

The Augsburg Confession

Article 8

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The eighth article continues with the subject of the Church which was started in the previous article. This article states: *“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). Accordingly the Donatists and all others who hold contrary views are condemned.”*

What the Church Is

[Article 7](#) and Article 8 both state that the Church is made up of “believers”.

Note: The term “believers” – which is so often misused today – has been defined in the previous articles as those who believe in: the Trinity, sin, Jesus Christ as both true man and true God, and the forgiveness of our sins through the grace of God, not by our works or actions. This is what a “believer” must believe.

The previous article declares that such believers will be found wherever the Gospel is preached in its purity and where the Sacraments are administered according to the Word of God, just as the LORD Himself says: ***“So shall My word be that goes forth from My mouth; It shall not return to Me void, But it shall accomplish what I please, And it shall prosper in the thing for which I sent it” (Isaiah 55:11).*** This article states: *“the Christian church, properly speaking, is nothing else than the assembly of all believers and saints.”*

Notice how these articles describe the Church: the Church of God is not tied to one specific physical organization. The Church is not a specific earthly group or denomination since it is made up of all those who are believers.

Differences Concerning “the Church”

This is in complete opposition to the teachings of the Roman Catholic Church. The Second Vatican council declared: *“It is through Christ’s Catholic Church alone, which is the universal help toward salvation, that the fullness of the means of salvation can be obtained. It was to the apostolic college alone, of which Peter is the head, that we believe that our Lord entrusted all the blessings of the New Covenant, in order to establish on earth the one Body of Christ into which all those should be fully incorporated who belong in any way to the People of God.”* Here the Church is understood quite differently. They teach that the Church is the organization of the Roman Catholic Church.

The Third Article

This difference is also seen in the way the third article of the Creeds is understood and worded. The original wording of the third article, going back to the 4th century was: *“I believe in the Holy Ghost, the holy, catholic church...”* and *“I believe one holy, catholic and apostolic church...”*. The word “catholic” means “universal” and originally was understood to refer to the invisible Church which is made up of all believers in Christ. But over the centuries – and especially after the Roman Church adopted the term Catholic as part of its title – this was interpreted to mean the physical organization of the Roman Catholic Church.

The Roman Catholic Catechism in explaining the third article says this: *“What is the Church? The Church is the congregation of all baptized persons united in the same true faith, the same sacrifice, and the same sacraments, under the authority of the Sovereign Pontiff and the bishops in communion with him”* (The New St. Joseph Baltimore Catechism, Question 136).

Even before the time of the Reformation some had begun to use the word “Christian” in place of the term “catholic” in the Creeds. But after the Reformation its usage became common among those in the Lutheran church because of the misunderstanding associated with the term “catholic”.

The Papacy

Connected to this false notion concerning the Church is the teaching of the papacy. The Roman Church taught that salvation could come only through the visible church and the institution of the papacy. This teaching was based on the words of Jesus to Peter in Matthew 16:18: *“And I also say to you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build My church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it.”*

Based on that passage the Catholic Church asserts: “*Christ, the ‘living stone,’ thus assures his Church, built on Peter, of victory over the powers of death. Because of the faith he confessed Peter will remain the unshakeable rock of the Church. His mission will be to keep this faith from every lapse and to strengthen his brothers in it*” (Catechism of the Catholic Church, p. 156, ¶552).

But the keys were given to all the disciples and not to Peter alone (see Matthew 18:18; John 20:23) and the “rock” which Jesus spoke of as the foundation of the Church in Matthew 16 was not Peter himself, but the confession of Peter “*You are the Christ, the Son of the living God*” (*Matthew 16:16*). (This will be discussed further in Article XIV.)

The Validity of the Sacraments

This article continues: “*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*”.

At first this statement may seem out of place in this article which speaks about the Church. But the connection between these two is the fact that the Church is created and maintained through the Gospel in Word and Sacrament. So doubt about the validity of the Sacraments leads to doubt about the existence of the Church.

The Donatist controversy broke out in 311 AD when a church refused to accept Caecilian as the Bishop of Carthage because the man who had consecrated him as bishop had betrayed his faith in Christ during a time of persecution. The Donatists taught that sacraments administered by those who recanted their faith in Christ were invalid.

Imagine the consequences of such a teaching. If the blessings offered by God through reception of a sacrament depended on the faith of the administrator, how could Christians ever be certain that they were receiving those God-intended blessings? How could they be sure they had received the washing away of sin in baptism? How much time would be spent in worry over whether or not they had truly received the forgiveness of their sins through the reception of the Lord’s Supper?

What about Matthew 23:2? Why did the Lutherans quote that passage and what does it have to do with this topic? They wrote: *“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).”* From just that one verse it may be difficult to understand the connection, but Jesus continues in the following verse: *“Therefore whatever they tell you to observe, that observe and do, but do not do according to their works; for they say, and do not do” (Matthew 23:4).* The point is this: while the Pharisees were hypocrites (this is clearly pointed out by Jesus in Matthew 23:13 and the following verses) this did not change the Word of God. The Word remained true and effective in spite of the hypocrisy of the Jewish leaders who taught one thing, and did another.

Conclusion

The early church condemned the false teaching of the Donatists, and emphasized the Scriptural truth that the Sacraments are efficacious because of the power of God, not because of the faith of the administrator. It is the Christ Himself through the Word who makes the Sacraments powerful and effective in us as He Himself says: ***“All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (Matthew 28:18-19).***

What a blessing it is that we have been brought into the Church of God and that we can be confident of God’s working in us through the Word and Sacrament, since it depends only on God not on the administrators!