

CHURCH MEMBERSHIP: A LOOK AT THE SCRIPTURAL DISTINCTION BETWEEN CHURCH AND CONGREGATIONAL MEMBERSHIP

The essay committee said about the assignment of this paper: “With the ecumenical movement and the cultural trend of “spirituality” as opposed to “religiosity” on the rise, the time is right for a healthy conversation on the topic of Church Membership. Evangelical authors have begun to address the issue in recent writings. But what about Lutherans? What do we have to say on the topic?” The committee went on to say:

“This essay is exegetical and isagogical in nature. Potential points to address include:

- **On what basis does one become a member of the Holy Christian Church?**
- **Where does the concept of “church membership” come from in Scripture? Are there any direct references to church (congregational) membership in Scripture? If there are only a few, where do we see it indirectly inferred in the NT church?**
- **What would Scripture define as the purpose and responsibility of being a “member” of the Church?”**

Possibly because of their statement that “Evangelical authors have begun to address the issue in recent writings...But what about Lutherans?” the essay committee suggested some pertinent present day writing on this topic and quoted the following. We list these sources here to set the tone and to provide reference to other literature concerning our topic:

“ There is a surprising, even dangerous, gap in the literature on the church in the areas of church membership and church discipline. The former sets the boundaries of a leader’s responsibility, and discipline is the last option of a church when members will no longer live in fellowship with their brothers and sisters in the Lord and accept the guidance of their leaders.

“And so this book¹ is written first to church leaders, offering guidance on how they should receive and minister to those for whom they will have to give an account according to Scripture. But under the view of the church upheld in these chapters, the receiving of members and discipline of members are both acts of the greater church body, and thus all members of the church share in the accountability for each other. Consequently, *Those Who Must Give an Account* (Hammett and Merkel, editors) will be of interest to all believers.

“Among this volume’s nine notable contributors are Mark E. Dever (“The Practical Issues of Church Membership”), Thomas R. Schreiner (“The Biblical Basis for Church Discipline”), and Bruce Riley Ashford and Danny Akin (“The Church as God’s Missional People”).”

Millenials are the ones who give the topic of our paper special impetus as they spin their view of organized churches or the Church of God itself. They stay away from churches by and large. Some unabashedly say they no longer believe...or never did. They claim to be spiritual instead of religious. Some have had bad experiences within church groups. They don’t want to commit to a congregation’s rules or membership list. They speak of being too busy; they don’t have time. Organized things bother their free spirits and they would rather find out for themselves what they choose to believe. They are looking for what they call spiritual things but they really aren’t looking too hard. The following correspondence between Susie of Southwestern

¹ *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church*, Mark Dever

University in Georgetown, Texas (not her real name) and Pastor Hartzell perhaps shows where the cultural milieu is at right now with regard to church membership in a Christian church.

Susie wrote:

I do recognize this is a bit of an odd request, but I was wondering if it were possible to meet with someone who could teach me about the Lutheran branch of the Christian faith...what makes it different, what the holidays I am unfamiliar with mean, anything you choose to tell me.

Before I sound too odd, let me explain:

My name is Susie. I'm a student at Southwestern and a firm believer in the Christian faith. When I was growing up, I was raised Methodist and Baptist, but as I grew older I began to realize that there was so much more to our faith and what the Father has to teach me than what I was raised to believe. I became a Christian in my own form two years ago. Some call me nondenominational, but I choose to call myself simply "Christian", as labels put such a burden on us sometimes.

Since that day, I've participated in celebrations like Ash Wednesday and Lent, but I feel rather bad doing so while only knowing the bare bones of its reasoning. I chose this kind of faith because I wanted to learn God's full truth, whatever that may be for me, and have decided that during the season of Lent this year, that's exactly what I want to start doing.

This recent revelation that has finally made me desire to go deeper into what makes our faith so special- so I have come to you.

I thought about simply sitting in on one of your sermons, or observing for a few days, but it will only teach me so much. I feel like I would gain more if I could actually learn from someone who actually loves their faith as much as I do mine.

It does not have to be on a Sunday, and especially not during the week of Ash Wednesday, I know those times are the busiest, but if such a meeting is at all possible, I would love to learn all I can. Please let me know.

God bless.

Susie

And this is Pastor Hartzell's response after some time and some intermittent correspondence:

Susie,

I was looking over some of my email and I saw your original letter here. I remember you when you came and sat in on our service.

I just heard someone not long ago speaking to this business of just being Christian and not joining a church. I am a Lutheran and that isn't just a label. Luther himself didn't want people to call themselves Lutheran. That name was given by Luther's religious enemies. But, all right, I am a Lutheran. I'm a Lutheran because in studying the Bible and its teachings I realize as I see how Luther taught that of all people "out there" he teaches the way I believe to be right too. His reference is always the Scriptures. I don't believe it's right because he taught what he taught. I believe he is right (and was right) because what he said was the Scriptural and Biblical thing...about how we are converted, what baptism is, what we receive in the Lord's Supper, what good works are and what part they play in our Christian lives, etc. I am a Lutheran by

conviction and not by convenience. I am sure that there are probably many who may be Lutherans because that's just what they think they are and don't really know why.

All these different church names really do matter because they all represent different ways of interpreting the Scripture. I'm not saying that if someone is not a Lutheran they are not going to be saved. Being saved happens when we believe Jesus is our Savior, that he died on the cross for us, that we can do nothing to save ourselves, that God loves us and makes a place for us in his love and by his grace. The other things do make a difference though. False teaching is false teaching. I liken it to the following example. There are ten glasses in front of you filled with liquid, ranging from almost complete mud on through to absolutely clear water. If you drink the almost complete mud you are going to be very sick, if not die. If you drink the murky ones, you will probably be able to stay alive but you will be sick a lot. Which of the ten glasses would you choose? I would choose the clearest and most pure one. That's why I'm Lutheran. Mud is mud. You can say I am being judgmental (and maybe I am) but look at what happens when you don't get this right.

Non-denominational is really a misnomer. All that is saying is that the particular "non-denominational" church is flying under your radar. You know that this church has its own way of teaching and believing. It just doesn't choose to be identified by a name. It is going to be teaching you, for instance, what it believes to be true about baptism...whether that is something God does for you to save you or it is something you do to show God that you are saved. Both ideas are different. They really aren't compatible. That's why you have to be in the Word to determine whether the church you are attending is telling you what God means and what you know...or not. The Berean Christians in Acts 17:11 had it right. We hear about them, "*Now the Bereans were of more noble character than the Thessalonians, for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true.*" So Susie, that is what you have to do too. I hope that you are led to a good pastor and a good church that teaches correctly in all things. Ask the Lord to guide you there. If I can be of any help, I will do it. I would be glad to show you in the Bible where everything is that we say here and do here.

God bless you!

Pastor Hartzell

You can't get more stereotypically millennial than Susie was in her letter. She mentions her former unsatisfactory religious experience. She says she is a Christian "in my own form." She speaks disdainfully about being "raised to believe" something. She wants that need to believe to be answered from the result of her own search. About her present status she says "nondenominational" but prefers just "Christian" because church labels burden people unnecessarily and harmfully. She mentions the trappings of Christianity as something she has and wants but then says about their appropriateness and authority, "whatever that may be for me." She is choosing to do what she is choosing to do and she thought it would be kind of neat to do all this during the time period Christians call Lent. She realized that her faith ("our faith") is shallow and said she would like to go deeper into what makes it all special. She was invited to the Ash Wednesday service and told about the church's practice of closed communion as carefully as the pastor could say it. She came to the service and she also came up to the Lord's Supper. She demonstrated by that what so many believe: "it's my business...and God's...if I go the Lord's Supper. Susie never responded to further attempts to reach her and talk to her. In general, Susie demonstrated the Millennial mindset and practice Paul describes is coming in the last days, "...*having a form of godliness but denying its power.*"² You will hear it said by many like Susie who are proud to say, "I am not religious but I am spiritual."

² 2 Timothy 3:5

Susie can be put into that group which chooses to be identified as “Nones” when it comes to church and religious affiliation. It is said regarding Nones: “Estimates vary. This percentage of the U.S. population who claim no interest in affiliating with any religious group has been pegged as low as 10% and as high as 18%....I am suggesting that a large portion of the population, including roughly 50-60 million Millennials, has not found what they consider to be an authentic spiritual voice or at the very least would be willing to listen in hopes of finding one.”³ According to a political message from the then Presidential Candidate Ben Carson, “A very troubling new survey just released by the Pew Research Center...identifies a massive 49-percent of those surveyed as “Nones,” or those who don't identify with a religious group, say they left their church because they simply “don't believe.”

