

The Lowly Visible and Invisible Church
I Kings 19:1-18, First Sunday after Epiphany
January 7, 2007

Beloved of the Lord....Which is the true visible church? Which church should I go to, and how do I know if it is the church where God wants me to go? Many a person has asked this question in truthful sincerity. There are thousands of churches out there. Which church is the right church? How do we know?

God gave us the answer to this question by giving us the Scriptures. The Scriptures are the sole standard by which God wants us to judge which is the right church. "All Scripture *is* given by inspiration of God, and *is* profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness." 2 Tim. 3:16 Scripture is God's Word. Because it is God's Word, it contains God's doctrines which are necessary for salvation.

Now, many people don't like this little word, "doctrine." They say "doctrine" divides us, and God does not want us to be divided. But there are two kinds of doctrine. There is true and false doctrine. True doctrine unites, but false doctrine divides. That is why we must hold fast to the true doctrines of Scripture. They are precious. Jesus says, "The words that I speak unto you, *they* are spirit, and *they* are life." Jn. 6 Thus true doctrine brings spiritual life while false doctrine brings spiritual death. Therefore we dare not deviate from true doctrine, lest there be death.

But consider it this way. In Japan there is a fish delicacy called Fugu. Fugu is made from Blowfish and Blowfish contain poison. Hence when a cook prepares Fugu, certain careful steps must be taken in order to remove the poison. If these directions are not followed perfectly, and if any poison remain, there will be instant death for the "Fugu eater". They will literally eat there last meal and fall over dead. Now if we happened to be the cook, preparing such a Fugu meal, wouldn't we be very careful, especially if we were to eat what we prepared? But now consider Scripture. False doctrine is poison for the soul. To play around or treat false doctrine as if it can't hurt us or others..... this is far worse than a cook carelessly chopping up the poisonous Blowfish. False doctrine is poison which leads us away from Christ. False doctrine leads the soul to everlasting death.

That's why we must treasure true doctrine. Every word uttered from God's divine lips is precious and sacred. In Proverbs 4:2 God says, " I give you good doctrine, forsake ye not my law." Do not forsake God's good doctrine. In Deuteronomy (32) God says, "My doctrine shall drop as the rain, my speech shall distil as the dew, as the small rain upon the tender herb, and as the showers upon the grass." You, dear child of God are the tender plant that God wishes to water and refresh. His Gospel doctrine is like the fresh dew of the morning, or a

gentle rain in the Spring. His doctrine gives spiritual life and guides your soul through this world to everlasting life in heaven.

All of this brings us back to the original question, "Which is the true visible church? Which church should I go to?" The answer is we must go to that visible church which faithfully follows the true doctrines of God's Word. Our catechism says, "That denomination is the true visible Church which has, teaches, and confesses the entire doctrine of the word of God and administers the Sacraments according to Christ's institution." And so we should only go to a visible church which rightly teaches the pure doctrine of God's Word, and rightly gives the Sacraments.

Today then let us look at this lowly visible and invisible Church. The lowly visible church is that church or congregation which has the full truth of God's Word and rightly teaches God's doctrine. The True Church however is hidden within the visible church. Only God can see the faith in the heart of man.

I. Discouraged Elijah could not see the lowly visible church. Looking back just one chapter, we see Elijah having a great victory over 450 false prophets of his day. Elijah had challenged them to pray to their god Baal, and see if Baal would rain down fire upon their sacrifice. Though these 450 false prophets prayed, nothing happened. Elijah then prayed to the true God of Israel, and the Bible says, " the fire of the LORD fell, and consumed the burnt sacrifice, and the wood, and the stones, and the dust, and licked up the water that *was* in the trench." After this Elijah said to the people, "Take the prophets of Baal; let not one of them escape. And they took them: and Elijah brought them down to the brook Kishon, and slew them there." But now wicked queen Jezebel seeks to murder Elijah (for Elijah had slain her prophets). Her hatred for this prophet of Christ reminds us today of the Muslims who murder and terrorize all non-Muslims. God's lowly Church on earth is always persecuted.

Discouraged Elijah now flees "a day's journey into the wilderness", and rests in the shade of a tree. He prays "O LORD, take away my life." But it is not yet Elijah's time to die. God sends a Special Angel to strengthen Elijah, who twice says, "Arise and eat." This special "Angel of the Lord" is none other than Christ who appeared several times as an angel in the Old Testament. We know this Angel to be Christ for the Bible says, "the Word of the Lord came to" Elijah. Christ is the Living Word, and to this day Christ the Living Word strengthens and refreshes those who believe and trust in His forgiveness.

