

Augsburg Confession: Article VIII; What the Church Is

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Although “the Church” properly is the congregation of saints and true believers, nevertheless, since in this life many hypocrites and evil persons are mingled therewith, it is lawful to use sacraments administered by evil men, according to the saying of Christ: “The scribes and Pharisees sit in Moses’ seat,” etc. Matt. 23,2. Both the Sacraments and the Word are effectual by reason of the institution and commandment of Christ, notwithstanding they be ministered by evil men.

They condemn the Donatists, and such like, who denied it to be lawful to use the ministry of evil men in the Church, and who thought the ministry of evil men to be unprofitable and of none effect.

The Eighth Article of the *Augsburg Confession* brings before us a very practical question. Does the effectual working of the Means of Grace, namely Word and Sacraments, depend upon the Faith of the individual who administers them? Throughout the history of the Christian Church this question has arisen. It is a question which at times has caused schisms in the outward church and has plagued the minds of many other believing Christians. Even today the question arises. When it does, fear and uncertainty may plague the most sincere and faithful Christians concerning the Word of God he has heard, and the Sacraments he has received from a man who has shown himself unfit for the office of the holy ministry. A study of this article should set aside those feelings of fear and strengthen such a person in his faith in the Lord Jesus. Besides this there are other practical applications to which this article speaks.

As we study this article, we shall divide our thoughts into four sections: I. The Church on Earth; II. The Power of the Gospel; III. False Teachings to be Rejected; IV. Other Practical Applications.

I.

The Church on Earth

In Article Seven, the doctrine of “the Church” was clearly set forth on the sound basis of God’s Word. As the title, “What the Church is,” of Article VIII would indicate, there is a close relation between the two. So close is this relationship that in the *Apology of the Augsburg Confession* these two articles were treated under the same heading, “Of the Church.” In this first section some parts may be a repeat of Article VII. They are needed though, as we establish the basis upon which this article of confession is made.

Properly speaking, “the Church” is, as we confess in the Apostle’s Creed, “the Holy Christian Church, the Communion of Saints.” It is a holy church for those who make up its membership have been cleansed from their sins by the blood of Christ. It is the Christian Church for “the Church” is “built upon the foundation of the Apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief cornerstone” (Eph. 2:20). St. Paul tells us also that “other foundation can no man lay, than that is laid, which is Jesus Christ” (I Cor. 3:11). Christ is also the overseer of the Church and those who are members in “the Church” are under His authority. “Christ is the head of the church,” as St. Paul told the Ephesians, (Eph. 5:23). “The Church” is also referred to as the invisible church for no man can definitely judge who does or doesn’t belong to it. It is invisible for man can not look with the naked eye into the heart of man to see whether his faith is true and genuine or false and hypocritical. Thus only God knows who belongs to “the Church,” for “The Lord knoweth them that are His” (II Tim. 2:19). It has also been called the “*una sancta*,” the one holy church, for there is only one true congregation of believers in God’s sight. This then is “the Church,” the congregation of true believers, those who confess their faith, professing Christians.

“The Church” is not limited to a particular building or a particular group of Christians. “The Church” is universal for it is found around the world. No one earthly group dare lay claim to the fact that they and they alone are “the Church.” This false teaching we find within the Roman Catholic Church, and is one that we must

vigorously object to. Jesus did not entrust the Word and Sacrament to one individual or even to one particular group, but to the priesthood of believers.

The presence of “the Church” can be seen however, by looking at a particular group and seeing if the Word and Sacraments are present in their true and correct form. Therefore where the Word is preached and the Sacraments are administered in their truth and purity, there you will also find “the Church.” These gatherings of individuals also become known as congregations or churches. This is the visible church. We can see people entering through the church doors to hear the Word and receive the Sacraments. We can hear the people confessing their faith as they recite the Apostles’ Creed. The one thing we can not do though, is definitely say that they are all members of “the Church.”

