

# What Does it Mean to be "Church"?

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Presented to the ELCA Executive Committee December 17, 2002

## *Preamble: Lutherans are "Jesus People"*

All Christians define themselves with reference to Jesus Christ. We are people who believe in Jesus, who are followers of Jesus, who are baptized into Christ, etc. But Lutherans, I think, can lay legitimate claim to being the most Jesus-oriented Christians on the planet.

Some theologians like to say that we are "Second Article" Christians, meaning that what is most distinctive about our theology is to be found in matters related to the Second Article of the Creed. I'm not a theologian; I'm just a Bible teacher. I prefer to say simply that we are the Jesus People.

It seems to me that Christian sects have to *start* their theology somewhere. We all have to decide what we believe about the Church and the Bible and sin and all sorts of other things, but we have to start somewhere. Lutherans start with Jesus.

This is how I see it (and I emphasize again that I am not a systematic theologian or any kind of expert in ecumenics): I think that Roman Catholics start their theology with a doctrine of the Church. If you believe what they believe about the Church, you will probably be accept a lot of their theology. That might be true of Episcopalians as well—I'm not sure. Baptists start with the Bible. If you accept their understanding of the Bible, then what they teach about other matters will often hold up. I think Presbyterians start with a doctrine of God—the First Article God, i.e., God the Father. Pentecostals start with the Holy Spirit and Methodists start with a certain understanding of humanity.

Of course, I might have all that wrong, but what I am pretty sure of is that Lutherans start with Jesus. We start out by asking you to believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God and if you can believe that and confess it as Peter did at Caesarea Philippi, then there is a rock on which a Church can be built. And that Church has scriptures. And this Jesus reveals to us the Father and gives to us the Spirit. We end up with doctrines about all sorts of stuff, but we *start* with Jesus. That's what makes us the Jesus People.

The children's song says, "Jesus loves me this I know, for the Bible tells me so." This is not good Lutheran theology. I do believe that Jesus loves me and I do believe that the Bible tells me this—/I just don't believe it *because* the Bible tells me so. That would be Baptist theology. If I were a Baptist I would tell you to make a leap of faith and believe that the Bible is the Word of God. Just accept that on faith—that everything in the Bible is true. And, then, if you accept that on faith, we can look in the Bible and I will show you where it says that Jesus loves you and then you will be able to sing that song.

But, as a Lutheran, I don't want you to make your leap of faith to the Bible. I want you to make that leap directly into the arms of Jesus. Jesus is the Christ, he is risen, and he loves you! Believe *that* on faith.

Naturally all these things are related, so in reality the scheme is never completely neat. The scriptures testify to Christ (John 5:39). The Spirit reveals Christ (John 16:13-16). The Father draws people to Christ (John 6:44). Other humans and church members embody the presence of Christ (Matthew 10:40; 18:20; 25:40). So there is nothing really wrong with people saying, I came to Christ *through* the Bible or the Church or the Spirit or whatever, and it is understandable why different Christian groups organize their theology differently. Still, I think that Lutherans are the Jesus People. We prefer to start with Jesus and then go on to everything else through him.

What this means for the ELCA, its Cabinet, and Strategic Planning Team is this: as Lutherans, we probably want to define our mission, our vision, our values, and our direction with primary reference to Jesus Christ. On every one of those points, we might ask, what does it mean to start with Jesus?

### ***What Does It Mean to Be Church?***

According to the New Testament, the Church is instituted by Jesus Christ; it exists for his sake and by his authority. The Bible uses many different images for the Church. I want to focus on two of the most prominent ones.

#### *1. The Church as the Bride of Christ.*

In the Gospels, Jesus identifies himself as "the Bridegroom" (Mark 2:19) and in Ephesians, Paul interprets marital relations as "a great mystery" that can be applied to Christ and the Church (Eph. 5:31-33). Likewise, in Revelation, the Church is identified as the bride of Christ (Rev. 22:1; 22:17).

What is perhaps most compelling about this image is that it defines the Church in terms of its relationship to Jesus Christ and *specifically* defines that relationship as an intimate bond of love. The Church, according to this image, consists of those people who are loved by Jesus Christ and who love Jesus Christ in return.