After Elijah is strengthened by the Word of God, his soul is so refreshed that he now travels forty days without food, until he reaches Mt. Horeb, which is also known as

Mt. Sinai. This is the same mountain where God gave the Ten Commandments to Moses. Yet when Elijah reaches this mountain, again Elijah is discouraged. God speaks to Elijah and says, "What are you doing here Elijah?" Elijah answers, "I have been very jealous for the LORD God of hosts: for the children of Israel have forsaken thy covenant, thrown down thine altars, and slain thy prophets with the sword; and I, *even* I only, am left; and they seek my life, to take it away." The visible church in Elijah's eyes had been completely destroyed. Those people who once served the Lord had torn down God's altars. Jezebel had murdered Elijah's fellow ministers. Elijah believed himself to be the only faithful minister left. Here we should stop and think what would we do if this happened today? What if the heathen demolished our own church building, and killed all the Gospel ministers? Would we give up the faith or give up the fight? Wouldn't we be discouraged as Elijah was?

And so it should not surprise us when the visible church on earth suffers. Wherever God's Word is taught in its truth and purity, there will be gathered only a "little flock". And this "little flock [is] always on the edge of extinction." (Miller) In the days of Noah, the visible church consisted of only eight souls at the time of the flood.....EIGHT SOULS though Noah preached God's Word for 120 years up until the flood. The visible church at the time of Christ wasn't much better. Even Jesus had only twelve disciples, and one was no disciple at all! In John chapter six after one of Jesus' sermons, we are told, "many of his disciples went back, and walked no more with him." In the same way today, people still leave orthodox Lutheran churches for all sorts of reasons. Some leave because they want to be in a church with more people, or perhaps their friends go there. Others leave because they want more than God's Word. They want to feel God with their senses (as if He can be felt). Then there are those who go to other churches for excitement and entertainment, as if its God's job (or the pastor's) to entertain them. Still others leave because they want to be able pray with anyone they wish, regardless of the false doctrines they believe. And so wherever the truth of God's Word is taught in the visible church, such a church will always be a lowly and undesirable church in the eyes of the world. The visible church is much like a wallflower at a dance, the lonely girl which few desire. But we should desire her, for in the visible church there is our Beautiful Savior Jesus Christ. His good and true doctrine, His Holy Gospel, are the pearls we proudly wear. He has adorned us with His grace.

II. The Invisible Church endures by the Gospel. The great prophet Elijah was just one of those believers adorned in God's grace. There at Mt. Horeb, God now tells Elijah to stand up before the Lord. Suddenly there is

a tornado-like wind which breaks up the rocks, but God is not there. Then there is an earthquake and fire, "but the LORD was not in the fire: and after the fire a still small voice." This "still small voice", was God's Gospel voice. God would not strengthen Elijah with a miraculous sign, but with His Gospel Word. God speaks to us with this same Gospel Word today. God speaks to your heart and converts your soul, not by the law of an earthquake and fire, but by the Gospel, which is the sweet and forgiving voice of Jesus. You hear (or even better) your heart hears the sweet and forgiving voice of Jesus, when God convinces you by His Word, that all your sins are forgiven for the sake of Jesus Christ. Thus God's "still small voice" speaks to you, every time you hear the Gospel message of forgiveness of sins and salvation through Christ Jesus your Lord. And so we do not need a revelation from heaven, nor a sign in the stars, nor an earthquake, nor a baptism by fire in order to be converted. All we need to do is hear God speaking to our hearts His Gospel Word. God through the Word speaks to our soul saying, "Son, be of good cheer; thy sins be forgiven thee." This good doctrine from the Lord, is that gentle rain that comforts our hearts. God's Gospel words, that "still small voice", says to us, "I am the resurrection, and the life: he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live: And whosoever liveth and believeth in me shall never die."

So even though Elijah believed himself to be the last believer on the face of the earth, it was not so. God still had a remnant, 7000 who had not bowed the knee to Baal. Though the visible and invisible Church were hidden from Elijah's eyes, they were not hidden from the eyes of the Lord. God is faithful. He will keep and preserve His True Church, unto the end of time, by the power of His Gospel. The very gates of hell will not prevail against God's Church. And even though we at times are discouraged, when we look upon our own small fellowship, or when we see that our seminary is empty, or we fear for the salvation of our own children, let us remember that God is stronger than all this. His True Church will endure. God will not fail His own Bride, His beloved, the beloved of the Lord. God will not fail those who trust in Him, but will comfort your heart with the richness of His forgiveness. He does this by the preaching of His Gospel Word, and by the written Word found in our Bibles at home. He also comforts our hearts with His own body and blood, which bring the forgiveness of sins in Holy Communion. And so fear not dear Christian, God still has a plan for His Church on earth just as He did for Elijah. Elijah went on to anoint the future prophet Elisha. God's Gospel Word continues to this day, even here in our own little visible church. May we thank God for it. Amen.

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