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The Proper Distinction Between Law and Gospel and the Terminology Visible and Invisible Church

By F. E. MAYER

ECCELESIASTICAL, or dogmatical, terminology has proved to be a convenient tool to convey Scriptural truths succinctly and precisely and to reject erroneous views. However, ecclesiastical terminology may also become a barrier to a common understanding and may actually be the cause that two partners in a conversation talk past each other. The *usus loquendi* also in ecclesiastical terminology is never constant. The terminology adopted in the Chalcedonian Creed is a case in point. The English theologian unfamiliar with Greek thought patterns may encounter some difficulty in understanding the terms after they have been transferred from Greek to Latin, thence to German, and finally into English. It must furthermore be kept in mind that theologians of different eras employ different methods, and the terminology will be weighted accordingly. This accounts for the fact that the modern theological student finds it very difficult to understand the terms *nature* and *accident* as employed in the Flacian controversy concerning original sin.

A third factor is that new dogmatical terms are coined in controversies. While the antitheses remain essentially the same, the points of emphasis are in a constant state of flux. The terminology employed to describe the Church is a good example. Luther defined and discussed the Church primarily in antithesis to Rome, which had externalized the Church. C. F. W. Walther had to wrestle with the problem of the Church and the ministry. Modern Lu-

therans are compelled to view the Church in relation to ecumenicity, fellowship, unionism, separatism. The same is true concerning the term *Word*. Luther found himself constrained to place prime emphasis on the Word as the oral proclamation; Francis Pieper discussed the Word of God in opposition to "*Ich-Theologie*"; the present theologian has to deal with the existential and dynamic concept of the Word in antithesis to the dialectical school.

A final factor which is frequently overlooked is that certain terms are used both in their original Biblical and in their dogmatical connotation. A case in point is the term *fellowship*, which, according to the Biblical concept, denotes the transcendent unity of all Christians, whereas in its ecclesiastical sense it has come to denote pulpit, altar, or prayer fellowship.

Because ecclesiastical terminology has sometimes increased misunderstanding, some would cast it aside entirely. However, in this attempt they not only break their historical tie with the ancient Church, but frequently also lose the concomitant, rich heritage of the Christian Church. With the terminology they may also reject the subject matter. Others take the easy way out and thoughtlessly take over the terminology and unwittingly fall into dead traditionalism.

The terms *visible* and *invisible* Church have been brought into prominence during the past several decades. The advocates of the ecumenical movement found it necessary to define the nature and function of the Church, and in the many pre-Amsterdam studies the emphasis was placed upon the so-called visible Church. For various reasons these terms have become a focal point of discussion also within the Lutheran Church in recent years.

The terms "visible" and "invisible" have frequently been weighted with an entirely false notion of the true nature of the Church. Unless one carefully observes the antitheses implied in these terms, one is liable to fall into a hopeless mixing of Law and Gospel, or into an Antinomianism that is a premature anticipation of the perfected glory in heaven and thus a denial of the purpose and use of the Law. The entire history of doctrine in the Western Church can be grouped under two headings: (1) the mixing of Law and Gospel, and (2) the observing of the proper distinction between Law and Gospel. And this history is reflected

in the wrong and the correct use of the terms "visible" and "invisible" as applied to the Church. In the first part of this paper we shall discuss the three great theological traditions of Western theology in which the use of the terms manifests a mixing of the Law and the Gospel: The Augustinian-Calvinistic system, the Roman Catholic theology, and the Arminian-Pietistic theology. In the second part we shall present the correct use of the terms in relation to the proper distinction between Law and Gospel as it is presented in Lutheran theology. In the final section we shall set forth two dangers which confront the theologian of today.

I

As early as the third century Cyprian placed undue emphasis on the visible Church, which he viewed as the continuation of the Apostolic office to which all were expected to be obedient. However, Augustine was the first to make a clear-cut distinction between the Church as the body of Christ and the Church as a visible organization. Two factors were responsible for Augustine's employing the term "Visible Church." The Donatists insisted that no sinner could belong to the Church and professed to know who, because he had failed to meet their ethical standards, was not to be considered a member of the Church. In his controversy with the Donatists, Augustine asked the basic question, Who is saved? and answered: only the elect whom no one knows except God. This is the Invisible Church of the elect. Both the elect and the non-elect are included in the historic Church, which is not as yet perfect, is always *in via*, in a state of becoming. Only at the end of history will the true people of God become known, and not until then will the ultimate meaning of all history—a perfect and triumphant Church—be realized. The visible Church in the meantime is only an inadequate and symbolic representation and a temporal manifestation of the eternal kingdom.

Augustine views the visible Church as an institution to carry out the great purposes of God in history, a view developed during the cataclysmic invasion and sack of Rome by Alaric, when only the Church survived. This condition prompted Augustine to view the Church as the divine instrument by which God will bring His grand purposes in the history of the world to a successful issue.

