesus said that his Church would continue, even though outwardly it might appear otherwise. **Matthew 16:18; Matthew 24:24**.
- C. The Church is so constituted, that it must endure: **Ephesians 2:19-22; John 14:16**.
- D. The Church is holy and pure. It is made up of sinners who have been cleansed by Jesus’ blood. **1 Corinthians 6:11**.

Scripture tells us that our ascended Christ is seated at the right hand of the Father, where he rules and governs all things. But when we look around us in the world today it may not look like Jesus is in control. How do we reconcile the promises of Scripture with what we see in the world today?

Prominent scandals involving clergy abuse have surfaced. How can such flagrant sin be found in the church?

The Church is the Communion of Saints.

- A. It is not an external organization. **John 18:36.** (The Roman Confutation rejected this article of the Augsburg Confession.)
- B. The saints (believers) are united by faith with God as well as with one another. **1 Corinthians 1:2; 1 John 5:1-2; Romans 10:13**
- C. This congregation is founded on the external means of grace. Hence the means of grace are the *notae ecclesiae* (marks/signs of the church). **Acts 2:42.**
- D. The Church administers the means of grace, the gospel in Word and Sacrament. **Matthew 28:19; Mark 16:15; Luke 22:19.**
- E. Even in heterodox churches there are believers, not as a result of the error, but because of the presence of the pure gospel in spite of the error. God's Word is powerful and will create and sustain faith. **Isaiah 55:10,11.**

Why can it be so attractive to equate "the Church" with an outward, visible organization on earth?

The unity of the Church is the unity of faith, not union of organization.

We can only gauge unity in faith by comparing the confession of the individual or the visible church body with Scripture.

- A. As the gospel makes the Church one, not many, so this unity appears in the unity of faith.
- B. The unity of the Church is not affected by purely external things. We can differ in outward ceremonies, rites, language.
- C. We must stay away from those who teach contrary to the truth. **Romans 16:17.**
- D. In spite of outward organizational schism, the true Church is one. **Ephesians 4:3-6.**

Explain the difference between *unity* and *union*. Why is this such an important distinction?

Article VIII: What the Church Is

¹ Again, although the Christian church, properly speaking, is nothing else than the assembly of all believers and saints, yet because in this life many false Christians, hypocrites, and even open sinners remain among the godly, the sacraments are efficacious even

if the priests who administer them are wicked men, for as Christ himself indicated, "The Pharisees sit on Moses' seat" (Matthew 23:2).

³ Accordingly the Donatists and all others who hold contrary views are condemned.

Many hypocrites are mingled with the Church on earth.

A *hypocrite* is one who claims to be a believer in Jesus Christ but is not. A hypocrite may be secretly impenitent or secretly reject Jesus as Savior. We cannot see hypocrites.

An *open sinner* is one who openly and outwardly lives a disobedient life. An open sinner may claim to be a believer in spite of open, unrepented sin, but the absence of repentance betrays his confession as false.

False doctrine taught in a church body can lead faithful believers away from Jesus by obscuring the gospel and building on a foundation other than the teaching of Jesus and his apostles.

All believers are confessors, but not all confessors are believers.

- A. The gospel retains its power and effectiveness, even when it is proclaimed by hypocrites. **Philippians 1:18.**
- B. Unbelievers are especially worthy of condemnation, when they proclaim the gospel. **Psalms 50:16-17; Romans 2:17-23.**

C. This, however, cannot harm those, who from the mouth of such hear the gospel. The power of the gospel is independent of the intention of him who proclaims it. **Philippians 1:15-18.**

D. The power of the gospel lies in its divine truth and rests on Christ's institution. **John 17:17.**

It is said, "We cannot know what is in a person's heart." Therefore we cannot know who is pretending to be a Christian outwardly but has inwardly rejected Jesus through impenitence or unbelief. Thus we cannot know for certain who *is* a Christian. Are there ever occasions when we can know definitively that someone *is not* a Christian?

The error of the Donatists

Donatus the Great became an opposition bishop in Carthage in AD 313, because Bishop Caecilian had been consecrated by a *traditor* (one who turned over sacred writings during the Diocletian persecution). The Donatists taught that Christians who had lapsed during a time of persecution had to be rebaptized before they could be readmitted into the church. Clergy who had succumbed to persecution had to be reordained or might not be readmitted to the clergy at all. The Donatists maintained that sacraments administered by lapsed clergy were not valid.