

VII. THE CHURCH AND ITS MINISTRY

1. We believe that there is one holy Christian church, which is the temple of God (1 Corinthians 3:16) and the body of Christ (Ephesians 1:23; 4:12). The members of this one church are all those who are the "sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:26). The church, then, consists only of believers, or saints, whom God accepts as holy for the sake of Jesus' righteousness, which has been credited to them (2 Corinthians 5:21). These saints are scattered throughout the world. All people who believe that Jesus is their Savior from sin are members of the holy Christian church, regardless of the nation, race, or church body to which they belong.
2. We believe that this holy Christian church is a reality, although it is not an external, visible organization. Because "man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart" (1 Samuel 16:7), only the Lord knows "those who are his" (2 Timothy 2:19). The members of the holy Christian church are known only to God; we cannot distinguish between true believers and hypocrites. The holy Christian church is therefore invisible and cannot be identified with any one church body or with the total membership of all church bodies.
3. We believe that the presence of the holy Christian church nevertheless can be recognized. Wherever the gospel is preached and the sacraments are administered, the holy Christian church is present, for through the means of grace true faith is produced and preserved (Isaiah 55:10,11). The means of grace, therefore, are called the marks of the church.
4. We believe that it is the Lord's will that Christians meet regularly to build one another up by using the means of grace together (Hebrews 10:24,25) and to work for the spread of the gospel into all the world (Mark 16:15). Since these visible gatherings (for example, congregations and synods) use the means of grace, they are called churches. They bear this name, however, only because of the true believers present in them (1 Corinthians 1:2).
5. We believe that God directs believers to acknowledge oneness in faith with Christians whose confession of faith submits to all the teachings of Scripture (John 8:31; 1 Thessalonians 5:21,22). We believe, furthermore, that individuals through their membership in a church body commit themselves to the doctrine and practice of that church. To assert that unity exists where there is no agreement in confession is to presume to look into people's hearts. Only God can look into people's hearts. It is not necessary that all Christians agree on matters of church ritual or organization. About these the New Testament gives no commands (Romans 14:17).
6. We believe that those whose confession of faith reveals that they are united in the doctrines of Scripture will express their fellowship in Christ as occasion permits (Ephesians 4:3). They may express their fellowship by joint worship, by joint proclamation of the gospel, by joining in Holy Communion, by joint prayer, and by joint church work. God directs believers not to practice religious fellowship with those whose confession and actions reveal that they teach, tolerate, support, or defend error (2 John 10,11). When error appears in the church, Christians will try to preserve their fellowship by patiently admonishing the offenders, in the hope that they will turn from their error (2 Timothy 2:25,26; Titus 3:10). But the Lord commands believers not to practice church fellowship with people who persist in teaching or adhering to beliefs that are false (Romans 16:17,18).
7. We believe that every Christian is a priest before God (1 Peter 2:9). All believers have direct and equal access to the throne of grace through Christ, the mediator (Ephesians 2:17,18). God has given the means of grace to all believers. All Christians are to declare the praises of him who called them out of darkness into his wonderful light (1 Peter 2:9). In this sense all Christians are ministers, or servants, of the gospel. God wants all Christians to share the message of salvation with other people (Matthew 28:19,20; 10:32).

8. We believe that God has also established the public ministry of the Word (Ephesians 4:11), and it is the will of God that the church, in accordance with good order (1 Corinthians 14:40), call qualified individuals into this public ministry (1 Timothy 3:1-10; 1 Corinthians 9:14). Such individuals minister publicly, that is, not because as individuals they possess the universal priesthood but because they are asked to do this in the name of fellow Christians (Romans 10:15). These individuals are the called servants of Christ and ministers of the gospel. They are not to be lords over God's church (1 Peter 5:3). We believe that when the church calls individuals into this public ministry, the Lord himself is acting through the church (Acts 20:28). We believe that the church has the freedom to establish various forms within the one ministry of the Word, such as pastors, Christian teachers, and staff ministers. Through its call, the church in Christian liberty designates the place and scope of service.

9. We believe that the church's mission is to serve people with the Word and sacraments. This service is usually done in local congregations. We look upon the pastoral office as the most comprehensive form of the public ministry of the Word. Pastors are trained and called to provide such comprehensive spiritual oversight for the gathering and nurturing of souls in congregations (1 Peter 5:2).

10. We believe that women may participate in offices and activities of the public ministry except where that work involves authority over men (1 Timothy 2:11,12). This means that women may not serve as pastors nor participate in assemblies of the church in ways that exercise authority over men (1 Corinthians 11:3; 14:33-35).

11. We reject any attempt to identify the holy Christian church with an outward organization. We reject any claim that the church must function in the world through specific organizational forms.

12. We reject as false ecumenicity any views that look for the true unity of the church in some form of external or organizational union, and we oppose all movements toward such union made at the expense of a clear confession of all the teachings of Scripture. We reject the contention that religious fellowship may be practiced without agreement in doctrine and practice. There must be agreement in the confession of scriptural doctrines, and also one's actions or practice must show that error is not tolerated.

13. We reject participation or membership in organizations that have religious features in conflict with the Christian faith, such as most lodges.

This is what Scripture teaches about church and ministry. This we believe, teach, and confess.