In *De civitate Dei* Augustine presents all human history as the struggle between two irreconcilable opposites: faith and unbelief, the society of God and the society of the world, the visible Church and the political state. It is to the visible Church that Augustine pays chief attention. In doing so he lapsed into a mixing of Law and Gospel. He views the visible Church both as God's "police officer" to regulate the affairs of men in order to bring about God's purposes in history and as the instrument to bring the elect to the ultimate union with God through progressive sanctification. In either case the emphasis is on the Law. This historically organized Church is also the only depository of truth, a premise for the claim that all men must submit themselves to the teachings and to the commandments of the visible Church.

Augustine's distinction between an invisible and a visible Church is reflected in two streams of thought in Western theology. Wycliffe, Huss, Zwingli, the spiritualists, notably the Anabaptists, the Pietists, the mystics, represent in some form Augustine's view of the invisible Church. Augustine's visible Church becomes the legally established organization, as it is represented in the Roman Church, by the later Melancthon, in Calvin's theocracy, in practically every Reformed Church, and among some Neo-Lutherans. But wherever such a distinction is made, a mixing of Law and Gospel will inevitably follow.

Rome's concept and description of the Church is expressed in its theology of salvation by good works. In reply to the question: Who belongs to the Church? Robert Bellarmine states that the Church is as visible and perceptible as is the gathering of the Roman people, or the kingdom of Gaul, or the republic of Venice. He defines the one true Church as the body of all those—including the wicked—who are bound together by the same profession of doctrines, the use of the same sacraments, and submission to the commandments of the Church under the regime of legitimate pastors, particularly of the Vicar of Christ, the Roman Pontiff. With its extensive organization, its political, economic, and spiritual power, the Roman Church could claim during the Middle Ages to be the sole and ultimate authority, God's representative and the interpreter of His will, and it could demand obedience of all, princes as well as serfs. The Latin genius for law and order and

its deep sense of social responsibility were given a Christian point of emphasis, and imperial Rome became the visible Church, with the Pope as its head. In the Middle Ages society was viewed as an organic whole united by a common faith and ruled by the divinely appointed authority. Each man had certain obligations assigned to him, but enjoyed also certain privileges according to his rank. Order was regarded as the highest good. It was established in the visible Church of Rome. Good order also required that all submit to the one and the same authority. Through Baptism one became a member of this visible society and automatically subject to the commandments of the Church, a necessary requisite not only for one's external but also for one's spiritual and eternal welfare. This visible Church became the sole channel of salvation, and no other power or jurisdiction on earth was superior to it. According to Melanchthon, the Romanists defined the Church as follows:

It is the supreme outward monarchy of the whole world in which the Roman Pontiff necessarily has undisputed power . . . to frame articles of faith, to abolish according to his pleasure the Scriptures, to appoint rites of worship and sacrifices, likewise to frame such laws as he may wish and to dispense from whatever laws he may desire, divine, canonical, or civil, and that from him the emperor and all kings receive according to Christ's command the power and right to hold their kingdom . . . therefore the Pope must necessarily be the lord of the whole world, of all the kingdoms of the world, of all things, private and public, and must have absolute power in temporal and spiritual things and hold both swords, the spiritual and the temporal. (Apology VII, 23.)

True, the encyclical *Mystici Corporis Christi* of 1943 attempts to describe the Church in more spiritual terms and to give more meaning to the invisible Church. Formerly Roman theologians, when referring to the Church in the analogy of body and soul, usually defined the body as the visible organization, and the soul as those who, because of invincible ignorance, found it impossible to unite with the Roman Church. But recently Roman theologians have defined the soul of the church as the invisible activity of the Holy Spirit and the visible Church primarily as the priesthood in its threefold office of teaching (prophetic), of administering the sacraments (priestly), and of ruling the congregation (pastoral).

But for Rome everything centers in the visible Church, and this emphasis is inevitable because of its central doctrine that man is saved by his good works in obedience to the commandments of the Church. In short, its definition of the Church reflects its hopeless mixing of Law and Gospel. Christ is no longer the Law Remover but the Law Giver.

No theologian has adhered more closely to the Augustinian tradition concerning the doctrine of the Church than has John Calvin. Calvin, in turn, has determined the ecclesiology of the Reformed denominations in varying degrees.

The leitmotiv of Calvin's theology is the sovereignty of God, God's self-glorification. Calvin's distinction between the visible and the invisible Church and his definition of each is indispensable for his theology. He held that God glorifies Himself in the invisible Church by electing the unknown company whom He will bring to faith by the irresistible power of the illuminating Spirit. But Calvin's real interest was centered in the visible Church. In the *Institutes* of 1559 he goes so far as to say that outside this Church there is no salvation and that separation from this visible Church is *desertio religionis*. According to Calvin, God manifests His glory in the invisible Church by the sovereign decree of election and reprobation. But it is particularly in the so-called visible Church that God is said to manifest His glory. Calvin believes that when God "smites the earth with the staff of His mouth and destroys the wicked with the breath of His lips," He does so to discipline us, to show His sovereign power through the spiritual sword of His Word proclaimed by the ministers, and to destroy everything which is opposed to Him.

Calvin views God's sovereignty in such a way that it is impossible for men to approach God. *Finitum non est capax infiniti*. Therefore man can never come near to God unless God selects an earthen vessel. This is the visible Church with its organization. Here the meeting between Christ and the Christian can take place, and man learns to become the obedient servant of his sovereign Master.