There can be no doubt that the concept of church is badly confused and refused by many in the culture today. We come now to the assignment at hand.

Where does the concept of “church membership” come from in Scripture? Are there any direct references to church (congregational) membership in Scripture? If there are only a few, where do we see it indirectly inferred in the NT church?

We look first to the Old Testament and the concept of church described there.

Deuteronomy 6:4-6 is the great SH'MAH. The imperative here suggests that there is a church of people...and a Church of all God's people. He speaks to both as if they were an individual. (It is similar to what he said when we read, “Jeshurun waxed fat and kicked.”) There is a plural imperative in Hebrew. This SH'MAH is the singular masculine imperative. God's people are spoken to as one individual...not as to many individuals. So in this passage that states that God is one it really is also stating that his people are one and he talks to them like that. This harmonizes with the New Testament which speaks of the Church being one body. All believers are parts of one body; probably more significantly, all members of a given congregation and church are to look at themselves as all necessary and functional members of the particular congregation. So when there is one part of the body that is suffering, the whole body does this too because of its parts. Either we are parts of this body or church or we aren't. Each part does its own work. Here, God is speaking to the complete unit of his people and he says they should “Hear!” (A similar treatment of this plurality in unity is in the New Testament letters written to the various places where the writers sent them....and, of course, to God speaking to the Seven Churches in Revelation.)

lhq – This is the Old Testament word that means to “call together” or “assemble.” The noun is translated in English “the assembly.” It describes a church setting or a church like setting. (Cf. The Assemblies of God) There was a reason for the church assembly as the Old Testament spoke of it. Something was causing these people to be asked to come as the gathering of God's people to listen to certain laws and proclamations. They were separate in this. Moses and his people were often ordered to “hold an assembly.” The assembly was occasionally ordered to take a particular offender outside the camp and put him to death. The word here “assembly” could well be also translated “congregation” in our parlance.

³ P. 3 in *Preach the Word*, May/June 2016. Mark Birkholz is quoting J.E. White in his article *Preaching with the Millennials.*”

Ecclesiastes is the Greek word for the Hebrew **tlhq**. About this word the JPS Hebrew-English TANAKH says in the footnote, “Probably ‘the Assembler,’ i.e., of hearers or of sayings.” It says in 12:9-11, “*A further word: Because Koheleth was a sage, he continued to instruct the people. He listened to and tested the soundness of many maxims. Koheleth sought to discover useful sayings and recorded genuinely truthful sayings.*”

There is a bridge at this point between the Old Testament word **tlhq** for church or assembly or congregation and the New Testament word for church **ekklhsia**. Literally, the Greek word from which all sorts of “ecclesiastical” words (in English) come means “the called out ones.” This implies the exclusive and inclusive nature of the church as this New Testament word suggests. The Greek dictionary uses these very English words to render the meaning(s) of the Old Testament Hebrew words. BAG⁴ says about **e[kk]hsia**, “...assembly, gathering, meeting...the church or congregation as the totality of Christians living in one place...the church universal, to which all believers belong...The local as well as the universal church is more specifically called (Greek: the church of God) or (Greek: the church of Christ).”⁵

hrxu is translated “a solemn assembly.” You can see in the following quote a careful examination of who was on the church’s clergy roster and who wasn’t! The account happened under Jehu’s watch. “*Jehu said, “Call an assembly in honor of Baal.” So they proclaimed it. Then he sent word throughout Israel, and all the ministers of Baal came; not one stayed away. They crowded into the temple of Baal until it was full from one end to the other.....Jehu said to the ministers of Baal, “Look around and see that no servants of the LORD are here with you---only ministers of Baal.” As soon as Jehu had finished making the burnt offering, he ordered the guards and officers; “Go in and kill them; let no one escape.*”⁶ There was a difference in the two churches, Divine Yaweh and Holy Baal, that is for sure!

