

## Pure Church, No – Pure Gospel, Yes

**Was there a pure church at the beginning?** Some see the early church through rose-colored glasses. Was there unity then? No. Even at the beginning there were conflicts, even divisions. Paul separated from fellow believers. Centuries later, Luther did, too. The breaking point for both Paul and Luther was “the truth of the gospel” (Gal 2:5, 14). Consider the following:

- Paul: “Even if we, or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be damned” (Gal 1:8). “. . . to them we did not yield submission even for a moment, that **the truth of the gospel** might be preserved for you” (Gal 2:5). “But when Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned” (Gal 2:11). “But when I saw that they were not straightforward about **the truth of the gospel** . . .” (Gal 2:14).
- Luther: “Paul curses Peter, Barnabas, and the others in no uncertain terms of failing to walk in **the truth of the gospel**, that is, of having swerved from **the truth of the gospel**. It was a serious matter for Peter to be accused by Paul of falling and swerving from **the truth of the gospel**. There could be no graver reproach. Yet he bears it patiently and undoubtedly accepted it with real gratitude. I warned earlier that **many have the gospel but not the truth of the gospel**” (*Luther’s Works* 26:115).
- *Augsburg Confession VII*: The church is “the assembly of all believers among whom the gospel is **purely preached** and the sacraments administered according to the gospel.”<sup>1</sup>

What about the church today? What is decisive is the **freedom** which comes from **the truth of the gospel**, as we affirm in our “Charter of Freedom”:

“The Word of the cross comes to us earthly creatures through earthly means: words, water, bread and wine. The gospel by its very nature turns us back into the world, creating both church and mission. **The New Testament does not prescribe any particular structure for mission and church** except for establishing that Jesus Christ continues to be the Lord of his mission and the Lord of his Church, regardless of the shape of these structures. Thus, while the true church is not invisible (i.e., it has visible means), it is always both hidden under the cross and revealed through

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<sup>1</sup> CA 28:77: “It is not our intention that the bishops give up their power to govern, but we ask for this one thing, that they allow the Gospel to be taught **purely**.” Cf. AC 7: “The church is the assembly of saints in which the Gospel is taught **purely** . . .” The link between AC 7 and AC 28:77 is found in the word **purely** (Latin: *pure*). To proclaim the gospel purely undermines the sacramental Historic Episcopate because to proclaim the gospel purely overthrows all authorities that appeal to something else besides faith alone in Christ alone.

the cross (Ap 7-8:18). **All structures** and practices for church and mission, like all our works, **are broken**. They are earthly and sinful. Jesus Christ retains his Lordship.

“Therefore it is sufficient for the true unity of the Church that the gospel be preached in conformity with a pure understanding of it and that the sacraments be administered in accordance with this gospel (AC 7). **No particular structures may be prescribed**. Their shape and use are determined by whatever best serves the mission of preaching the truth of the gospel. Just as we are all free in Christ (cf. Gal 5:1), so too **we are free to use whatever structures** further the proclamation of the Word of the cross. “Through Word and sacraments, as through instruments, the Holy Spirit is given, and the Holy Spirit produces faith, where and when it pleases God, in those who hear the gospel” (AC 5; cf. Rom 10:17). All Christians receive the Holy Spirit through baptism, and all Christians are called to proclaim the Word of the cross in word and in deed (the priesthood of all believers). For the sake of good order (1 Cor 14:40) and mission a variety of public structures for proclamation has developed (Ap 14:1), but already in the New Testament the variety of such structures demonstrates that **no particular structure was normative**.<sup>2</sup> The Lord is free to use many kinds of structures for his mission.

“Through the Word our brokenness is forgiven by Jesus Christ and we are free to live in a broken world, trusting in the Word of the cross alone; **we are not free to surrender our freedom** by establishing structures which are held to safeguard the gospel from the brokenness of this world.

Therefore: *“We exclude:*

the attempt to use the doctrine of the unity of the church to determine the truth of the gospel.

the belief that anyone or anything (such as bishops in an historic episcopate) except the Word of the cross “safeguards” the gospel or establishes its “fidelity.”<sup>3</sup> The gospel authenticates itself.

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<sup>2</sup> *Lutherans and Catholics in Dialogue 4* (New York: LWF 1970) 100. Jerome Quinn, writing for the Roman Catholics, acknowledges that in the New Testament period “differences in structuring the Ministry existed simultaneously in different churches (Jerusalem; Corinth; Ephesus; Rome, etc.)” *The Lutheran-Episcopal Dialogue II Report and Recommendations* (Cincinnati: Forward Movement, 1981) 40, notes that the Lutheran/Catholic dialogue acknowledges **the diversity of church order found in the New Testament period**.

<sup>3</sup> In 1999 Lutherans in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) adopted a unity agreement with the Episcopal Church, USA, *Called to Common Mission* (CCM), which **required the ELCA to change its constitution** (§10.81.01), **permanently binding** the ELCA to an Episcopal sacramental threefold ranked hierarchy. CCM ¶5: “a ministry of pastoral oversight (*episkope*) . . . is necessary . . . to **safeguard** the unity and **apostolicity** of the church.” and ¶12: “Both churches value a ministry of *episkope* as one of the ways in which the apostolic

elevating any structure or practice except proclaiming the Word and administering the sacraments to the level of a requirement for mission and Church, so that it is held to safeguard the gospel from the brokenness of this world.

distinguishing between the audible Word (i.e., the preached Word) and the visible Word (i.e., the sacraments) in such a way that the visible Word is given elevated status over the preached Word.

restricting the administration of the Lord's Supper to the "ordained" in such a way that implies ordained clergy have a special character or power to make Christ present in the Sacrament.

establishing any structure in the church which limits the freedom to proclaim the Word of the cross even to the church, i.e., the church too, like every Christian, is totally sinful, even in its structure, as well as totally righteous."

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succession of the church is visibly expressed and personally symbolized in fidelity to the gospel through the ages."