

Augsburg Confession, VII. [The Church]

¹ It is also taught among us that one holy Christian church will be and remain forever. This is the assembly of all believers among who **the Gospel is preached in its purity and the holy sacraments are administered according to the Gospel.** ² For it is sufficient for the true unity of the Christian church that the Gospel be preached in conformity with a pure understanding of it and that the sacraments be administered in accordance with the divine Word. ³ It is not necessary for the true unity of the Christian church that ceremonies, instituted by men, should be observed uniformly in all places. ⁴ It is as Paul says in Eph. 4:4, 5, “There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call, one Lord, one faith, one baptism.”

Augsburg Confession, VIII. [What the Church Is]

¹ Again, although the Christian church, properly speaking, is nothing else than the assembly of all believers and saints, yet because in this life many false Christians, hypocrites, and even open sinners **remain among** the godly, the sacraments are efficacious even if the priests who administer them are wicked men, for as Christ himself indicated, “The Pharisees sit on Moses’ seat” (Matt. 23:2).

⁴⁰⁰ Although our opponents arrogate to themselves the name of the church, therefore, we know that the church of Christ is among **those who teach the Gospel of Christ**, not among those who defend wicked opinions against the Gospel, as the Lord says, “My sheep hear my voice” (John 10:27). Augustine says: “The question is, **where is the church?** What then shall we do? Shall we seek it in our own words or in the words of its head, our Lord Jesus Christ? I think we should seek it in the words of him who is the truth and who knows his body best.”⁹ The judgments of our opponents will not bother us since they defend human opinions contrary to the Gospel, contrary to the authority of the holy Fathers, and contrary to the testimony of pious minds.

Apology to the Augsburg Confession, Articles VII and VIII. The Church

¹ The authors of the Confutation have condemned the seventh article of our Confession in which we said **the church is the assembly of saints.**¹ And they have added a lengthy dissertation, that **the wicked are not to be separated from the church** since John compared the church to a threshing floor on which chaff and wheat are heaped together (Matt. 3:12) and Christ compared it to a net in which there are both good and bad fish (Matt. 13:47).

² The saying is certainly true that there is no defense against the attacks of slanderers. Nothing can be said so carefully that it can avoid misrepresentation. ³ That is why we added the eighth article, **to avoid the impression that we separate evil men and hypocrites from the outward fellowship of the church** or deny efficacy to the sacraments which evil men or hypocrites administer. Thus we do not need to defend ourselves at any length against this slander. The eighth article exonerates us enough. **We concede that in this life the hypocrites and evil men are mingled with the church** and are members of the church **according to the outward associations of the church’s marks** — that is, Word, confession, and sacraments — especially if they have not been excommunicated. The sacraments do not lose their efficacy when they are administered by evil men; indeed, we may legitimately use sacraments that are administered by evil men. ⁴ Paul also predicts that Antichrist

will “take his seat in the temple of God” (2 Thess. 2:4), that is, that he will rule and hold office in the church.

⁵ The church is not merely an association of outward ties and rites like other civic governments, however, but it is mainly an association of faith and of the Holy Spirit in men’s hearts. To make it recognizable, this association has **outward marks**, the pure teaching of the Gospel and the administration of the sacraments in harmony with the Gospel of Christ. This church alone is called the body of Christ, which Christ renews, consecrates, and governs by his Spirit, as Paul testifies when he says (Eph. 1:22, 23), “And he has made him the head over all things for the church, which is his body, the fullness,” that is, the whole congregation “of him who fills all in all.” Thus those in whom Christ is not active are not members of Christ. This much our opponents also admit, that the wicked are dead members of the church. ⁶ We wonder why they criticize our description, which speaks of living members.

⁷ We have not said anything new. Paul defined the church in the same way in Eph. 5:25-27, saying that it should be purified in order to be holy. He also added **the outward marks**, the Word and the sacraments. He says, “Christ loved the church and gave himself up for it, that he might sanctify it, having cleansed it by the washing of water with the word, that the church might be presented before him in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that it might be holy and without blemish.” We have repeated this statement almost verbatim in our Confession. The Creed also defines the church this way, teaching us to believe that there is **a holy, catholic church. Certainly the wicked are not a holy church!** ⁸ The following phrase, “the communion of saints,” seems to have been added to explain what “church” means, namely, the assembly of saints who share the association of the same Gospel or teaching and of the same Holy spirit, who renews, consecrates, and governs their hearts.