Joel 2:13 speaks, “Rend your heart and not your garments. Return to the LORD your God, for he is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love, and he relents from sending calamity...Blow the trumpet in Zion, declare a holy fast, call a sacred assembly (**hrxu**)). Gather the people, consecrate the assembly..” (**lhq**) We see both Hebrew words used in the same context for essentially the same thing. This is the Hebrew poetical penchant to repeat things using synonyms with slightly different shades of meaning.

vdq or **ajgiazw** (in the New Testament) are words dealing with holiness...both the kind that separates and sets apart and the kind that makes a person pure and without sin and stain. The words “consecrate the assembly” above in Joel 2:13 have the Hebrew **vdq** there. This is an assembly of people who have made themselves holy by special washing or fasting or ceremonial practices related to dealing with things that made them dirty or in some way unfit for admission and participation in the general assembly. Chapters in the books of Moses are devoted to this making oneself---the assembly making itself---holy before the Lord. At that point it was the holy assembly...the Old Testament equivalent of the holy Christian Church. In the Apostles Creed we confess, “I believe in the Holy Spirit, the Holy Christian Church, the communion of saints,

⁴ Bauer Arndt Gingrich

⁵ BAG, p. 240

⁶ 2 Kings 10:20ff

the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting.” *Christian Worship* punctuates the creed in exactly that way. The Small Catechism punctuates the Third Article this way: “I believe in the Holy Ghost; the holy Christian church, the communion of saints; the forgiveness of sins; the resurrection of the body; and the life everlasting.” The Catechism makes “the holy Christian Church and the communion of saints” to stand together appositionally. *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* says, “After confessing “the holy catholic Church,” the Apostles’ Creed adds “the communion of saints.” In a certain sense this article is a further explanation of the preceding: “What is the Church if not the assembly of all the saints?” The communion of saints is the Church.”⁷

Keep in mind the two meanings to the word “holy” when it refers to God’s people or to the Church. “You shall be holy as I the Lord your God am holy” is the holiness of having all sins forgiven and to be without sin and pure. In the Church we are that because of what Jesus does for us on his cross, forgiving us for all sins and taking away anything that would make us impure or unholy. “These in white robes. Who are they?” And we know! They are the members of the Christian Church who have made their robes white in the blood of the Lamb. They are they who came from Christian churches in their earthly lives. The second idea, and it also applies to the Church of all believers and even to the members of individual Christian churches, is the idea to be made separate and chosen out of a bigger group. Peter talks about this kind of holiness: “*But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.*”⁸

This holiness is a wonderful definition and description of those who belong to the Church of God. They are the ones who have been singled out by the Spirit through the means of grace to be saints and “holy” people in both senses of the word. Luther also says about holiness, particularly the holiness of being singled out and set aside, “See, now you understand what hallowing is, what holy means. It is nothing but a separation from misuse to divine use, as a church is consecrated and set apart for the sole purpose of divine service. So our entire life is to be hallowed that no activity be carried on within us except such as honors the name of God, that is, kindness, truth, righteousness, and the like. Therefore the name of God is hallowed or profaned not only with the lips but also with all the members of the body and with the soul.”⁹ You could also consider that fledgling groups of Christians consider this holiness when they name themselves. Consider Holy Word in Austin for example. You can’t help but think of the First Petition in this regard: “God’s name is certainly holy by itself, but we pray in this petition that we too may keep it holy.” Those first believers in the group that would become Holy Word of Austin, Texas must have thought, “We want our assembly of believers to live under the moniker that God’s Word is a holy thing in our midst.”

The whole Old Testament was about a homogenous grouping. You were either in or you were out. There were outsiders who became insiders but the group was monolithic. There were the Children of Israel in Egypt. The Old Testament was the account of the closed society of God’s people.

⁷ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, pp. 268, 269

⁸ 1 Peter 2:9,10

⁹ *WHAT LUTHER SAYS*, Vol. 2, p. 654

But even there people were allowed “in” like Rahab and Ruth and Naaman the healed leper. Listen to the exchange in Naaman’s conversation about church membership with the Prophet Elisha: “*But may the LORD forgive your servant for this one thing: When my master enters the temple of Rimmon to bow down and he is leaning on my arm and I bow there also---when I bow down in the temple of Rimmon, may the LORD forgive your servant for this.*” “*Go in peace,*” *Elisha said.*” How could anyone say that the Old Testament does not talk about the Church of God being represented by the church organization of the Old Testament believers? Naaman realized there were churches he didn’t want to be in and a church he *did* want to be in!

The New Testament also talks about Church and church. The references to the Church and the church and the importance of belonging to both are legion in the New Testament. Virtually each of the epistles is a letter to a church and / or to the leaders of churches. It was first of all Jesus’ custom to be in the Synagogue on the Sabbath day.¹⁰ He went out to the mountains by himself, true enough, but he allied himself to a local synagogue where imperfect people came to worship. He taught there. He spoke there. It is impossible to think of this one who had this church going habit to not have gone to the synagogue with Mary and Martha and Lazarus on that last Saturday of his life at Bethany, the day before Palm Sunday.