Some of the individuals may have joined the outward church for reasons other than confessing their Lord and Savior. For while all believers are confessors, not all confessors are believers. The hypocrite or false confessor, may present himself as the best Christian through words and actions. Yet his heart, that which the Lord wants, may be far from Him. To the Pharisees Jesus said, “This people draweth nigh unto me with their mouth and honoureth me with their lips, but, their heart is far from me” (Matt. 15:8). Sad to say this may be the case with some people who call themselves Christians and grant others to look upon them as Christian.

The church on earth is therefore not a pure church of true believers, but one where believers and hypocrite exist side by side. At times the hypocrite may even look like a more dedicated Christian than the true believer. The devil knows that he has the hypocrite under his power. He doesn’t have to work on him as much as he does the believer. Against the believer, the devil throws all his power. He may have the greatest struggle within himself as he fights against the devil with God’s help. As he struggles, his faith may become weak. His faith may not show itself outwardly by actions and some may think that such a person is not a good Christian. In the meantime, the dry hypocrite outwardly continues to show himself as a devout, believing Christian by actions in life deceiving the members in the congregation.

The fact that hypocrites and believers would be mixed side by side, Jesus taught us clearly through certain parables. The parable of the Tares and the Wheat, amply illustrates that the two may grow side by side in this world. The devil plants tares, hypocrites, among the wheat, believers. Jesus tells us that we should not try to separate the two here on earth, for in doing so we might also destroy some of the valuable along with it. Jesus says to leave both grow until the harvest time, judgment day, comes and then the separation shall be made. The Lord who looks into the hearts of people shall make the true and correct separation of believer and hypocrite, assigning each to his proper place in eternity.

Who may be hypocrites within a congregation? It is not limited to a particular class or race of people. It may be a rich man, or a poor man. It may be the hourly accepted member or the lifelong member who signed the charter constitution. It may be the person who comes to church every Sunday; who gives freely of his time, talents and treasures to the work of the church. He may partake of the Lord’s Supper often and show great concern for those who spurn the Lord’s invitation. He may be a leader in the congregation, perhaps even a member of the church council. It may even be the pastor or teacher whom the congregation has called to serve them. No one is exempt from falling into this sin of being a hypocrite. We are all human and subject to the same temptation that the devil uses in this world.

What is the congregation to do to guard against hypocrites in its membership? Before a hypocrite becomes evident to the congregation, it can only warn against the danger of this sin and stress the grave consequences of remaining a hypocrite. If however the time comes when the hypocrite reveals his true nature and no longer plays the role of a hypocrite, then the congregation must take firm action. That individual then is no longer a hypocrite but a manifest unbeliever who has joined himself to the outward congregation and must be dealt with by the true church. To allow such a person to remain within ones fellowship is wrong. By taking the proper steps of Christian discipline we are showing our love for that individual. We may point out to that individual his error and bring him back into the true membership of “the Church.” Then also to allow an exposed hypocrite to remain within the outward form of the church may prove harmful to some who truly are members of the true Church. The Lord clearly tells us that we should admonish and correct with all

longsuffering and patience, but when this is to no avail, then we are to “mark them which cause divisions and offenses contrary to the doctrine which ye have learned, and avoid them” (Rom. 16:17).

It is good to remember that a hypocrite never actually belonged to the “the Church” but only to the outward visible church. He in no way jeopardized the standing of the true church of God, for he never was a member of it while he was a hypocrite. When he became a hypocrite his membership in “the Church” was terminated.

To equate the church on earth with “the Church” would lead to a false conclusion. What we can say is that where confessing Christians join together in an earthly church, there most surely “the Church” will also be found. But along with the true believers there will also be found hypocrites mixed in amongst them in the outward form of the earthly church.

II. The Power of the Gospel

Our pastor is a hypocrite! How shocking it would be to a congregation to learn this about their pastor. Yet from time to time such shocking statements become reality. Perhaps for many years there was no indication which even pointed to this sad fact. He preached the Word of God in all its truth and purity, his sermons were forceful, well written, and edifying. He preached the law with all its force, exposing sin as the damning barrier of separation from God. He proclaimed the Gospel with all its grace and mercy for the comfort of the sinner and the strengthening of faith. He baptized my children. He stood before me in front of the Lord’s altar pronouncing the forgiveness of sins in the place of Christ. He offered me the assurance of that forgiveness by giving me the body and blood of Christ through the Sacrament of the Altar. He called upon the sick assuring them also of the Lord’s mercy.