⁹ We set forth this doctrine for a very necessary reason. We see the infinite dangers that threaten the church with ruin. There is an infinite number of ungodly within the church who oppress it. The church will abide nevertheless; it exists despite the great multitude of the wicked, and Christ supplies it with the gifts he has promised — the forgiveness of sins, answer to prayer, and the gift of the Holy Spirit. The Creed offers us these consolations that we may not despair but may know all this. ¹⁰ It says “the church catholic” lest we take it to mean an outward government of certain nations. It is, rather, made up of men scattered throughout the world who agree on the Gospel and have the same Christ, the same Holy Spirit, and the same sacraments, whether they have the same human traditions or not. The gloss in the *Decrees* says that “the church in the larger sense includes both the godly and the wicked,” and that the wicked are part of the church only in name and not in fact, while the godly are part of the church in fact as well as in name. ¹¹ The Fathers say the same thing in many places. For example, Jerome says, “Therefore the sinner who has been defiled by any spot cannot be called part of the church of Christ, nor can he be said to be subject to Christ.”³

¹² **Hypocrites and evil men are indeed associated with the true church as far as outward ceremonies are concerned. But when we come to define the church, we must define that which is the living body of Christ and is the church in fact as well as in name.** ¹³ We must understand what it is that chiefly makes us members, and living members, of the church. **If we were to define the church as only an outward organization** embracing both the good and the wicked, then men would not understand that the kingdom of Christ is the righteousness of the

heart and the gift of the Holy Spirit but would think of it as only the outward observance of certain devotions and rituals. ¹⁴ Then, too, what difference will there be between the church and the Old Testament people? Yet Paul distinguishes the church from the Old Testament people by the fact that the church is a spiritual people, separated from the heathen not by civil rites but by being God's true people, reborn by the Holy Spirit. Among the Old Testament people, those born according to the flesh had promises about physical well-being, political affairs, etc. in addition to the promise about Christ. Because of these promises even the wicked among them were called the people of God inasmuch as God had separated these physical descendants from other nations by certain outward ordinances and promises. Nevertheless, these evil people did not please God. ¹⁵ But the Gospel brings not the shadow of eternal things but the eternal blessings themselves, the Holy Spirit and the righteousness by which we are righteous before God.

¹⁶ According to the Gospel, therefore, only those are the true people who accept this promise of the Spirit. Besides the church is the kingdom of Christ, the opposite of the kingdom of the devil. It is evident, moreover, that the wicked are in the power of the devil and are members of the devil's kingdom, as Paul teaches in Eph. 2:2 when he says that the devil "is now at work in the sons of disobedience." Certainly the Pharisees had an outward affiliation with the church (that is, with the saints among the Old Testament people), for they held high positions and they sacrificed and taught. To them Christ says (John 8:44), "You are of your father the devil." **Thus the church, which is truly the kingdom of Christ, is, precisely speaking, the congregation of the saints.** The wicked are ruled by the devil and are his captives; they are not ruled by the Spirit of Christ.

¹⁷ But why belabor the obvious? If the church, which is truly the kingdom of Christ, is distinguished from the kingdom of the devil, it necessarily follows that **since the wicked belong to the kingdom of the devil, they are not the church.** In this life, nevertheless, because the kingdom of Christ has **not yet been revealed**, they are mingled with the church and hold office in the church. ¹⁸ The fact that the revelation has not yet come does not make the wicked the kingdom of Christ. What he quickens by his Spirit is always the same kingdom of Christ, **whether it be revealed or hidden under the cross**, just as Christ is the same, whether now glorified or previously afflicted. ¹⁹ Christ's parables agree with this. He clearly says in Matt. 13:38 that "the good seed means the sons of the kingdom, the weeds are the sons of the evil one." The field, he says, is the world, not the church. Thus John speaks (Matt. 3:12) about the whole Jewish nation and says that the true church will be separated from it. Therefore this passage is more against our opponents than for them since it shows that the true and spiritual people will be separated from the physical people. Christ is talking about **the outward appearance of the church** when he says that the kingdom of God is like a net (Matt. 13:47) or like ten virgins (Matt. 25:1). He teaches us that the church is **hidden** under a crowd of wicked men so that this stumbling block may not offend the faithful and so that we may know that the Word and the sacraments are efficacious even when wicked men administer them. Meanwhile he teaches that though these wicked men participate in the outward marks, still they are not the true kingdom of Christ and members of Christ, for they are members of the kingdom of the devil.

²⁰ We are not dreaming about some Platonic republic, as has been slanderously alleged, but we teach that this church actually exists, made up of true believers and righteous men scattered throughout the world. And we add its marks, the pure teaching of the Gospel and the sacraments. This church is properly called "the pillar of truth" (1 Tim. 3:15), for it retains the pure Gospel and

what Paul calls the “foundation” (1 Cor. 3:12), that is, the true knowledge of Christ and faith. Of course, there are also many weak people in it who build on this foundation perishing structures of stubble, that is, unprofitable opinions. But because they do not overthrow the foundation, these are forgiven them or even corrected.²¹ The writings of the holy Fathers show that even they sometimes built stubble on the foundation but that this did not overthrow their faith. Most of what our opponents maintain, on the other hand, does overthrow faith, as when they condemn our doctrine that the forgiveness of sins is received by faith. It is also an open and wicked error when our opponents teach that men merit the forgiveness of sins by their love for God before entering a state of grace. This, too, means to remove Christ as the foundation. Similarly, why will faith be necessary if sacraments justify *ex opere operato*,⁴ without a good attitude in the one using them?

²² Just as the church has the promise that it will always have the Holy Spirit, so it also has the warning that there will be ungodly teachers and wolves. But the church, properly speaking, is that which has the Holy Spirit. Though wolves and ungodly teachers may run rampant in the church, they are not, properly speaking, the kingdom of Christ. So Lyra testifies when he says: “The church is not made up of men by reason of their power or position, whether ecclesiastical or secular, because princes and supreme pontiffs as well as those in lesser stations have apostasized from the faith. Therefore the church is made up of those persons in whom there is true knowledge and the confession of faith and truth.”⁵ What have we said in our Confession that is different from what Lyra says here?

²³ Perhaps our opponents demand some such definition of the church as the following. *It is the supreme outward monarchy of the whole world in which the Roman pontiff must have unlimited power beyond question or censure. He may establish articles of faith, abolish the Scriptures by his leave, institute devotions and sacrifices, enact whatever laws he pleases, excuse and exempt men from any laws, divine, canonical, or civil, as he wishes. From him the emperor and all kings have received their power and right to rule, and this at Christ’s command; for as the Father subjected everything to him, so now this right has been transferred to the pope. Therefore the pope must be lord of the whole world, of all the kingdoms of the world, and of all public and private affairs. He must have plenary power in both the temporal and the spiritual realm, both swords, the temporal and the spiritual.*²⁴ Now, this definition of the papal kingdom rather than of the church of Christ has as its authors not only the canonists but also Dan. 11:36-39.

²⁵ If we defined the church that way, we would probably have fairer judges. There are in existence many extravagant and wicked writings about the power of the Roman pope for which no one has ever been brought to trial. We alone are accused, because we preach the blessing of Christ, that we obtain forgiveness of sins through faith in him and not through devotions invented by the pope.

²⁶ Christ, the prophets, and the apostles define the church as anything but such a papal kingdom.²⁷ Nor should that be transferred to the popes which is the prerogative of the true church: that they are pillars of the truth⁶ and that they do not err. How many of them care anything for the Gospel or think it worth reading? Many openly ridicule all religions, or if they accept anything, accept only what agrees with human reason and regard the rest as mythology, like the tragedies of the poets.

²⁸ In accordance with the Scriptures, therefore, we maintain that the church in the proper sense is the assembly of saints who truly believe the Gospel of Christ and who have the Holy Spirit. Nevertheless, we grant that the many hypocrites and evil men who are mingled with them in this life

share an association in the outward marks, are members of the church according to this association in the outward marks, and therefore hold office in the church. When the sacraments are administered by unworthy men, this does not rob them of their efficacy. For they do not represent their own persons but the person of Christ, because of the church's call, as Christ testifies (Luke 10:16), "He who hears you hears me." When they offer the Word of Christ or the sacraments, they do so in Christ's place and stead. Christ's statement teaches us this in order that we may not be offended by the unworthiness of ministers.

²⁹ On this issue we have spoken out clearly enough in our Confession, where we condemn the Donatists and the Wycliffites,⁷ who believed that men sinned if they received the sacraments from unworthy men in the church. For the time being this seemed enough to defend the definition of the church which we had given. Nor do we see how it could be defined otherwise, since the church, properly so called, is termed the body of Christ. It is clear that the wicked belong to the kingdom and body of the devil, who drives them on and holds them captive. All this is clearer than the light of noonday; if our opponents still continue to twist it, we shall not mind replying more fully.

³⁰ Our opponents also condemn the part of the seventh article in which we said, "For the true unity of the church it is enough to agree concerning the teaching of the Gospel and the administration of the sacraments. It is not necessary that human traditions or rites and ceremonies, instituted by men, should be alike everywhere." If we mean "particular rites" they approve our article, but if we mean "universal rites" they disapprove it.^{8 31} We do not quite understand what our opponents mean. We are talking about true spiritual unity, without which there can be no faith in the heart nor righteousness in the heart before God. For this unity, we say, a similarity of human rites, whether universal or particular, is not necessary. The righteousness of faith is not a righteousness tied to certain traditions, as the righteousness of the law was tied to the Mosaic ceremonies, because this righteousness of the heart is something that quickens the heart. To this quickening human traditions, whether universal or particular, contribute nothing; ^(tr-239) nor are they wrought by the Holy Spirit, as are chastity, patience, the fear of God, the love of our neighbor, and the works of love.

³² We certainly had weighty reasons for presenting this article, for it is clear that many foolish opinions about traditions have crept into the church. Some have thought that human traditions are devotions necessary for meriting justification. Later they debated how it happened that they had come to worship God in so many ways, as though these observances were really acts of devotion rather than outward rules of discipline, completely unrelated to the righteousness of the heart or the worship of God. For good and valid reasons, these vary according to the circumstances, one way or another. Similarly, some churches have excommunicated others because of such traditions as the observance of Easter, the use of icons, and the like.⁹ From this the uninitiated have concluded that there can be no righteousness of the heart before God without these observances. On this issue there are many foolish books by the summists and others.¹

³³ But as the different length of day and night does not harm the unity of the church, so we believe that the true unity of the church is not harmed by differences in rites instituted by men, although we like it when universal rites are observed for the sake of tranquility. So in our churches we willingly observe the order of the Mass, the Lord's day, and the other more important feast days. With a very thankful spirit we cherish the useful and ancient ordinances, especially when they contain a

discipline that serves to educate and instruct the people and the inexperienced.³⁴ Now, we are not discussing whether it is profitable to observe them for the sake of tranquility or bodily profit. Another issue is involved. The question is whether the observance of human traditions is an act of worship necessary for righteousness before God. This must be settled in this controversy, and only then can we decide whether it is necessary for the true unity of the church that human traditions be alike everywhere. If human traditions are not acts of worship necessary for righteousness before God, it follows that somebody can be righteous and a child of God even if he does not observe traditions that have been maintained elsewhere. Thus if the German style of dress is not a devotion to God necessary for righteousness before him, it follows that men can be righteous, children of God, and the church of Christ even though they dress according to the French rather than the German style.

³⁵ Paul clearly teaches this in Colossians (2:16, 17): “Let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a sabbath. These are only a shadow of what is to come; but the substance belongs to Christ.” And again (vv. 20-23): “If with Christ you died to the elemental spirits of the universe, why do you live as if you still belonged to the world? Why do you submit to regulations, ‘Do not handle, Do not taste, Do not touch’ (referring to things which all perish as they are used), according to human precepts and doctrines? These have indeed an appearance of wisdom in promoting rigor of devotion and self-abasement.”³⁶ What he means is this. The righteousness of the heart is a spiritual thing that quickens men’s hearts. It is evident that human traditions do not quicken the heart, are not works of the Holy Spirit (like love of neighbor, chastity, etc.), and are not means by which God moves the heart to believe (like the divinely instituted Word and sacraments). Rather, they are customs that do not pertain to the heart and “perish as they are used.” Therefore we must not believe that they are necessary for righteousness before God. He says the same in Rom. 14:17, “The kingdom of God does not mean food and drink but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.”

³⁷ But it is not necessary to cite a great deal of evidence since it is obvious throughout the Scriptures and we have assembled much of it in the latter part of our Confession. Later on we must raise again and discuss more fully the issue in this controversy, namely, the question whether human traditions are acts of devotion necessary for righteousness before God.