1 John 2:19 is about church membership: “*They went out from us, but they did not really belong to us.*” In Galatians 2:12 Paul speaks of spiritual squirming regarding teaching and membership. “*Before certain men came from James, he (Peter) used to eat with the Gentiles. But when they arrived, he began to draw back and separate himself from the Gentiles because he was afraid of those who belonged to the circumcision group.* Paul’s verdict about Peter who got embroiled, “*He was clearly in the wrong.*” Luke 5:30 speaks about prevalent church grouping (by our definition) at the time of Jesus’ ministry, “*But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law who belonged to their sect complained to his disciples, “Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and ‘sinners’?”*”

Sheep stealing supposes and presupposes a certain church organization and orientation.

Philemon 1:2 *To Philemon our dear friend and fellow worker, to Apphia our sister, to Archippus our fellow soldier and to the church that meets in your home...* Colossians 4:15: “*Give my greetingsw to the brothers at Laodicea, and to Nympha and the church in her house.*” Listen to selected verses from Romans 16: “*I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a servant of the church in Cenchrea...Greet Priscilla and Aquila, my fellow workers in Christ Jesus. They risked their lives for me. Not only I but all the churches of the Gentiles are grateful to them. Greet also the church that meets at their house...All the churches of Christ send greetings.*” These references surely all talk about individual organizations and groupings of people within the fold of the Christian Church of all believers. Someone who visited one time would not have considered himself a member of the church. That would have come in knowing what it was that was taught and liking the group and knowing what held them together and wanting, finally, to be part of it.

The Lord of the Church acknowledged the presence of churches in his very striking presentations to the seven churches in Revelation 2 and 3. If you take the number 7 to be God’s usual number of completeness perhaps you could say that the Lord is speaking in Revelation to the sum total of

¹⁰ Luke 4:16

Christian churches, acknowledging that his message to each is essentially the same but that he does speak to each church's uniqueness and unique circumstance. He spoke to each different church personality and persona, addressing their "angel," their pastor. What better example of Church and church could there be?

Matthew 18 speaks of discipline within the churches and lists the three steps where tough love goes from personal to public. The last step is this: *"If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector."*¹¹ In 1 Corinthians 11:16 churches are mentioned in a disciplinary setting too: *"If anyone wants to be contentious about this, we have no other practice---nor do the churches of God.* The topic being discussed there is of length of hair which is kind of a matter of adiaphora and yet there is this dogmatic statement that none of the church of God have the practice. The point that could be made that if people want to be contentious (about anything) there are general parameters which police their corporate behavior and congregational behavior.

1 John and the other "Johns" talk about policing behavior pertinent to church groupings and individual peoples banded together with a doctrine and belief they are espousing and protecting. *"They went out from us, but they did not really belong to us. For if they had belonged to us, they would have remained with us; but their going showed that none of them belonged to us."*¹² Again, *"Dear friends,,do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world. This is how you can recognize the Spirit of God: Every spirit that acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, but every spirit that does not acknowledge Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the antichrist, which you have heard is coming and even now is already in the world."*¹³ Once more speaking to policing the preaching and teaching of the church: *"Watch out that you do not lose what you have worked for, but that you may be rewarded fully. Anyone who runs ahead and does not continue in the teaching of Christ does not have God; whoever continues in the teaching has both Father and the Son. If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching, do not take him into your house or welcome him. Anyone who welcomes him shares in his wicked work."*¹⁴ In fact, in this discussion of congregations/churches the beginning of 2 John even says, *"To the chosen lady and her children, whom I love in the truth..."* This could simply be a lady with her children. Most think, however, that this "lady" is simply a metaphor for a congregation...one of the ones in western Asia Minor that John was supervising.