The *mission* of the Church according to this image seems to be simply to love Jesus. Then, of course, we must ask what that means and how we do that. The Bible would give us a lot of help: Jesus says, "Those who love me keep my commandments" (John 14:21). Jesus asks Peter, "Do you love me?," Peter says, "Yes, Lord, you know I love you," and Jesus responds, "Feed my sheep" (John 21:15-17). Those are just a couple of suggestions. If we read the Bible we will find lots of information on how people who love Jesus should act and what they should do.

The point, perhaps, is that "feeding sheep" and "keeping commandments" are all strategic directions that flow from a primary mission statement. The fundamental, basic mission of the bride of Christ is to love the Bridegroom. Once we agree on that, the rest is just strategy.

Even as I say this, I am uncomfortable with language that seems to prioritize certain matters over others. Who am I to say that one thing is primary and other things secondary? Well, I dare not do so myself, but one time somebody did ask Jesus, "What is the greatest commandment of all?" And he did not say, "Oh, there are lots of commandments and they are all equally important." He had a straightforward answer. And he did not say, The most important is "Feed my sheep" or "Help the poor" or "Include the marginalized" or whatever. He said, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and mind." That is the prime directive. Everything else flows from it, including the *second* commandment, "Love your neighbor as yourself."

I suspect that what this says to our modern context is that the *worship life of the Church is an essential part of its mission*. I'm putting my own spin on things now, but I think that we love God most purely, we love our Bridegroom Jesus most obviously when we worship—and whatever else we do flows out of that worship as an extension of it. We exist as a Church to worship God and love Jesus and one way that we worship God and love Jesus is by living the way that God wants us to live and doing the work that Jesus would have us do.

I need to move on, but here are a few quick points that go along with this:

- the ELCA constitution in Provision 4.02 lists "six purposes of the ELCA." One of these is "to worship God."
- Luther's Small Catechism begins its explanations for each of the Ten Commandments with the words, "we are to fear and love God, so that we . . ." Thus, Luther treats the ethical life of the Church as an expression of its doxological and liturgical life.
- In the book of Revelation the Church at Ephesus gets in trouble not for failing to carry out any specific expectation but for faltering in its prime directive: "You do not love me as you did at first" (Rev. 2:4).

## *2. The Church is the Body of Christ*

Another very prominent image for the Church in the New Testament is that of "the body of Christ." This is especially prominent in Romans 12 and 1 Corinthians 12 where Paul emphasizes the unity of the Church: we are many parts of one body.

This image brings out the dynamics of diversity that seem so relevant for the Church in its present context. The many parts of the body are all different from each other, yet all are necessary. The hand cannot say to the foot, I do not need you.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer reminds us that the unity of the Church as the Body of Christ is not a goal to be attained but a fact to be recognized. We do not have to "strive to become the body of Christ." We *are* the Body of Christ. We are all part of one Body, whether we realize it or not. What happens to one of us affects the whole body whether we realize it or not. The mission of the Church according to this image is not to achieve unity but to act as the unified entity that we are.

This image also implies that the Church embodies Christ's continuing presence in the world and so acts *as Christ* in the world. The Church serves and suffers for the world as Christ served and

suffers for the world. In many ways, the mission of the Church as the Body of Christ is simply to continue doing what Jesus did.

I note here that according to the Gospels the primary work of the earthly Jesus (the main thing that he did) was to proclaim the rule of God. He did this by a) preaching that God's kingdom was near; b) teaching people the will of God, so that God could rule in their lives; and c) delivering people from disease and demons. See, for example, Matthew 4:23). Jesus does many things, but Bible scholars agree that these three activities have a certain defining primacy to them.

Also, note that Jesus encourages his followers to do many things (give alms, be peacemakers, etc.) but he specifically encourages the apostles to do the same three things mentioned above: preach the kingdom of God, teach people the will of God, and deliver people from disease and demons (see Matthew 10:7-8 and 28:20). Biblically, those three activities should probably receive special attention in any expression of the Church's mission (especially when the latter is conceived as an ongoing expression of the work of Jesus).