In the interest of his theological leitmotiv Calvin further views the visible Church as our mother. There is no other entry into life than to be conceived in her womb, to be born of her, to be nour-

ished at her breast, and to be under her guidance and discipline until we depart this life. The visible Church is God's institution to train us into spiritual manhood and the custodian to guard us from acts contrary to the glory of God. No one dare ever separate himself from the schooling of this visible Church. True, this fact places us into an order which is obnoxious and burdensome to us as self-righteous men. Membership in this visible Church becomes a yoke of humility which God imposes upon us in order that He may prove our obedience and through the external Church keep us in obedience by overcoming our own weaknesses.

Calvin believes that in her nurturing office as the mother the visible Church builds the body of Christ and makes it possible for Christians to be in fellowship with one another and with Christ. But in Calvin's view Christ is the Head of the Church, not primarily through His redemptive work, but chiefly because of His divine sovereignty. Christ does not, as Luther says, become my Lord. He *is* the Lord of all by His absolute power and majesty. He is the Lord of the Church, and we are all unprofitable servants. To maintain His sole sovereignty within the Church, Christ does not delegate ecclesiastical authority to a single person, but to many, each with a special gift, to exclude any ecclesiastical and hierarchal domination and to preserve unquestioned God's sovereignty. Since obedience to the visible Church is of the utmost importance, the sovereign God has endowed the Church with four distinctive offices. The office of doctor, or teacher, has been established to explain the Scriptures to maintain the "pure doctrine" among the faithful; that of the pastor or preacher to preach and administer the Sacraments; that of the presbyter to exercise church discipline; and that of the deacon to look after the external welfare of the members. These functionaries serve to make the visible Church a holy Church, not primarily through faith in Christ, but through an enforced sanctification. Thus the communion of saints becomes a congregation, not of believers, but of obeyers. In line with this thinking the purpose of church discipline was not to save the soul but to magnify the glory of God. That church discipline was exercised with great severity in Geneva is a historically established fact. Calvin's entire theology is of one pattern: In the interest of the sovereignty of God he operates with the visible Church; removes

the distinction between Law and Gospel and makes the "third use" the chief purpose of the Law; sees in Christ not primarily the Law Remover but the new Law Giver; reduces the Gospel to a new law and faith to a new obedience. Calvin demands that all areas of life — ecclesiastical, cultural, political, social, economic, scientific — be integrated with this God-centered concept. And this condition applies to all men, for God has endowed all men with common grace so that they can live to the greater glory of God in the areas of culture, industry, science, and politics.

Calvin's views of the visible Church are reflected in all the historic Calvinistic churches. The Westminster Confession, for example, defines the invisible Church as the whole number of the elect, and the visible Church as "consisting of all who profess the true religion and their children, outside of which Church there is ordinarily no salvation." It is stated further that Christ has given to this visible Church the ministry, the oracles, and the ordinances of God for the perfecting of the saints (Westminster Confession, Art. XXV, 1—4). In New England Congregationalism, Calvin's ideal of the visible Church is probably best symbolized by the fact that both the courthouse and the church were erected in the public square. The Puritan New Haven Colony adopted the following statement (1639): "The Scriptures do hold forth a perfect rule for the direction and government of *all* [our italics] men in all duties in which they are to perform to God and man as well in the government of the family and commonwealth as to the matters of the church." The Calvinistic Baptists restrict the church to the local and visible congregation of the regenerate, an organized body of believers, administering its affairs under the headship of Christ, united in the belief of what He has taught, covenanting to do what He has commanded, and co-operating with other like bodies in Kingdom movements.

The emphasis on the visible Church is responsible for the slogan: Join the church, and participate in her various activities. The Church, *qua* Church, is viewed as the conscience of society and for the greater glory of God must take an active part in the legislative program of the State.

The third stream of thought emanating from Augustine's view of the visible Church is found in the Anabaptist-Arminian the-

ology, which views the Church as a visible body of holy people whose piety meets a humanly devised standard.

The Anabaptists held that the visible Church is a number of smaller associations of believers who by a life of self-imposed laws profess to have renounced the world with its evils, such as warfare, taking oaths, or holding political office.

German Pietism placed tremendous emphasis on the distinction between the visible and the invisible Church. It viewed the Church as consisting of two concentric circles, the larger circle being the visible Church, and within it the circle of the true believers, the invisible Church, the *ecclesiola in ecclesia*. The larger circle is said to be the gate into the smaller circle, composed of those only who have had a personal religious experience and subsequently strictly adhere to certain standards of holiness of life, carefully outlined and strictly adhered to. In its strict legalism Pietism mixes Law and Gospel, and elevates the Law above the Gospel.

The same is true to a large degree in Wesleyan-Arminian theology. Its central theme is the "perfected" man. In the interest of this leitmotif Wesley views the Church as three concentric circles: the larger circle, the kingdom of the Father, includes all men who obey the measure of light which they have received by nature. The second circle, the kingdom of the Son, embraces all who are obedient to the Gospel. The center circle, the kingdom of the Spirit, comprises all such as love God completely and are bound together by a unique religious experience and by a common program of religious duties. This is a visible Church, a union of men devoted to observing the simple virtues of honesty, sobriety, purity, cleanliness, and frugality according to the "discipline," and to making the Church the instrument in society to improve social conditions. In Methodism — especially in the adoption of the social creed in 1907 — the mixing of Law and Gospel appears most patently in the functions assigned to the visible Church.