Pastor Mark Jeske says about 2 John and 3 John, "And so John wrote these little notes: 2 John to warn against embracing false teachers and 3 John to urge Christians to embrace true teachers. The need for this kind of vigilance and work will never go away. Every business leader knows how critically important it is to recruit, train, and supervise workers. ...In the same way, leaders and members of a congregation cannot afford the luxury of sitting back and just being consumers of a religious experience. They must evaluate the people who do ministry among them. They

¹¹ Matthew 18:17

¹² 1 John 2:19

¹³ 1 John 4:1-3

¹⁴ 2 John 8-11

must learn to discern truth and error. They must learn how to train and choose good leaders and how to hold their leaders accountable for what they do.”¹⁵

The *Didache* was an early book which in some degree was like a confessional statement to determine true membership in New Testament and apostolic Christian churches...or those who professed to be that. The first sentence talks, “The teaching of the Lord to the Gentiles by the twelve apostles.” The second part of the book (chapters 7-10) speaks about acceptable practice regarding baptism, fasting and the Lord’s Supper. The third part (chapters 11-15) talks about the ministry and how to deal with traveling prophets of the kind 2 and 3 John speak about.

The Lutheran Confessions also speak very pointedly to the Church and to the church. Some may accuse us of circular argumentation when we go to our confessions and creeds to show why we believe in the Church of God and necessarily also to the church in our community where we are members. Creeds are important. We present what it is we believe about churches and we do it also in our confessions. That is exactly the reason for creeds. Churches that say they don’t have creeds and don’t need creeds and don’t want creeds have, first of all, just made a creed. They credibly cry to their members, “We are the church that believes that you don’t need a creed.” The Christian Church has seen the importance and need of a stated confession. It’s important. The Apostles Creed can’t be construed as restrictive or judgmental. It is what we believe. That is the purpose of church membership classes...or it should be. We want the new member to know what it is we believe so that this new member can truly and meaningfully say, “I want to be a member of this church because I understand what your teaching is and I agree with it.” Agreeing to disagree about what constitutes the church on earth and why it is so important doesn’t work.

The Lutheran Confessions speak specifically to our assignment: “*Church Membership: A look at the Scriptural distinction between church and congregational membership.*” The Confessions are statements of belief that identify and separate Lutheran churches and practice from other Christian churches where the people had a different spirit...and a different church.

“The Christian church (Church), properly speaking, is nothing else than the assembly of all believers and saints...” This is the definition posited by Article VIII of *The Augsburg Confession*.¹⁶ In Article VII it says, “For it is sufficient for the true unity of the Christian church (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.”¹⁷ This does not demand lockstep adherence to outward religious worship and liturgical practice. These are matters of adiaphora and the Confession says, “It is not necessary for the true unity of the Christian church (Church) that ceremonies, instituted by men, should be observed uniformly in all places.”¹⁸

The Small Catechism tones it down just a little when it says, “The Holy Christian Church is found only where the Gospel is preached and the sacraments are used.”¹⁹ The Small Catechism’s

¹⁵ Mark Jeske. *The People’s Bible: James; 1 and 2 Peter; 1, 2 and 3 John; Jude.* p. 285

¹⁶ Tappert, p. 33

¹⁷ Tappert, p. 32

¹⁸ Tappert, p. 32

¹⁹ Luther’s Catechism, p. 208

definition would allow there to be in the “assembly of all believers and saints” some who would not be (perhaps) believing “in conformity with a pure understanding” of the Gospel.

Article V says, “To obtain such faith (faith resultant from God’s justification of the sinner) God instituted the office of the ministry that is, provided the Gospel and the sacrament. Through these, as through means, he gives the Holy Spirit, who works faith, when and where he pleases, in those who hear the Gospel. And the Gospel teaches that we have a gracious God, not by our own merits but by the merit of Christ, when we believe this. Condemned are the Anabaptists and others who teach that the Holy Spirit comes to us through our own preparations, thoughts, and works without the external word of the Gospel.”²⁰ The ministry is clearly described in the context of churches where ministers ministered. The section also condemns other church bodies...”the Anabaptists and others.”

Note that the brackets signify that the heading (The Office of the Ministry) was put into the Confession after 1533 because the confessors realized they wanted to be more specific in discussing the church and its ministry. In this particular Article V in the more official German translation there is a footnote which says, “*This title would be misleading if it were not observed (as the text of the article makes clear) that the Reformers thought of “the office of the ministry” in other than clerical terms.*”²¹ When the article says, “Condemned are the Anabaptists and others who teach that the Holy Spirit comes to us through our own preparations, thoughts, and works without the external word of the Gospel”²² it is speaking about proper church practice. Though the term isn’t used, this is surely a doctrine of church fellowship in saying what the church must disagree with and even “condemn.” This kind of dogmatic approach and excluding nature is absent from the present church fellowship scene in most Christian churches. Notice also in Article V that there is no statement whatsoever that says that the “Anabaptists and others” are not members of the Christian Church. It does say that they would not be able to be members of the Lutheran churches because they taught things that had to be condemned.

