

In the name of ✠ Jesus.

Sadly, today the Christian church is divided. There are, of course, the broad divisions: Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, Protestant. And within Protestantism, divisions. In the last Voice of Zion, I wrote about the soon-to-be-effected split in the formerly United Methodist Church.

The Symposium on the Lutheran Confessions, just concluded, had “Ecclesiology” as its topic...the Church—“Locating Confessional Boundaries,” acknowledging by that subtitle the divisions in the Church. Even among Lutherans, we heard this past week, there have been plenty of disagreements and plenty of divisions.

Of course, we pray for unity, but unity is elusive. Satan is a wily adversary. He thinks he can apply Jesus’ own words against His Church—“*if a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand*” (Mark 3:24). Satan seeks the demise of the Church. He wants it to fall.

Thus, we pray “Thy kingdom come,” reminding ourselves that God’s kingdom is a communion of saints that comes by the Word and Spirit. Luther says, “God’s kingdom comes when our heavenly Father gives us His Holy Spirit, so that by His grace we believe His holy Word and lead godly lives here in time and there in eternity.”

And we can pray that petition confidently, for Jesus reminds us, “*the gates of hell shall not prevail against*” the Church. Of course, that Church is the Church that Christ builds (Matt. 16:18). That Church is built not only by Christ, but on Christ and on the confession of Him as the Son of the Living God (Matt. 16:16), on the confession of Him as Savior and Lord, on the confession of Him crucified and risen from the dead (1 Cor. 1:18; Rom. 10:9). That Church is the “congregation of saints [Psalm 149:1] in which the Gospel is purely taught and the Sacraments are correctly administered” (Augsburg Confession, VII:1).

Our Augsburg Confession says, “Strictly speaking, the Church is the congregation of saints and true believers” (AC, VIII:1). The Church is made up of believers—of disciples. But believers in whom? Disciples...followers...pupils of whom? Jesus says it clearly in our Gospel: “*Follow me.*” Christians are disciples of Christ.

Yet, we are told today, it is not Christ or His Gospel that attracts. It’s the ancillary things—not necessarily bad in themselves, but not the Gospel. It’s a dynamic youth program. It’s a comfortable atmosphere, like one finds in a mall with perhaps a coffee bar. It’s spacious and well-appointed bathrooms. It’s being a friendly church. Don’t get me wrong. These things aren’t bad of themselves; it’s just that they can become idols when these replace Christ as the reason for Church.

For others again, it's not Christ or His Gospel, but a particular charismatic leader that attracts people. But how uncertain is that! Oh, the TV or megachurch pastors who have drawn to themselves large followings only to disappoint: Jimmy Swaggart, Jim Bakker, Ted Haggard, Mark Driscoll, Bill Hybels. If you don't know all of these names, suffice it to say that they were popular, celebrity pastors who fell into gross sin to the great demise of their congregations. The problem was that they drew the people to themselves and not to Christ. Christ said, *"Follow me."*

Of course, the first century Church had its own struggles. You heard St. Paul write to the church in Corinth. There were divisions in the Church. He was calling for unity. There were divisions in the Church: *"I follow Paul,"* or *"I follow Apollos,"* or *"I follow Cephas"* (remember Cephas is Peter), or *"I follow Christ,"* the people were saying.

Paul responded with some questions that virtually answer themselves. *"Is Christ divided?"* Paul began. Surely not. As Christ's body is one, so should His Church be one in Him. Paul emphasizes this in his letter to the Ephesians, too, centering our unity in this one body of Christ, in *"the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God"* (Eph. 4:13). Thus, we confess, "one, holy, Christian ... church" (Nicene Creed).

Paul asked a second question, *"Was Paul crucified for you?"* or perhaps better translated, *"Paul wasn't crucified for you, was he?"* This kind of question expects the hearer to answer, "no!" And indeed, we do. Paul and Apollos and Peter all were surely good preachers, but none of them, Paul included, died for the sins of the world. Only Christ has been crucified for you, for your sins, for your life, for your salvation. Only the blood of Jesus cleanses you from sin. Follow Christ!

Paul asked a third question, *"were you baptized in the name of Paul?"* Obviously not. What good would such a baptism do? Paul had been a persecutor, far from fulfilling all righteousness, as Christ did. A baptism into Paul would do nothing, but wash a bit of dirt from the body! But baptized in the name of the Holy Trinity, we are clothed with Christ and receive His righteousness. Baptized into Christ, we are saved and granted rebirth into His kingdom. We are brought into His body the Church and into a life of repentance, of drowning the old Adam in us "with all sins and evil desires," and of having that "new man ... daily emerge and arise to live before God in righteousness and purity" (Small Catechism, Baptism, 4th Part). We are brought by baptism into a life of following Christ.

If history is any indication, there will always be divisions in the Church, for Satan's deceptions breed error in Christ's Church, and contrary to what some today say, it is not pure doctrine that divides, but false doctrine. It's not truth that divides but error, as St. Paul teaches, *"If anyone teaches a different doctrine and does not agree with the*

sound words of our Lord Jesus Christ and the teaching that accords with godliness, he is puffed up with conceit and understands nothing. He has an unhealthy craving for controversy and for quarrels about words, which produce envy, dissension, slander, evil suspicions, and constant friction among people” (1 Tim. 6:3-5).

History bears witness to divisions in the Church. In Corinth, the people divided into factions. Though Paul and Peter and Apollos weren't false teachers, Paul addressed these divisions that seemed to be brought about by a cult of personality.

But false teachers that caused divisions did arise in the Church: Cerinthus and Valentinus and Marcion; Arius and Nestorius and Apollinarus; and many more. The Church had to respond to their errors, first ensuring that what we have as Scripture is indeed God's word handed down by apostles and prophets, that the Church may be built upon Christ Himself as the chief cornerstone, that we may abide in Jesus' word, know the truth, and live in freedom, that we may follow Jesus.

Errors in doctrine gave rise to creeds—the Apostles', Nicene, and Athanasian Creeds—which we confess still today to help keep us from making the same errors and dividing into the same divisions. Through the years councils have met; there have been reformations, all with the purpose of shoring up the Church in the truth.

Yes, the past certainly suggests that until Christ returns there will always be divisions. So where do we find comfort now in this jumble of teachings? Jesus says, *“Follow me.”* Jesus says, *“Abide in my word”* (John 8:31).

God grant us faithfulness to Jesus' Gospel word and to the Sacraments He has given His church. Let us continue to pray to the Lord for the Church, even as Jesus prays for us—that we may be one in doctrine and practice. And God grant us thankfulness for our faithful forebears who have handed down the faith: the apostles and prophets, church fathers, Luther and our Reformation fathers, and those in our own Synod, who continue to point us to Christ. We learn from them, but we do not follow them. God grant that we may always follow Christ, and then go forth boldly to proclaim Him to others as modern day *“fishers of men.”*

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit.