

Christ Alone: Keystone and Cornerstone (Eph 2:19-22; John 17:21)

A sermon for the Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Someone said: "If you can't trust the clergy, who can you trust?" That's a joke, of course. The wider question is: If you can't trust the church, what can you trust?

But where is "the church"? There are in the world about 40,000 different Christian denominations. Not 4,000 but 40,000! And whether you divide them into churches, denominations, sects, or cults, basically there is a very large number.

It's true that 90% of those belong to seven church families. Nevertheless, there is a wide spectrum of different kinds of churches.

This is also true in other religions. In Hinduism there are 430 million gods. In Judaism, with over 15 million members, there probably are 30 million ways they sort out Judaism. In Buddhism, even though it is 1/5 the size of Christianity, there are as many divisions as we have in Christianity. The same is true in a different way with Islam.

Just to look at the Lutheran family, which is about 70 million. The Lutherans in Ethiopia, about seven million, are very different from Lutherans in Sweden, also about seven million, and not just because of racial and historical backgrounds.

Even in this country there are somewhere between 40 and 45 different Lutheran church bodies of different sizes and for different reasons.

The fact remains: There are all these divisions. What are you going to do? In the Apostles' Creed we say "the" holy Christian church, not "a" holy Christian church. In the Nicene Creed it's "one, holy, universal (catholic), and apostolic." That's in the Nicene Creed for a reason. Because by 325 A. D. there were already many different groups claiming to be church.

A century before that, Cyprian, one of the leaders of the early church, created the famous statement: "Outside of the church there is no salvation." He didn't write that in a vacuum. That's because there were many different claims to being the church, and the real question always is: Salvation.

You may recall in John 17:21, in what is called the High Priestly Prayer, it says: "that they may be one as we are one, so that the world may believe." The claim has been made that unity leads people to Christ. Therefore, for the last 150 years, there has been a worldwide effort to bring the different churches together. There have been mergers and agreements. This effort is called ecumenism. It has now largely faded away.

What is church unity? It is the Lord who gives the glory. John 17:22: "The glory which thou has given me I give to them, that they may be one even as we are one." God alone does it. And also John 15:16: "You did not choose me, but I chose you. . . ." He does it through his

son. No one has seen God directly, but we know him only through the Son, as John 1:18 states: "No one has ever seen God; the only Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, he has made him known." And as Paul writes in Romans 10:17: "Faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes by the preaching of Christ." The test is Christ alone, and 2 John 10 warns Christians not to welcome other Christians who have adopted false teachings: "If any one comes to you and does not bring this doctrine, do not receive him into the house or give him any greeting." As John 14:6 reads: "Jesus said to him, 'I am the way, the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, but by me.'" The closer we draw to Christ alone, the closer we draw to each other.

What then should we do? Turn that sentence by Cyprian on its head. He said: "Outside of the church there is no salvation." Instead say: "Outside of salvation, there is no church." (This is essentially what Luther and the Reformers say in Article 7 of the Augsburg Confession.)

Many might say to that: We might as well punt. After all, is there anything final? And there are so many claims about salvation. What should we do?

What really happens is that we make up an 11th Commandment: "Thou shalt be nice." As one wag said: "God is nice. We are nice. Isn't that nice?" That about sums it up.

Over fifty years ago, there was a book: *I'm O.K., You're O.K.* Therefore, whatever is, is O.K. But what if it's not true? What if I'm not O.K. and you're not O.K.? Then things are not O.K.

Then what about salvation? We fall back on Romans 1:16: "The gospel is the power of God for salvation." Salvation is through the gospel. And the gospel is that God in Jesus Christ died and rose for you and me. Those words are kind of a formula. You may ask: Is it a formula? No. The gospel is that God does this. But, of course, he uses means. He uses words. He uses water. He uses bread and wine. These are audible, visible, and for that matter, touchable, and bread and wine even have an aroma. But, nonetheless, the means are not decisive because it is his doing, not the means alone. On the other hand, we do have this basic statement (formula) about the gospel as to what salvation is.

The evil one, to be sure, is up to his old tricks. These tricks can be summed up in two ways. The one is: Well, yes, there is salvation, but it has to be added to. It's salvation plus. There is this add-on. A certain kind of church is required. Claims for a congregational, an episcopal, or a papal structure, and every other kind of structure, find a basis in the New Testament. We will always have structures because we are human beings. We live in sociological groups. But when a church requires a certain kind of structure, then it is subverting the gospel. It is undermining the all-sufficient cross.

The other trick is to say that salvation depends on what you and I are like. It's not only the gospel, but also what we are, or what we do. You know the hymn verse which goes:

“Nothing in my hands I bring, simply to thy cross I cling.” It starts out right – “nothing in my hands I bring” – but it ends with “to the cross I cling.” It implies that we have to cling, and we can cling. But what about the times when you can’t cling to the cross anymore? When you give up? When you’re depressed? Are you then outside of salvation? No. This helps us to see, just like infant baptism, that it is not about us, and how we react, and how we are. Rather it is, as Luther says, that the Lord himself “snatches us from the jaws of the devil” (Large Catechism, Fourth Part, Baptism, 83; Tappert 446; Kolb/Wengert 466).

It’s like the mother cat who carries the kitten by the nape of the neck. There isn’t anything that the kitten can do or must do. The same is true for us. There is no add-on about what we have to do. The Lord is carrying us; the Lord is doing it.

The gospel, that is, salvation, is simply that the Lord saves you and me because of what God did in Jesus Christ in the cross and resurrection. What he has done, is doing, and will do for us changes everything. As Eph 2:19-22 states:

“So then you are no longer strangers and sojourners, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are built into it for a dwelling place of God in the Spirit.”

Amen