Article VII of the Augsburg Confession speaks of the Church. It says in this regard, “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. 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. It is not necessary for the true unity of the Christian church that ceremonies, instituted by men, should be observed uniformly in all places.” Surely this is speaking to the idea of the Christian Church and of various Christian churches.

Article VIII of the Confession defines what the Church is. It says, “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” (Matt. 23:3).

²⁰ Tappert, p. 31

²¹ The Latin rendering of the title of Article V is: [The Ministry of the Church]

²² Tappert, p. 31

Accordingly the Donatists and all others who hold contrary views are condemned.” The spelling seems to allow for the Christian Church to be that all inclusive Church of the believers even though some members may belong to churches in this world which practice things our fellowship of believers condemns. Surely this is not saying that the only ones who are going to be saved are those who have membership in the WELS. We are sometimes accused of saying this, but we don’t say it. It does say that only those who believe in and live in accordance with Scripture are in the Christian Church. It also says that in our churches we cannot have fellowship and religious tolerance of those who teach and practice otherwise.

This surely presupposes an understanding that there are Christian churches with the ability to make these prescribed judgments as to who can rightfully be called members and allowed in fellowship with the body and those others outside the church who are “open sinners.” The culminating command of St. John in this discussion of false belief from within is, “*If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching, do not take him into your house or welcome him. Anyone who welcomes him shares in his wicked work.*”²³

Article XVII speaks about the return of Christ to Judgment. It is a very important statement about something that separates churches and believers in different Christian churches. The quote is: “Rejected, too, are certain Jewish opinions which are even now making an appearance and which teach that, before the resurrection of the dead, saints and godly men will possess a worldly kingdom and annihilate all the godless.”²⁴ The footnote for the German says, “Incited by Hans Hut and some Jews in Worms, Melchior Rinck predicted that the millennium would be ushered in during Easter, 1530.”²⁵ This would be a great matter today because it “condemns” millennialism in its incipient form. This condemnation of millennialism would be difficult with the present phenomenon of the teaching of the Millennium being the number one energy in many Christian churches today, as some maintain that it is. Article XVII speaks against Hans Huts’ militaristic and martial millennium and reminds us of those who questioned as Jesus rose again to heaven, “Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?”

Article XVIII speaks to the freedom of the will, “It is also taught among us that man possesses some measure of freedom of the will which enables him to live an outwardly honorable life and to make choices among the things that reason comprehends.” We might think of the Mormons or the Masons here who can make some happy moral statements of belief. There is nothing here, however, that says we should as a church endorse or embrace this type of person into fellowship. You do hear this proclivity and penchant in Christian churches today. This kind of blessing is also spoken of under the reach of the Fourth Petition. We ask God to give good things in life that will make the lives of his children easier and happier. We don’t have to be---nor should we be---in church fellowship with people who do not believe correctly, but still provide a blessing to our physical life.

These references from the Lutheran Confessions (and there are many more like them) speak to there being a Christian Church and to there being Christian churches. The term heterodox is used by us to describe churches other than ours that have true believers in them but do not have

²³ 2 John 1:10,11

²⁴ Tappert, pp. 38,39

²⁵ Tappert, p. 39

completely true and correct teaching. The direction is never “to agree to disagree.” Nor is the direction that we not be a member of a church because we don’t want to deal with the inevitable disagreement that will come caused by the false teaching of the others. No doubt the reluctance of many to maintain this dogmatic and strict statement against false churches comes from Post Modern thought that says there should not be nor can there be objective statements of truth which keep churches apart.

Ted Cruz in the recent political goings-on made some kind of reference to the “Body of Christ” rising up to vote. No doubt he was referring to the evangelical and Christian churches vote rising to help him and his cause. A commentator took entirely a wrong turn and ended up saying Cruz was talking about some kind of weird resurrection. In fact, Cruz was right in speaking about the body of Christ being the Church of the believers. Colossians 1:18 says, “*And he is the head of the body, the church.*”

So join a Christian church or not join a Christian church: this is the question.