II

It is foreign to Lutheran theological thinking to compare or to contrast an invisible and a visible Church. To do so is a false antithesis, since the word *Church* has an entirely different connota-

tion in each term: in the one it is the communion of saints; in the other it is a *corpus mixtum*, not even an *ecclesia mixta*, in fact, strictly speaking, no Church at all. True, in his treatise *Concerning the Papacy of Rome*, Luther states:

For the sake of brevity we shall speak of two churches with different names, the first is the natural, essential and true church, which is the spiritual, inner Christendom (*die wirkliche Kirche*). The other is a humanly established and external church (*die gemachte Kirche*), and we shall call it the corporeal external Christendom. We do not intend to separate the two but shall speak of them as when I speak of a man according to his soul, which is spiritual, and according to his body, which is corporeal, or as St. Paul usually speaks of the inner and external man. Likewise, when I speak of the Christian congregation according to its soul, I think of one congregation gathered in one faith although according to its body it cannot be gathered at one place, but each part is gathered at a specific place. This external Christendom is governed by the ecclesiastical organization. . . . Although this external congregation does not make a true Christian . . . nevertheless it never exists without true Christians. For as the body is not the cause of the soul, nevertheless the soul lives in the body and exists also without the body. Those who are without faith and outside the true congregation and are only in the external congregation are dead before God and are only wooden pictures of true Christendom. (St. Louis, XVIII: 1018f.)

Since the concept of an external Christendom does violence to the word *Church* and had been used by the Romanists for the claim to be the only saving Church, Luther points out that there is not one letter in the Holy Scriptures concerning this external Church and that the Holy Scriptures know only one church, the communion of believers. For this reason Luther nowhere in his New Testament translates *ecclesia* with "*Kirche*," but always as "*Gemeinde*." It is, of course, unfortunate that the ecclesiastical term *Church* has such a variety of meanings. It has caused a great deal of theological confusion.

Luther's definition and description of the Church is in full accord with his central theological principle: justification by grace through faith. Accordingly he confesses *credo unam sanctam ecclesiam*: I believe a holy Christendom. He knows that the Church is holy,

because every believer is holy through faith, which always accepts the entire Christ. As St. Paul says, Christ cannot be divided or parceled. No matter how great the difference in understanding God's revelation may be among the individual Christians, every believer always has the entire Christ with all His benefits and blessings. The epitaph on Copernicus' tombstone, which does not ask for the grace given to a Paul or to a Peter, but only for that given to the malefactor on the cross, is in reality poor theology and contrary to the Creed, which confesses a perfectly righteous and holy Church, every member adorned with the perfect righteousness of Christ. The Church is a holy Christian Church also because the Holy Spirit is active in every Christian. No matter how insignificant it may appear, every good work is a glorious victory which the Holy Spirit has gained in the hearts of the believers. Hence the phrase *communio sanctorum* is an exposition of *ecclesia*. In Roman and Calvinistic Catholic theology the word *sanctorum* is taken to be a neuter noun, and the phrase is to be understood as a sharing in the holy things which the Church possesses. From this view it is proper to pause between the two phrases in reciting the third article. But this is not the Lutheran view. Luther rejected the translation of "*communio*" with "*Gemeinschaft*," a sharing, since this is an abstract concept and reduces the Church to an institution. However, an institutionalized view of the Church is, in Luther's opinion, not only self-contradictory, but actually an unscriptural concept of the Church. He therefore translated the word *communio* with "Christian congregation" or simply a holy "Christendom." The charge has been made that in his effort to avoid any institutionalized view of the Church, Luther has fallen victim to an extreme individualism. In both Romanism and Calvinism the Church is viewed as a social unit, a togetherness of people active jointly in performing church work. In Lutheran theology the emphasis does indeed lie on the faith of the individual, and the first person in the singular predominates in Luther's exposition of the Creed. But in spite of the emphasis on the individual's faith, Luther sees in the congregation an active sharing. He is a part of the Church and shares with others all her treasures. (The Creed, Art. III, 51. 52.) In the second part of his treatise *The Liberty of the Christian Man* he points out that

a Christian is freed from the Law in order that he may now devote his entire strength to serve his fellow men. In the Church the believers share all the burdens and even the sins of every fellow Christian as though they were their own. (St. Louis, XIX: 1006—1011). Thus Luther's view is both truly personal and genuinely social.

The Church as the living body of Christ is particularly meaningful to Luther for two reasons. Christ is the Head and activates the body. Christ's life never comes to rest in His believers because He Himself does not rest but is always living and active. Thus not we live, speak, and act, but Christ lives, speaks, and acts within us. Furthermore in the body every Christian experiences the impact of all other saints and shares everything they do and suffer. Luther states:

There is no doubt that all—the dear angels, the saints and all Christians—as one body rush to that member who is in death, in sin, and help him to conquer hell. Thus the work of love and the communion of the saints goes on earnestly and mightily. [W. A., Vol. 2, p. 695.]