Theologically, however, the Church does not just imitate Jesus or follow his example. Rather, the risen Lord Jesus Christ is continuing to do what the earthly Jesus did. But the risen Lord Jesus Christ acts and speaks *through* the Church.

For this reason, the Bible often describes the work of the Church as simply *bearing fruit*. See Matthew 13:23; 21:43. The metaphor implies a natural activity, something that one *does* simply because of what one *is*.

In John 15:5, Jesus says, "I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing." This is an excellent statement of what it means to "be Church" and of what the mission of the Church is. To "be Church" is to abide in Christ and the mission of the Church is to bear the fruit that Christ produces in us.

What I am saying is that the image of "Body of Christ" implies an ecclesiology defined more by *being* than by *doing*. In a fundamental sense, the Church fulfills its calling and mission simply by being the people who God creates in Christ.

The Church's mission is to bear the fruit of Christ's mission. The Church is the recipient and beneficiary of Christ's mission and its first calling is to be the people in whom and through whom Christ's mission is fulfilled.

According to Matthew 1:21, the mission of Christ is "to save his people from their sins"; the mission of the Church, first and foremost, then, is to be people who are saved from their sins. Of course, the Church is to share this salvation with the world at large—but in a *primary* sense the call simply to be saved people comes first.

Or, we might say that the church's ultimate mission is to "make disciples of all nations" (Matt. 28:19). Yes, but *first* the mission must be to *be disciples*, i.e., to be made disciples by Christ. There could be many such formulations of a mission charge, all of which relate to the Church's identification as the Body of Christ, as a community of people who manifest Christ's presence in

the world and continue his work. But in every case, the primary mission is to *be* not to *do*. The mission of the Church is, first, to be the people *in whom* Christ's mission is fulfilled and, then, to be the people *through* whom Christ's mission is fulfilled for others.

This is why Jesus says that he "came not to be served but to serve" (Mark 10:45). The Church's mission eventually involves "serving Christ" but it's first calling is simply to be served by Christ.

### ***Mission***

I agree with others that statement # 2 is the best of the 3.

I note that there is nothing explicitly Lutheran about the statement. Or even Trinitarian. Could Mormons or Jehovah's Witnesses adopt this same statement? Should the statement be more specific to *our* identity?

I note that the ELCA Constitution (Provision 4.02) lists six "chief purposes of the ELCA." One of these is "to worship God," which does not seem to be reflected here.

Similarly, the greatest commandment according to Jesus is to "love God with all the heart, soul, and mind." Biblically, this seems to be the prime directive for all of God's people: not simply to obey God, or believe God, or trust God, but to *love* God. In some sense, *that* is our mission.

(note that the church in Ephesus fails because it does not love Jesus as at the first; note that Christ's commission to Peter "Feed my lambs" impinges on his positive response three times to the question, "Do you love me?"; note the common biblical image for the church as "the bride of Christ"; note how 1 Peter 1:8 virtually defines the church as "those who love Christ") There is something basic, primary, or fundamental about the Church loving God/Christ.

Some have questioned the theological appropriateness of saying that *we* make Christ known. John 16:13-16 indicates that the Spirit of truth will lead people into all truth, taking what is of Christ and declaring it to them. See also Luther's Small Catechism, explanation to third article. Or, again, Jesus says in John 6:44 that no one can come to him unless drawn by the Father. See also Matthew 11:25, where the Father is credited with revealing (and hiding) the truth of Christ.

The word "embodying" is probably not "comprehensible by persons who are not affiliated with a church" but it is a good theological term; the church is to manifest Christ's presence in the world, by being the body of Christ; people know God through Christ and they know Christ through the people called "church" (Matt. 10:40).

On "making Christ *known*": The Bible speaks of people being in a relationship with Christ in terms that are less "cognitive" in connotation. (In Matthew 11:28 people are invited to "come to Christ"; many passages speak of "following Jesus"; John 15: 5 speaks of "abiding in Christ"; in Gal. 2:20, Paul says "Christ lives in me"; in John 14:23 Jesus speaks of how he and the Father will "make our home with" those who love them). I hope that "making Christ known" carries more connotative force than simply spreading information about him; we seek to bring people into an active relationship with the risen, living Lord.