In closing we refer to a present author who speaks to the above questions. His name is Jonathan Leeman and he is the editorial director for 9Marks (Southern Baptist) which deals particularly with discussions of what makes a healthy church in our world today. (cf. the beginning of the paper) 9Marks strives to show what a healthy Christian church looks like and provides help and direction to those who would like to become one. Jonathan Leeman wrote a book entitled *Church Membership: How the World Knows Who Represents Jesus*. He makes good points. Many people (maybe even most people) think they join a church like they would join a club. Rather we should think of the church as an embassy. An embassy is one entity representing itself to those who belong to it in another entity. The embassy extends the power and the protection and the law to its citizens who are living in another country or entity.

Consider some of Leeman’s points.

Many have the idea that joining a church is like joining a club. People think of it as just another voluntary association you make...if you want to. People think of church as a service provider...kind of like towing insurance or a roadside assistance offer. You join to better yourself, be entertained, find a niche, answer an interest. But if more important things come along, the “club” membership is set to the side and the real world with job and family and entertainment is allowed to prevail. Leeman’s suggestion is that rather than a club the church should be considered an embassy. We are members of another place...citizens the Bible says. We live here in this world in a foreign place, an indifferent place, and even and especially in a hostile place. We need the embassy God has provided for us, which is our church. The church protects us. The church represents us...and him. The church gives us an identity and maintains that identity. The church like an embassy provides care that comes because we belong to the ultimate authority who stands behind the embassy. None of us get the luxury of living in another country and not declaring our citizenship. We are illegal aliens if we do. Scripture says our citizenship in heaven. Our duty is to submit to the authority of the local congregation. Our church represents God’s power among us. Matthew 18 surely comes to bear here. We declare our citizenship in the Kingdom by the Lord’s Supper and our belief. We don’t just show up there for something spiritual between us and the Lord even though we do have that in the Lord’s

Supper. It is a foregone conclusion that when we approach the checkpoint between two countries that we will have to produce some form of identification. It's our passport. If you try legally to get into the United States you have to show with your passport that you are indeed a citizen here. You can't say to the border authorities, "My being here is my business." The Lord put his church here on earth (with the individual embassies) to represent his Kingdom and him.

Leeman commands that we commit to the local church and its authority. The church is where we want to be and it's where God wants us to be. It is of primary importance to us and not secondary. We don't do it because it would be nice to do it or convenient or even that it gives us special privileges. God wants us to belong to one of his churches and manifestations of some kind of malaise in people's thinking is shown by the following:

1. People can attend a church for a long time without thinking of joining.
2. Christians can think of getting baptized without joining.
3. Christians take the Lord's Supper without thinking of joining.
4. Christians view the Lord's Supper as their own private mystical experience and not as an activity for church members who are incorporated into life in the church together with the other believers there.
5. Christians don't integrate their Monday through Saturday lives with the lives of other believers.
6. Christians assume they can make a habit of missing a few Sundays a month or more.
7. Christians make major life decisions (moving, accepting a promotion, choosing a spouse, etc.) without considering the effect on the relationships in the church or without consulting the wisdom of the church's pastor or other members of the church.
8. Christians buy homes or rent apartments with scant regard for how distance and cost will impact their ability to attend and serve in the church.
9. Christians don't seem to realize that they should be involved in the physical and spiritual welfare of the other members of the church.

When people know what the Bible says about the church and about their being in that church the nine points will to some degree go away. We pray that this proper recognition of the church might be what our people know. God grant it! God help us as leaders to help our people see clearly the Church and their own church and value and appreciate and love both.

Perhaps one thing yet that isn't at variance with anything Leeman said here but that is different. Very few churches realize and know what it means when we speak about a church "service." Sad to say, many have the idea of driving into a facility to get spiritually serviced on a semi regular schedule at their own discretion and in their own good time. Luther and the first Lutherans knew what *Gottesdienst* was. The service wasn't about us serving God with our attention and our money. It wasn't even about serving other believers in the service. The service Lutherans understood was that God was serving us. We go to church to have our Lord serve us as Jesus served the disciples that last night in the upper room. This is our worship service and the worship service. This is the time when the Lord takes off his outer garment and washes us clean.

This is the Lutheran understanding of what happens in church on Sunday. This was the significance in Lutheran church architecture of the prominence of the Baptismal font and the altar and the pulpit towering over everything else in the church and dominant in its place and in its purpose. If all you see in the front of the church is a stage and a microphone then you and the people who attend that church will have a very difficult time understanding what the service is really all about.

And if we do realize in the service of our church what the service is predominantly about that our God comes to serve us there, how could we not treasure and value our church and want to be--- and insist on being---members in the church!

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