And again:

What does it mean to believe the Holy Christian Church, if not the communion of saints? And in what do the saints have fellowship? Certainly, they share mutually all blessings and evils. . . . What does the small toe endure but that the entire body suffers? Or which benefit comes to the feet which does not gladden the entire body? We are one body. Therefore when we have pain and suffer, let us firmly believe and be certain that it is not we, or we alone, but that Christ and the entire Church suffer and die with us. Thus Christ has made provision that we do not enter upon the way of death alone, but are accompanied by the entire Church as we enter the path of afflictions and death. And the church is able to bear a greater load than we. (W. A., Vol. 6, p. 131.)

Thus the "our" in the Lord's Prayer becomes actual, existential, since we pray with and for each and every Christian. Luther could exclaim: "*Ecclesia* shall be my fortress, my castle, and my chamber." We suffer with the true believers behind the Iron Curtain regardless of their denominational affiliations. We rejoice with all the true believers, no matter who they are, when in and

through Christ they overcome sin, death, and the devil and extend Christ's kingdom. For this reason I find it extremely difficult to sing the fourth stanza of Samuel J. Stone's: "The Church's One Foundation." The Church of Jesus as His bride, as His body, is not rent asunder by schisms.

This view of the Church as the congregation of saints is possible only when Christians observe the proper distinction between Law and Gospel. This view is foreign both to Rome and to Calvinism. Both therefore view the Lutheran concept of the Church as a Platonic idea. Melancthon answers this charge and asserts that this Church truly exists and is composed of all believing and righteous men scattered throughout the world. He calls this Church the pillar of truth (1 Tim. 3:15), because it retains the pure Gospel (1 Cor. 3:11), although there are also many weak persons who build upon the foundation hay and stubble, unprofitable opinions. These, however, do not overthrow the foundations, but are both forgiven and corrected (Apol., VII, 20—22). Luther views the Church solely from the Gospel and its correlative, faith:

If the article—I believe the Christian Church, the communion of saints—is true, then it follows that no one can see or sense the Church. One does not see or experience what one believes, and again what one sees or perceives one does not believe. (St. Louis, XVIII:1349; cp. XIX:1081.)

And again Luther states:

Even as the rock is without sin, invisible and spiritual, so also the church which is without sin, is invisible and spiritual which one can perceive only through faith (*sola fide perceptibilis*). . . . Therefore St. Matthew's words do not treat of the papacy and of a visible Church, on the contrary, they overthrow it and reduce it to a synagogue of Satan. St. Louis, XVIII:1445. Cp. also p. 1469; XVII:1338; XXII:603 ff.; 989.)

The term "invisible" (*unsichtlich*) as it is commonly used today does not do justice to Luther's concept. From the quotation above it is apparent that Luther does not use the adjectives *invisibilis et spiritualis* in a quantitative or statistical sense, but qualitatively, *sine peccato invisibilis et spiritualis sola fide perceptibilis*. This is the sweetest Gospel, and it can be understood only by faith. The term "invisible" will lead to false conceptions if it is used in distinction

to the Calvinistic concept of a visible Church. Luther's concept of "invisible" is best expressed in the thought that the true nature of the Church is hidden under the cross (*ecclesia abscondita, cruce tecta, latent sancti*).

True, Luther uses the term "invisible" also in a statistical sense when he points out that only faith constitutes membership in the Church and no one can say definitely who has faith and belongs to the Church. But even here he weights the term "invisible" from the point of view of faith and never denies that the Church is always *sola fide perceptibilis*. The Church is invisible, imperceptible, to the unbelievers, since they are steeped in a theology of the Law and of work-righteousness and have no concept of the Gospel as the gracious promise of the forgiveness of sins in Christ Jesus. Even Christians find it difficult to distinguish properly between Law and Gospel and therefore sometimes fail to see the Church as the communion of perfectly sanctified people without spot or wrinkle. That Luther's "invisible" does not mean "imperceptible" is evident from his comment on Rom. 1:20: *conspiciuntur invisibilia non visa sed intellecta* (W. A., Vol. 3, p. 230). Luther points out that the invisible being of God is perceived, not as what is seen, but as what is understood. The invisible Creator is perceptible in His work, but not all perceive God and His invisible being. Likewise, the activity of the exalted and invisible Christ can be recognized in the world, but only the believer understands that this is the activity of our exalted Lord and Savior. Also the Church is perceptible, that is, it can be recognized by everyone inasmuch as everyone can observe the Church in action through the means of grace, but only the believer perceives through faith that this is the activity of the congregation of holy people.

The Church, then, is invisible, not because its membership cannot be established statistically, but chiefly because it cannot be experienced by the ordinary means of perception employed in such areas as philosophy, science, and history, where empirical data are the standard of cognition. The Church can be perceived only by faith. Luther's use of the term invisible is primarily antithetical to Rome's view that the true Church is found in the external organization of the Roman Catholic Church. Thetically the term expresses his basic faith: *credo unam sanctam ecclesiam*.

