

The Theses

Part One

Concerning the Church

THESIS I

The church in the proper sense of the term is the congregation [*Gemeinde*] of saints, that is, the aggregate of all those who, called out of the lost and condemned human race by the Holy Spirit through the Word, truly believe in Christ and by faith are sanctified and incorporated in Christ.

THESIS II

To the church in the proper sense of the term belongs no wicked person, no hypocrite, no unregenerate, no heretic.

THESIS III

The church in the proper sense of the word is invisible.

THESIS IV

It is to this true church of believers and saints that Christ gave the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and it is the proper and only possessor and bearer of the spiritual, divine, and heavenly gifts, rights,

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powers, offices, and the like that Christ has procured and are found in His church.

THESIS V

Though the true church in the proper sense of the term is essentially [according to its true nature] invisible, its existence can nevertheless be definitely recognized, namely, by the marks of the pure preaching of God's Word and the administration of the sacraments according to Christ's institution.

THESIS VI

In an improper sense Scripture also calls the visible aggregate of all the called, that is, of all who confess and adhere to the proclaimed Word and use the holy sacraments, which consists of good and evil [persons], "church" (the universal [catholic] church); so also it calls its several divisions, that is, the congregations that are found here and there, in which the Word of God is preached and the holy sacraments are administered, "churches" (*Partikularkirchen* [particular or individual churches]). This it does especially because in this visible assembly the invisible, true, and properly so-called church of believers, saints, and children of God is hidden; outside this assembly of the called no elect are to be looked for [anywhere].

THESIS VII

As visible congregations that still have the Word and the sacraments essentially according to God's Word bear the name "church" because of the true invisible church of sincere believers that is found in them, so also they possess the power [authority] that Christ has given to His whole church, on account of the true invisible church hidden in them, even if there were only two or three [believers].

THESIS VIII

Although God gathers for Himself a holy church of elect also where His Word is not taught in its perfect purity and the sacraments are not administered altogether according to the institution of Jesus

Christ, if only God's Word and the sacraments are not denied entirely but both remain in their essential parts, nevertheless, every believer must, at the peril of losing his salvation, flee all false teachers, avoid all heterodox congregations or sects, and acknowledge and adhere to orthodox congregations and their orthodox pastors wherever such may be found.

A. Also in heterodox and heretical churches there are children of God, and also there the true church is made manifest by the pure Word and the sacraments that still remain.

B. Every believer for the sake of his salvation must flee all false teachers and avoid all heterodox congregations or sects.

C. Every Christian for the sake of his salvation is in duty bound to acknowledge and adhere to orthodox congregations and orthodox pastors, wherever he can find such.

THESIS IX

To obtain salvation, only fellowship in the invisible church, to which alone all the glorious promises regarding the church were originally given, is absolutely necessary.

Text from Thesis III ✓

The church in the proper sense of the word is invisible.

1. Scripture Proof

Luke 17:20-21, 1 Peter 2:5, 2 Tim 2:19

2. Witnesses of the Church in Its Official Confessions

In the first place we read in the oldest Confession of the church, the *Apostles' Creed*: "I believe . . . a holy Christian church, the communion of saints." If, according to these words, the church is something that must be believed, it cannot be visible, for "faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen"

CONCERNING THE CHURCH—THESIS III

(Heb. 11:1). For this reason Augustine writes: "This is faith, to believe what you do not see" (Tract. 10 on John); and in another place: "You fool, what you see is not faith."

★ → The *Apology of the Augsburg Confession*: "If we would say that the church is merely an outward polity as are other governments, in which there are wicked and good [persons], etc., no one would know or understand from this that Christ's kingdom is spiritual, as indeed it is, in which Christ inwardly rules, strengthens, and comforts the hearts and imparts the Holy Spirit and various spiritual gifts, but people would think that it is merely the outward observance of certain forms of worship and rites. Likewise, what difference would there be between the people of [under] the Law and the church, if the church were merely an outward polity? But Paul distinguishes the church from the Jews thus that the church is a spiritual people, that is, a people that is distinguished from the heathen not merely by polity and civil affairs, but that it is the true people of God, regenerated in heart and born again by the Holy Ghost. Again, among the Jewish people all those who were by nature Jews, stemming from the seed of Abraham, had besides the promise of the spiritual gifts in Christ also many promises concerning temporal blessings, such as those of government and the like, and because of the divine promise also the wicked among them were called God's people. For God had separated the bodily seed of Abraham and all who were born Jews from other heathen by these very temporal promises. Yet despite these [promises] the ungodly and wicked were not the true people of God, nor did they please God.

"But the Gospel that is preached in the church brings not merely the shadow of the eternal gifts, but every true Christian partakes [even] here on earth of the eternal gifts themselves. . . . Therefore, according to the Gospel, only those are God's people who receive the spiritual gifts [and] the Holy Ghost, and this church is the kingdom of Christ, distinguished from the kingdom of the devil.

"If (then) the church, which surely is the kingdom of Christ and God, is distinguished from the devil's kingdom, the wicked, who are in the devil's kingdom, cannot be the church, although in this life, since the kingdom of Christ is not yet made manifest, they are among the true Christians and in the church, in which they also have the ministry of teaching and other offices. Yet the wicked in this life are not a part of Christ's kingdom for the reason that it has