But now we hear that he doesn’t practice what he preaches. He doesn’t believe the Bible exactly as he has been telling us all these years, he didn’t want to create a problem in the congregation so he preached what the people were accustomed to hearing instead of what he believes about the Bible. This may be only one of the many sad ways by which a pastor may show himself to have been a hypocrite.

But where does this leave the members of the congregation? What about the Word which they did hear from the pulpit? Was it God’s Word? Was it beneficial to them or have they not benefited at all from these services? What about my children’s baptisms? Are they valid? Have their sins been forgiven? Is the Holy Spirit working faith in their heart? Or what about the assurance of my sins being forgiven? Can I be sure my sins are forgiven? Did I truly receive the body and blood of the Lord or was it all a sham? Such questions as those may arise in the minds of Christians who have had such a sad experience with their pastor.

We turn to the *Augsburg Confession* and there we read in the article before us, “it is lawful to use Sacraments administered by evil men, according to the saying of Christ.”

The power of the Gospel does not get its force from the man who is using it, but that power is inherent in the Word itself. The effect that the Gospel message has upon the heart of a man does not depend upon the force with which the pastor may have spoken it or the style which he may have used to convey it or even the means by which that message was conveyed. The power lies in the Gospel itself. St. Paul to the Romans said, “I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God unto salvation” (Rom. 1:16). This same thought we read in Hebrews, “The word of God is quick and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword” (Heb. 4:12).

Neither does the intention of the man proclaiming the Gospel diminish the power of the Word. If the message is proclaimed in its truth the reason why an individual is speaking the Gospel does not affect it in the least. St. Paul speaking to the Philippians clearly sets forth this truth. While Paul was in Rome as a prisoner there were some men who wanted to become the center of attention like Paul. They thought that by preaching the Gospel as Paul had done that they too might receive some recognition and become a public figure like Paul. They were not preaching the Gospel with the concern of saving men’s souls, but were hoping to receive some personal glory from it. But Paul wrote, “Whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is preached; and I therein do

rejoice, yea, and will rejoice” (Phil 1:18). If the Gospel message is conveyed in its correct form, the intention of the speaker neither adds to nor detracts from its power and effectiveness.

The same truth applies to the Sacraments administered by a hypocrite. Again the power and effectiveness of the Sacrament does not depend upon the intention of the man administering the Sacrament but the power lies in Word of God which is used in the Sacrament by the command of Christ. It is Christ’s Words of institution which give the Sacraments their power as a means of grace. For as the pastor administers the Sacraments they are not his Sacraments or his words which are spoken but he is repeating the Words of Jesus. He is administering the Sacrament not according to his particular feelings but according to the command of Christ. When Jesus instituted the Lord’s Supper he did not say, Take eat, this is My body, provided the pastor is a true believer. He simply and clearly said, “Take eat, this is My body.” The same holds true for baptism also. Christ’s command to go and baptize in the name of the Triune God does not depend upon the faith of the individual performing the rite. It lies completely in Jesus’ command to baptize in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Ghost. Jesus placed these Sacraments into our hands to use; according to Word. The power of those sacraments does not originate in the hands of men, but has kept that power in His hands and bestows it through His Word. In the *Apology*, Melancthon clearly sets this forth when he writes:

Neither does the fact that the Sacraments are administered by the unworthy detract from their efficacy, because, on account of the call of the Church, they represent the person of Christ, and do not represent their own persons, as Christ testifies, Luke 10:16, ‘He that heareth you, heareth me.’ (Thus even Judas was sent to preach.) When they offer the Word of God, when they offer the Sacraments, they offer them in the stead and place of Christ. Those words of Christ teach us not to be offended by the unworthiness of the ministers. (*Apology, Triglotta, p. 237*)