³⁸ Our opponents say that universal traditions should be observed because they are supposed to have been handed down by the apostles.² How devout they are! Apostolic rites they want to keep, apostolic doctrine they do not want to keep.³⁹ We should interpret those rites just as the apostles themselves did in their writings. They did not want us to believe that we are justified by such rites or that such rites are necessary for righteousness before God. They did not want to impose such a burden on consciences, nor to make the observance of days, food, and the like a matter of righteousness or of sin.⁴⁰ In fact, Paul calls such opinions “doctrines of demons.”³ To determine the apostles’ wish and intention, therefore, we must consult their writings, not merely their example. They observed certain days, not because such observance was necessary for justification but to let the people know when to assemble. When they assembled, they also observed other rites and a sequence of lessons. Frequently the people continued to observe certain Old Testament customs, which the apostles adapted in modified form to the Gospel history, like the Passover and Pentecost, so that by these examples as well as by instruction they might transmit to posterity the memory of these great events.⁴¹ But if they were transmitted as something necessary for

justification, why did the bishops later change them in so many ways? If they were of divine right, it was unlawful for men to assume the right to change them.

⁴² Before the Council of Nicaea some people celebrated Easter at one time and others at another,⁴ but this difference did no harm to faith. Later on came the arrangement by which our Passover falls at a different time from the Jewish Passover. The apostles had commanded their churches to celebrate the Passover with the brethren who had been converted from Judaism, and so, after the Council of Nicaea, certain nations held tenaciously to the custom of using the Jewish time. ^(tr-243) But as the words of this decree show, the apostles did not want to impose an ordinance on the churches. For they say that no one should mind if his brethren do not correctly compute the time in celebrating Easter. The text of the decree is preserved in Epiphanius: “Do not calculate, but whenever your brethren of the circumcision do, celebrate it at the same time with them; even if they have made a mistake, do not let this bother you.”⁵ According to Epiphanius, these words are from an apostolic decree about Easter; from them the discerning reader can easily judge that the apostles wanted to disabuse the people of the foolish notion of having to observe a set time, since they tell them not to be bothered even if there has been a mistake in the calculations.

⁴³ There were some in the East who maintained that because of this apostolic decree the Passover should be celebrated with the Jews; they were called Audians,⁶ from the originator of this idea. In his refutation of them⁷ Epiphanius praises the decree and says that it contains nothing contrary to the faith or the rule of the church, and he criticizes the Audians for misunderstanding it. He interprets it the same way that we do; for the apostles did not intend it to refer to the time when Easter should be celebrated, but for the sake of harmony they wanted others to follow the example of the chief brethren who had been converted from Judaism but kept their customs. ⁴⁴ The apostles wisely admonished the reader neither to destroy evangelical liberty nor to impose a necessity upon consciences, since they tell him not to be bothered even if there has been a mistake in the calculations.

⁴⁵ Many similar instances can be gathered from the histories in which it appears that a difference in human observances does not harm the unity of the faith. But why discuss it? Our opponents completely misunderstand the meaning of the righteousness of faith and of the kingdom of God if they regard as necessary a uniformity of observances in food, days, clothing, and similar matters without divine command. ⁴⁶ But see what religious men our opponents are! They require uniform human ceremonies for the unity of the church while they themselves have changed the ordinance of Christ in the use of the Lord’s Supper, which certainly was previously a universal ordinance. But if universal ordinances are necessary, why do they change the ordinance of Christ’s Supper, which is not human but divine? But on this whole controversy we shall have a few things to say later.

⁴⁷ They have approved the entire eighth article.⁸ There we confess that hypocrites and evil men have been mingled with the church and that the sacraments are efficacious even when evil men administer them, for ministers act in Christ’s stead and do not represent their own persons, according to the word (Luke 10:16), “He who hears you hears me.” ⁴⁸ We should forsake wicked teachers because they no longer function in the place of Christ, but are antichrists. Christ says (Matt. 7:15), “Beware of false prophets”; Paul says (Gal 1:9), “If anyone is preaching to you a gospel contrary to that which you received, let him be accursed.”

⁴⁹ Christ has also warned us in his parables on the church⁹ that when we are offended by the personal conduct of priests or people, we should not incite schisms, as the Donatists wickedly did.

⁵⁰ We regard as utterly seditious those who have incited schisms because they denied to priests the right to hold property or other possessions. The right to hold property is a civil ordinance. It is legitimate for Christians to use civil ordinances just as it is legitimate for them to use the air, light, food, and drink. For as this universe and the fixed movements of the stars are truly ordinances of God and are preserved by God, so lawful governments are ordinances of God and are preserved and defended by God against the devil.