The statement says that we make Christ known by following his example of mercy, justice, and peace. Do the Lutheran Confessions indicate, rather, that we make Christ known by preaching the Word of God and administering the sacraments?

Why focus on Christ's example of "mercy, justice, and peace"? Why specify particular items—and why select these three for privileged consideration? No one (I hope) would deny their importance, but lots of things are important and are these somehow definitive of who we are as a church?

- I note in this regard, that many people who are not Christians would seek to follow Jesus' example as one who showed mercy, sought justice, and pursued peace. One can argue that following his example on *these* matters are not ways in which we are the church but simply good people.
- Furthermore, Jesus is in no way unique as an example of one who worked for mercy, justice, and peace; people like Ghandi and Martin Luther King would be equally good—or even better—examples on those specific matters.
- The primary work of Jesus in the Gospels is threefold: *preaching* the kingdom of God, *teaching* people God's will, and *healing* diseases (e.g., Matthew 4:23). If we want to specify areas in which we seek to follow and exemplify Jesus should we perhaps emphasize these primary activities? In Matthew 10:7-8, Jesus commissions his apostles to *preach* the kingdom of God and to *heal* diseases; in Matthew 28:20, he commissions them to *teach* all nations "everything that I have commanded you."

(I recognize that "proclaiming the kingdom of God" is also not language "comprehensible by persons who are not affiliated with a church." Something like "witness (or testify) to the powerful presence and influence of God.")

Many, I think, will find it strange that a mission statement for a Lutheran church says nothing about *faith*.

The statement as such does not say what the gospel is. Certainly, our mission is to share the gospel with the world. Simply put, the gospel is the good news that Jesus is the Christ and that he is risen. It is because Jesus Christ is risen from the dead that we realize we might do more with our lives than simply preserve them. So, we offer them to the Triune God as a living sacrifice, which is our spiritual worship (Rom. 12:1).

### ***Values***

I concur with others who have questioned the word "sufficiency." I don't know what that word means and I certainly would never have associated it with acting justly, respectfully, and generously with creation. If I had to guess, I would have thought it meant self-reliance or something like that.

when I see a list of values like these I cannot help but think of the Boy Scout Law ("A scout is trustworthy, loyal, helpful, friendly, courteous, kind, obedient, cheerful, thrifty, brave, clean, and reverent.").

For what it's worth, I haven't been involved with Boy Scouts for 35 years but I could still quote that "law" without a moment's hesitation. So maybe there's benefit to such value-lists.

As with the Boy Scout Law, however, any "list of values" has the potential for legalistic application; in this case, the implication that those who struggle with any matter on the list are not good Lutherans.

The focus in the statement is rightly on how we will act as a community.

The "can of worms" question here of course is why these six values and not others?

What was/is the basis for selection?

- In the LBW "Holy Baptism" service we reference Isaiah by praying that our baptized members might evidence seven gifts of the Holy Spirit: wisdom, understanding, counsel, might, knowledge, the fear of the Lord, joy in [God's] presence"
- In the LBW "Affirmation of Baptism" service, we cite five values as indicative of continuing in the covenant God made with us at Baptism: to live among God's faithful people; to hear his Word and share in his supper; to proclaim the good news of God in Christ through word and deed; to serve all people, following the example of our Lord Jesus; and, to strive for justice and peace in all the earth.
- In Galatians 5, Paul lists nine "fruits" that evidence the spirit-filled life: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control.
- In Colossians 3:12 Paul urges believers to clothe themselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience.

And there would be many examples of such "value lists" in scripture and church tradition. The inevitable question is why create another one (e.g., sufficiency, persistence, integrity, justice, community, wisdom)? And if we are going to create a new one, why those six qualities and not others?

For what it's worth, I think the key values that Jesus encourages are "love for God and neighbor" (Matt. 22:36-39), faith in God (Mark 11:22), fear of God (Matt. 10:28), and self-denial (Mark 8:34). Other values encouraged by Jesus would be mercy (Matt. 5:7), purity of heart (Matt. 5:8), peacemaking (Matt. 5:9), and, of course, a lack of devotion to material things (Matt. 6:19-21).

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