We might also cite a reference from the *Through Declaration* where the Lord’s Supper is being spoken about:

They hold that the institution of this Sacrament made by Christ is efficacious in Christendom (the Church), and that it does not depend upon the worthiness or unworthiness of the minister who offers the Sacrament, or of the one who receives it, (*Thorough Declaration, Triglotta, p. 977*)

Scripture is most clear on this as the Lord Jesus himself testifies for us. Often the Lord spoke about the scribes and Pharisees and labeled them as hypocrites. He as the true God-man, who could look into the hearts of men, knew exactly the feelings and thoughts of these religious leaders. So we hear Jesus upbraiding them in the following manner:

Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites for ye make clean the outside of the cup and of the platter, but within they are full of extortion and excess.... Woe unto your scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites for ye are like unto whited sepulchres which indeed appear beautiful outward, but are within full of dead men’s bones and of all uncleanness. (Matt. 23:25, 27)

Jesus surely was no friend of the scribes and Pharisees, and He wanted to expose these men for what they really were, false religious leaders, hypocrites of the boldest form. But to His disciples and the people Jesus said the following:

The scribes and Pharisees sit in Moses’ seat: All therefore whatsoever they bid you observe, that observe and do; but do not ye after their works; for they say, and do not. (Matt. 23:23)

The scribes and Pharisees, although they were hypocrites proclaimed the Word of God. They preached from the Law of Moses. They proclaimed that message, transferred from God to men through Moses in its true and

correct form. They made sure that circumcision, a sacrament of the Old Testament, was carried out very exactly to the command of God in the Old Testament. Jesus told the people that they were to listen to the words which the Pharisees spoke because they were not just their words, or even just the words of Moses, but were in fact the very words of God. A word of caution was in place however, for they were not just to listen to the words but also do them. They were not to follow the example of the Pharisees but follow the Word of God, which word may have come from the lips of a hypocritical Pharisee.

Based upon this clear word of Jesus, the writers of Article VIII could correctly say:

Both the Sacraments and Word are effectual by reason of the institution and commandment of Christ, notwithstanding they be administered by evil men.

Based upon that clear word of God and the Confessions we may comfort those who doubt the effectiveness of the Word and Sacraments received yet the hand of an exposed hypocrite. The power of the Gospel, in Word and Sacraments, lies within the Gospel itself and not in the hands of he who administers it.

Concerning those who are hypocrites while they proclaim the Word scripture speaks a fearful warning of condemnation. St. Paul speaking to the Romans 2:1, tells us that they are “inexcusable” who condemn sin in others but not in themselves. Then in verses 17-23 he writes the following:

Behold, thou art called a Jew, and retest in the law and makest thy boast of God. And knowest his will, and a approvest the things that are more excellent, being instructed of the law; and art confident that thou thyself art a guide to the blind, a light of them which are in darkness, and instructor of the foolish, a teacher of babes which hast the form of knowledge and of the truth of law. Thou therefore which teachest another, teachest thou not thyself? Thou that preachest a man should not steal, dost thou steal? Thou sayest a man should not commit adultery, dost thou commit adultery? Thou that abhorrest idols, dost thou commit sacrilege? Thou that makest thy boast of the law, through breaking the law dishonourest thou God? (Rom. 2:17-23)

Although Paul was not speaking directly of a pastor, yet how fitting the words apply to a hypocritical pastor. They, who have learned the Word through diligent study and who have been ordained to proclaim that Word, are inexcusable if now they practice deception not living themselves by the Word which they would teach to others and have others live by.