The holy Christian Church, in spite of its "invisibility," is such a living reality that Luther is very much concerned with finding this holy Christian Church. He looks for the marks (*notae*) of the Church. Luther stood alone before the tribunal of God in his spiritual tensions; no priest, no saints could help him; and in his loneliness he asked, Where are the saints whom only God knows? In his quest for the Church, he was motivated by the axiom: God's people are not without the Word, and the Word is not without God's people. Wherever the Gospel is proclaimed, there the Holy Christian Church is found, since the Christian Church is not a *Sebreich* but a *Hoerreich*. In his strongest polemical writings against Rome he asserts that the holy Christian Church is in the Roman Church, since it still retains Baptism and the Gospel. He states:

In the city of Rome, though it is worse than Sodom and Gomorrah, Baptism, the Lord's Supper, the Word and the text of the Gospel, the Holy Scriptures, the ministry, the name of Christ, and the name of God still are present. The Roman Church is holy, since the name of God is kept holy. . . . Therefore our city of Wittenberg is holy, and we are truly holy, since we are baptized, have God's Word, are called, and are participants at the Table of the Lord. In our midst we have the works of God, namely, the Word and the Sacrament, and through these we are sanctified. . . . We are holy, the congregation, the city, the people, are holy, not by their own, but by an alien righteousness. The call into the ministry, the Gospel, Baptism, etc., whereby we are sanctified are divine things. . . . Therefore the Church is holy even where the "enthusiasts" dwell, as long as they do not deny the work of God and the Sacraments. Where these are denied, there can be no Church. Therefore the Church is holy everywhere where Word and Sacrament are substantially present, even though the Antichrist rules, who, according to 2 Thess. 2:4 does not sit in the devil's stable nor in a pig's sty, nor in the midst of the unbelievers, but in the most noble and holy place, the temple of God. (St. Louis, IX:43 f.)

In his treatise *The Council and the Churches* Luther includes among the marks of the Church also the absolution, the calling of the ministers, public prayer, and the Christian cross; and correctly so, for Christians establish the office of the ministry, exer-

cise the Office of the Keys, unite for public prayer, and because of the enmity of the world are under the cross.

In his controversy with the "enthusiasts" Luther must speak of the congregation of the called (*congregatio vocatorum*). However, Luther never thinks of this group as *ecclesia mixta*. It is no more than *corpus mixtum*, not entitled to the name Church, and certainly not entrusted with the means of grace. In his *Treatise against the Heavenly Prophets* Luther states that when Paul calls the Galatians, Corinthians, and groups in other cities churches of God, even though only the smaller portions are truly children of God, he follows the manner of the Scriptures, which employs the figure of speech known as synecdoche, or names the whole for a part (St. Louis, XX, 257). If Luther speaks of the *corpus mixtum* as the Church, he does not have two concentric circles in mind: the *ecclesia* in its proper sense possessing the ministry ideally, and the *corpus mixtum* being entrusted with the administration of the office. Thus even the use of the means of grace does not make the Church visible, that is, perceptible in the empirical sense, for unbelief cannot understand the transforming power of the Word and the Sacraments. It can understand only the Law. Any confusion of *corpus mixtum* and *una sancta* is a mixing of Law and Gospel.

Paradoxically, this invisible Church manifests itself both to the believer and to the unbeliever. To the believer it manifests itself as the body of Christ. The Church, the living body of Christ, communicates to every simple Christian all the treasures and all the activities which emanate from Christ, the Head, who is constantly active in all members of His body. (W. A., Vol. 4, p. 645 f.) Commenting on 2 Kings 6—Elisha's prayer that his servant's eyes may be opened to see the accompanying hosts—Luther states that we must ask God to open our eyes of faith to see the Church round about us and then we need fear nothing (W. A., Vol. 6, p. 131). The Church manifests itself also to unbelievers. In a series of theses for a doctorate dissertation Melancthon had stated: The Church is the visible symbol of holy people. In the subsequent discussion Luther conceded that *ecclesia apparet visibilis*, but added that this was the case only in the profession of its members. Several days later he wrote to Amsdorf:

The Church must appear in the world, but it can appear only in a mask (*larva*), in a person, in a cloak, in a shell, in some kind of a garment, so that in these we can hear, see, and comprehend it (*damit man sie darin hoeren, sehen, fassen kann*). Otherwise the Church would never be found. But such masks are a husband, a politician, a domestic, St. John, St. Peter, Luther, Amsdorf, etc. Nevertheless not one of them represents the Church, which is neither man nor wife, neither Jew nor Greek, but Christ alone. [Enders, *Luther's Briefe*, Vol. 14, p. 175.]

The paradox of Luther's concept of the church is this: The Church is invisible, but manifests itself in a mask, in a veiled form. It is therefore contrary to Luther's thought to place the terms "visible" and "invisible" in antithesis to each other. The term "visible" (*sichtlich*), which according to Luther scholars occurs only once in Luther's writings, denotes perceptible, recognizable (*wahrnehmbar*), not visible (*sichtbar*) in the commonly accepted meaning. Luther knows only one Church, the congregation of believers. The true nature of the Church cannot be established empirically, but it is and remains an article of faith. And of this congregation he states that it is both invisible and perceptible. This was his position in his treatise *Against the Heavenly Prophets*:

Whoever would find Christ must first find the Church. He dare not trust in Himself nor build his own bridge into heaven through his reason, but must go to the Church, visit it, and ask it. For outside this Christian Church there is no truth, no help, no salvation. (St. Louis, V:963.)