To the believers the Lord would also give Words of warning. For while Jesus tells us that believers may worthily receive the Word and Sacraments from a hypocrite, yet Jesus is very clear that we should not accept one who preaches false doctrine. Jesus warned his disciples:

Beware of false prophets, which come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ravening wolves. (Matt. 7:15)

Even though the man may be very sincere, have a great personality and a wonderful way with people, yet his teachings are contrary to God’s Word, or if he doesn’t teach all of God’s Word, then we are to avoid him and not accept him as a called servant of God. Likewise if a congregation were to have the sad experience of discovering that their pastor was a hypocrite, even though they had worthily received the Word and Sacraments, yet they must not allow such a situation to remain, but take the proper steps to remove that man from his high calling as a servant of the Lord. If they would not, they too would become hypocrites for not openly carrying out God’s Word by ‘marking’ and ‘avoiding’ those who profess and teach otherwise than God’s Word teaches. These are truly stern warnings to those who have been entrusted with God’s powerful Gospel of salvation.

III. False Teachings to be Rejected

The one group which Article VIII mentions in particular is the Donatists. A brief history of this sect is necessary to understand why the writer of the *Augsburg Confession* condemned their teaching.

From its conception the Christian Church has suffered persecution of one type or another. The early Christians suffered much at the hands of the Jews and then also the Roman emperors. The persecution of Nero and Diocletian are perhaps the most remembered. It was during these times of physical persecution that many Christians found it difficult to confess Christ in the face of death. They denied any association with the Christian Church or with the name of Christ.

After the persecution was over however, then these same individuals wished to be reinstated as members in the church. Rigid regulations and safeguards were now set forth to guard against this same falling away taking place at some future time. These individuals who had denied the church in the face of death and had asked to be reinstated became known as “*lapsi*.” They were people who had a lapse in their faith.

During the Diocletian persecution at the beginning of the fourth (300) century, a special form of “*lapsi*” appeared. Christians now were not only asked to deny Christ, but also to hand over the sacred Scriptures, the vessels of their church, or even a membership list of their congregation. At the threat of torture and death many complied. Among them were also a number of ministers and high church officials. This special group of “*lapsi*” became known as “*traditores*,” or those who had handed over.

In 311 the Bishop of Carthage in North Africa died and the archdeacon Cecillian was in line to succeed him. Since there was some opposition to his appointment, the Friends of Cecillian rushed to get his election final. They asked a certain Felix of Aptunga to ordain Cecillian instead of the regular man from that area. Soon after, a synod or church meeting was called and the bishops present decided that Cecillian had not been properly ordained. They gave the reason that Felix had been a “*traditor*” and therefore could not perform the rite of ordination. This group of bishops then erected a man of their own in opposition to Cecillian. In 315 a man by the name of Donatus became this opposition bishop. In a short time this group under the leadership of Donatus gathered a large following in North Africa, perhaps having as many as 270 bishops at one time.

This group, which became known as the Donatists, believed that the presence of the true church depended upon the holiness of the ministry. They held that any pastor who had in some way tainted his ministry could not perform or administer any rites or sacraments. The ordination of Cecillian, performed by Felix the “*traditor*” was therefore not valid. This also meant that a *traditor* could not perform a baptism nor administer the Lord’s Supper. They said that a baptism performed by a “*traditor*” was no baptism and as a result they re-baptized many among their membership.

Widespread opposition to their views was voiced from the churches in Europe. In 316, the Synod of Arles, a meeting of bishops in southern France, opposed the views of the Donatist. They said that a baptism performed by a “*traditor*” was valid provided it was in the name of the Triune God. They also stated that a man should not be removed from office if he had been ordained by a “*traditor*” provided he was conducting himself properly in the office.

For almost 100 years the Donatists were a powerful sect in north Africa. But then in 411 they suffered a setback when Augustine upheld the truth against them in a debate. Gradually their numbers dwindled and with the invasion of the Vandals in the fifth century they almost disappeared completely dropping from sight in the seventh century when the Moslems invaded Africa.

While it is true that the Donatists themselves were not a problem for the writers of the *Augsburg Confession*, there were those who held similar views and stood for the same false teachings as did the Donatists. These are mentioned with the phrase, “and such like.” Although no names are mentioned in the *Augsburg Confession* itself, Melancthon mentions one group in the Apology called the Wycliffites. John Wycliff had gained quite a following in England opposing the Roman church in the middle of the fourteenth century. He denounced many of the rituals of the Roman Church and was very critical of the friars and priests because of their lack of dedication and the poor example they were to their churches. He then also came to this conclusion

that men sinned when they received the Sacraments from individuals who were unworthy to hold a churchly office. It is against this point among others that we take exception and against which Article VIII speaks.

Another group active around the time of Luther and later was known as the Anabaptists. They did not believe in infant baptism and the power of the Word to work faith in baptism. They demanded a very high moral standard of their people, at many times becoming radical in their views. This high moral standard was to be especially true of their pastors. Therefore they felt that the Sacraments were of no value if administered by a man whose moral character did not meet their self-imposed standards. In such cases they would re-baptize the individual who wished to join their group.

A fourth group which appeared shortly after the *Augsburg Confession* had been written was the Schwenckfeldians. In the *Formula of Concord* the following teaching of the Schwenckfeldians was condemned:

That the minister of the Church who is not on his part truly renewed, righteous, and godly cannot teach other men with profit or administer real, true sacraments. (Formula of Concord, Art. XXI, 35: *Triglotta*, p. 1101)

Along with those we might also place the Roman Church. Within their teachings they also hold that one benefits only from the Word and Sacraments when the intention of the administrator is in complete harmony with the teachings and faith found within the church. Here also the power of the Word and Sacraments is taken away from them and placed in the hands of men, the intentions of man as he administers the Means of Grace, being most important.

IV. Other Practical Applications

Perhaps without realizing it, we apply this Article of faith many times within our congregations. Instead of looking at it from the negative side, we shall now speak more to the positive.

First we must repeat that this Article should be of comfort to any congregation which may have had a sad experience by having their pastor resign from the ministry because he was unworthy for the office. We can assure our fellow Christians that they have benefited from the hearing of the Word, that the baptisms performed are valid, and that they truly did receive the Lord's body and blood as they partook of the Sacrament.

Secondly, I'm sure that many pastors have been asked the question, "Must I be baptized again?" The new family in the adult information class may ask this question for themselves and their children. I think that in most cases, after asking several questions our answers are, "No, you do not have to be baptized again." Why? This article says the answer. We believe that a baptism performed by a hypocrite or a person not in complete agreement in faith is valid, provided it was carried out according to the command of Christ.

Today however we should make sure though that it was a valid baptism. Some churches only "christen" a child and do not baptize according to the command of Jesus, the "christening" being nothing more than the naming of the child. Other churches who baptize, deny the Trinity and therefore, even if they use the proper words, yet have not meant what the Lord intended when he instituted baptism. In such cases where the child has only been "christened" or where the words spoken were not the true words of Jesus, but the invention of man, we baptize according to the command of Christ. Notice that it is never spoken of as re-baptism, but only as baptism, for the former rites performed upon that individual were not baptism in its correct sense.

In the case of a person not knowing whether he was baptized properly, there we would baptize that individual according to the command of Christ, as a comfort and assurance for the person.

Concerning the Lord's Supper as celebrated in other churches we must say the following. If the institution of Jesus is followed and His words are used in their proper context and meaning, then the Sacrament is worthily received according to the institution of Christ. If however the words of Christ are changed in meaning, as they are in the Reformed and Roman Catholic churches then the command of Christ is not being followed and no true Sacrament takes place according to the institution of Christ.

As we summarize our thoughts, we must turn our attention to the Lord God. We must give to Him our thanks that in His wisdom, He has not entrusted the power of the Word or the Sacraments to the hands of sinful men, but has kept it in His loving and merciful hands. For if men were responsible the question might always be asked, "Is my pastor a true believer? Is he worthy to transmit the saving power of salvation through the Sacraments?" But when the power of God to work salvation is contained within the Word itself, then I know my salvation is sure. I have no doubts as to whether the Word is effective in me, or the Sacraments beneficial to me. Therefore, "whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is preached; and I therein do rejoice, yea, and will rejoice" for "I am not ashamed of the Gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God unto salvation to everyone that believeth." (Phil. 1:18, Rom. 1:16)