Luther suggests two standards by which to find the Church: faith and love. In his treatise *De servo arbitrio* Luther states:

I call them [the canonized saints] holy and consider them as such, and I give them the name of the Church of God according to the rules of love, not according to the norm of faith. Love always thinks the best of everyone. It is not suspicious, believes everything, and assumes the best of his neighbor. Love therefore calls every baptized person holy. No harm is done if love makes a mistake. It is the very nature of love to be deceived, since it is exposed to the use and misuse of all. . . . Faith, however, does not call anyone a holy person unless divine judgment itself has declared them so, since it is the very essence of faith not to be

deceived. Therefore according to the law of love we view all professing Christians as holy, but dare not declare another holy according to the law of faith as though it were an article of faith, as when the Pope places himself into the seat of God and canonizes his saints. (St. Louis, XVIII:1739.)

Commenting on John 10:14, Luther states that the saints are painted and sculptured in such a way that only Christ can know them. They constitute a spiritual congregation which hears the Shepherd's voice. Externally they can be identified by the use of the Word and the Sacrament. Internally they are known only to Christ (*absconditi sancti*). As Paul Althaus points out, the Christian in reliance upon Christ's promise does not look with skepticism upon the individual, but with full reliance upon the Word of God and its power and considers all those called by the Word as the congregation of the Lord. This reliance upon the Word which calls men and also creates trust and faith in the reality of the congregation assures also me when I question the reality of the Church. (*Communio Sanctorum*, p. 92.)

Luther's view of the Church within his central theological orientation accounts for his intensive love for the Holy Christian Church. Wilhelm Walther points out that Luther's love for the Church is so great and so intense that he cannot fail to look for the Church everywhere and to rejoice jubilantly wherever he meets the Church. This love so sharpens his vision that he finds the Church even in the dreary desert sand of the Roman Catholic Church, whose deplorable condition he saw so clearly and chastised so severely. Nor can Luther keep silence when he has found the Church, for his membership in her makes him so happy that even in the greatest misfortune he can sing:

Sie ist mir lieb, die werthe Magd,
Und kann ihr' nicht vergessen.
Lob, Ehr und Zucht man von ihr sagt,
Sie hat mein Herz besessen.
Ich bin ihr hold. Und wenn ich sollt'
Gross Unglück han — da liegt nichts an,
Sie will mich des ergoetzen
Mit ihrer Lieb' und Treu an mir,
Die sie zu mir will setzen,
Und tun all mein Begier.

(Cp. Theodore Engelder, Synodical Essay, *Der Lutheraner*, 1935, pp. 257, 273, 289.) It is impossible to shower such love upon a Platonic idea. The *una sancta ecclesia, communio sanctorum*, is for Luther and all Christians a true reality. (Cp. Timothy Dwight, "I love Thy Kingdom, Lord," *Lutheran Hymnal*, No. 462.)

III

Lutheran theologians have not always retained Luther's deep insights, but some have presented the doctrine in such a way that the terms "visible" and "invisible" were placed into a false antithesis and the proper distinction of Law and Gospel was set aside. Currently this tendency seems to manifest itself chiefly in two directions.

There is, first, a tendency to externalize the Church and to fail to distinguish between the Church in the proper sense and the Church in an improper, or figurative, sense, and to ascribe to the so-called visible Church functions which lie in the realm of the Law.

This trend perpetuates the Melanchthonian tradition. Melanchthon's humanistic and ethical interest prompted him to place undue emphasis on the external form of the Church. He believed that an organization functioning through the proper offices is necessary to discipline the Christians. Melanchthon furthermore viewed the visible Church ("our churches") as the standard-bearer of the true doctrine. As a result he conceived of the Church as a figure consisting of two concentric circles, the outer circle as the Church with its specific offices to teach and to discipline the congregation, and the inner circle as the *communio sanctorum*. In doing so Melanchthon failed to maintain the distinction formerly made by him, between *ecclesia proprie dicta* and *largiter dicta*. In his last edition of the *Loci* (1559) he states that when we speak of the Church, we must think of the called, who constitute the visible Church. The visible Church became for him the real Church, since it controlled the practical life of the Christian.

These Melanchthonian principles were revived during the middle of the last century in German Lutheranism, particularly by Wilhelm Loehe, who saw the Church in two concentric circles: the body of the called and the body of the elect, the invisible Church surrounded and supported by the visible Church. He held that the

function of the visible Church is to preserve purity of doctrine and to establish a correct basis for true ethics. Some Lutherans have gone so far as to insist that membership in the invisible Church requires membership in the "true visible Church," since outside her pale there is no salvation.

In present ecclesiastical, or dogmatical, usage the term "Church" usually denotes the Church in an improper, or figurative, sense: the total number of professing Christians united in a common confession and in external fellowship to proclaim the Gospel.

Since its early history The Lutheran Church — Missouri Synod has placed so great an emphasis on the local congregation that the local congregation is liable to become an *ecclesia mixta* and no longer to be viewed as a *corpus mixtum*. To clarify we may ask several test questions. One is, who administers the means of grace in the local congregation: the voting members, the communicant members, or the group which Luther calls "Herr Omnes," the total number of believers? Another, is the local congregation our spiritual mother? A third, is membership in the local congregation an indispensable cause of salvation? A fourth, on whom do we shower our love: on the local congregation as a *corpus mixtum* or upon the holy Christian Church? Or do we transfer this loyalty to an association of congregations?

In order to meet the tremendous responsibility of fulfilling the Savior's great mission command, it seems only natural to look to a visible organization, a humanly devised system of offices, an externalized program of church activity. This attitude involves the danger that a synodical organization becomes predominant in our thinking and that we so externalize the Church as to approach it primarily from the institutional, statistical, and organizational point of view. So much emphasis is placed on the organization as such that our efforts are directed largely toward perfecting the organization, and that in this endeavor we become indifferent to purity of doctrine and seek human devices for building the Church. A concomitant danger is the mixing of Law and Gospel, inasmuch as the support of Synod and the participation in the Church's activity so absorbs our attention that the "and" in the phrase "justification and sanctification" becomes fatal. In the end we pay only lip service

to the *una sancta* and center our real attention on the visible organization of our "beloved Synod."

The second danger which confronts Lutheran theologians is to spiritualize the concept of the Church to such a degree as to lose sight of the Church in its "improper sense." This trend can be traced to the Lutheran dogmaticians of the 17th century. The sharp antithesis between the visible and the invisible Church is not originally Lutheran, but came into Lutheran theology as a result of the controversy with Rome and Calvinism. Andrada defended the canons and decrees of the Council of Trent, and Martin Chemnitz in his *Examen* refuted Andrada. Robert Bellarmine, in turn, defended Rome's position against Chemnitz in his four-volume *Disputationes*. John Gerhard in his famous *Loci* replied to this Roman theologian, and quite naturally he had to adapt himself to a methodology and terminology which his opponent understood. This development had significant bearing on the doctrine of the Church. In opposition to a false antithesis of visible and invisible Church, the emphasis shifted from the "true Church" (*una sancta*) to the "pure Church," the visible Church of the true Gospel, in contrast to heterodox churches. The *esse* of the pure Church became so predominant that gradually the attributes of the *una sancta* were ascribed to the true visible Church.

This ecclesiological thinking manifests itself in various forms. In the first place, so strong an emphasis is placed on *Recht-glaenbigkeit* rather than on *Recht glaenbigkeit* that one may lapse into *Lehrgerechtigkeit*, which is just as dangerous as *Werk gerechtigkeit*. Second, the attribute of invisibility is made so unequivocal as to render any manifestation of the Church perceptible to believers and unbelievers impossible. The Savior's sacerdotal prayer (John 17:20) is said to be exclusively eschatological. True, indeed, the Savior prays for the inner unity of Christians, not for an organizational unity. But it is a unity which the world is to behold. Though Christ does not explicitly refer to the unity of love, as St. John does in his First Epistle, He speaks of it as one similar to that of the Father and the Son. As the Father and the Son exist for each other, so Christians must live for one another in a union of love (John 13:34; 15:12). Each one must see in the other a member of the body of Christ. Faith

is invisible and the unity is invisible, but it manifests itself in mutual love (John 13:35). The Savior's statement "That they may be in Us" is equivalent to the statement "That they may be one." The Church is "one" because it is no longer of the world, but is now of the Father and the Son, a reality which takes place in the proclamation of the Word. The purpose of this unity is that the world should believe. The unity must manifest itself—not at the end of history—but throughout the New Testament period.

In the third place, the false antithesis of visible and invisible leads to an unscriptural isolationism and to a legalistic separatism. It so fosters the "small flock" complex that it closes one's eyes to the glorious world-embracing vision of the New Testament in Is. 60:3ff. It leaves little room for a full appreciation of the doctrine of the universal priesthood of believers. This rich doctrine implies not only that we need no intermediary between us and God, but also that as priests we share each other's burden, joys, and successes, resulting in a true fellowship between all Christians. In his comments on Jacob's ladder, Luther points out that the Church is wherever the Word is proclaimed, be it in Turkey, in the Papacy, or even in hell. We participate in the sorrows and the triumphs of all other Christians wherever they may be. Equally important, we seek to help our fellow Christians wherever they are in a true fellowship of love. And love will find ample opportunity to serve the brother in faith without in any way violating Scriptural principles. And we in turn shall be blessed by the labors of love of our fellow Christians, whatever they are.

It is imperative that in the proper distinction between Law and Gospel we maintain that the preaching of the Gospel is both the efficient cause of the life of the Church and the resultant manifestation of the life of the Church. The more clearly we see the distinction between the Law and the Gospel—the particularly brilliant light of the Reformation—the more shall we appreciate and love the holy Christian Church, the communion of saints.

St. Louis, Mo.