

THIRTY-SECOND EVENING LECTURE.

(June 19, 1885.)

MY DEAR FRIENDS: —

During the last quarter of the eighteenth century, Rationalism rushed in upon the so-called Protestant Church with the force of a spring-tide, In the lecture halls of universities it was held up as a new and great light to young theologians, who afterwards preached it to the common people as true Christianity — Christianity purified. Thus Rationalism gradually became the dominant type of religion. The inevitable consequence was that the conviction that it is not a matter of indifference whether a person is a Lutheran or a Reformed or a Catholic vanished completely. The small remnant of sincere Christians who still believed and confessed with their mouths that the Holy Scriptures are the Word of God, that Jesus Christ is the Son of the living God, that man is justified before God by faith in Christ alone, — these few

Christians extended to each other the right hand of brotherly fellowship, like persons saved from a great shipwreck, who, having seen most of their fellow-passengers go down to a watery grave, now embrace each other with tears of joy though they had been perfect Strangers before. In this state of affairs the thought had to arise in all hearts that the time had come for putting an end to the abominable church quarrels (that is what doctrinal controversies were called) and to let down the bars that divided the churches from one another. Especially the confessions, it was held, must be removed, because, like toll-gates along a highway, they hindered progress, and, to sum up, a great universal union of the churches, at least of the Protestant churches, must at last be instituted.

But, lo! what happened? In the year 1817, when this plan was to be executed, *Claus Harms*, in whom there was still some Lutheran blood flowing, wrote ninety-five theses against Rationalism and the union of churches, which he intended as a counterpart to the Ninety-five Theses of Luther. In these theses he said to the advocates of church union: “You purpose to make the poor hand-maid, the Lutheran Church, rich by a marriage. Do not perform the act over Luther’s grave. Life will come into his bones, and then — woe to you!” This glorious prediction was fulfilled. When the union of churches was actually put into effect in Prussia, multitudes of Lutherans suddenly awoke from their spiritual sleep, remembered that they belonged to the Lutheran Church, and declared that they would never forsake the faith of their fathers. In fact, they chose to see themselves evicted from their homes, imprisoned, and expatriated rather than consent to a union of truth with error, of the Word of God with man’s word, of the true Church with a false Church.

Those were glorious days in the dark period about the middle of the nineteenth century. It is a pity that from the glorious conflict of those trying times there did not emerge the old, pure, genuine Lutheran Church. The reason was that the very men who wished to “hold that fast which they had that no man take their crown,” Rev. 3, 11, did not possess a clear and pure knowledge of the truth; and so it happened that they went from one extreme to the other: from Rationalism and religions and ecclesiastical indifferentism to particularism and a hierarchical tendency that was anti-Lutheran. The men, namely, who in those days led others in their determined opposition to the union of churches and strenuously insisted on being Lutherans, proceeded to prove their claim by asserting that the true visible Lutheran Church is the

Church mentioned in the Third Article of the Creed, in these words: “I believe a holy Christian Church, the communion of saints.” They held that the Lutheran Church is the Church *par excellence* (κατ’ ἐξοχήν), the Church in the most exalted and proper sense, the *ecclesia, extra quam nulla est salus*, the Church outside of which there is no salvation, possibly with this limitation: “except that God in a miraculous and extraordinary manner may save a person also outside of this Church and lead him to eternal life.” It was a pathetic and fatal error, which placed these men in direct contradiction to the Holy Scriptures and, moreover, overthrew the cardinal doctrine of Christianity, the doctrine that a poor sinner is made righteous in the sight of God for Christ’s sake, by faith alone. This error plainly involved a most detestable confusion and commingling of Law and Gospel. This error is still in vogue in the Separate Lutheran Church of Prussia.

Thesis XX.

In the sixteenth place, the Word of God is not rightly divided when a person’s salvation is made to depend on his association with the visible orthodox Church and when salvation is denied to every person who errs in any article of faith.

It seems strange, indeed, that after such a long time during which Rationalism and the greatest religious indifference were prevalent, men should have hit upon the doctrine that the visible Lutheran Church is the Church κατ’ ἐξοχήν outside of which there is no salvation. However, although this seems to be incomprehensible on first blush, it is easily explained by the prolific nature of error. The mother of the awful error which we are studying is the doctrine that the Church is a visible institute which Christ has established on earth, differing in no way from a religious state. Its governing offices are, indeed, not in the hands of kings, emperors, generals, and burgomasters, but in their place there are superintendents, bishops, church councils, pastors, deacons, synods, and the like. That *this view is erroneous*, every one who is at least somewhat conversant with God’s Word knows. Does not the Savior say: “Upon this rock I will build My Church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it”? Matt. 16, 18. This rock is Christ. No one is a member of the Church except he who is built upon Christ. Being built upon Christ does not mean connecting oneself mechanically with the Church, but putting one’s confidence in Christ and hoping to obtain righteousness and salvation from

Him alone. Whoever fails to do this is not built on this rock, hence is not a member of the Church of Jesus Christ.

Paul says to the Ephesians, chap. 2, 19–22: *Now, therefore, ye are no more strangers and foreigners, but fellow-citizens with the saints and of the household of God and are built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief Corner-stone, in whom all the building, fitly framed together, groweth unto an holy temple in the Lord; in whom ye also are builded together for an habitation of God through the Spirit.* No one is built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets who does not believably cling to their word. Hence, no one is a member of the Church who is without a living faith.

The Savior calls Himself a Bridegroom. Let no one who is not betrothed to Christ with the innermost affection of his heart claim to be a true Christian and a member of the Church. As regards his relation to Christ, he is an alien; the Church, however, is the bride of Christ.

Again, Christ is called the Head of the Church. Hence only he can be a member of the Church into whom there flows from Christ, the Head, light, life, strength, and grace. Whoever is not in this spiritual connection with Christ has not Christ for his Head. Whoever is his own ruler and is not governed by Christ does not belong to the Church.

In another place the apostle calls the Church the body of Christ. This has prompted many even of the most faithful Lutherans to say that, since a body is visible, the Church, too, must be visible. But that is an abominable piece of exegesis. The point of comparison (*tertium comparationis*) in the aforementioned phrase is not the visibility of the Church, but that, instead of being composed of many dead instruments, it is a vital organism of members in whom one faith and one energy of faith is pulsating. This proves beyond contradiction that the Church is not visible, but invisible. Only he is a member of the Church who experiences the constant outflowing of energy from Christ, the Head of the Church.

Again, Christ calls the Church His flock. Hence no one is a member of the Church who does not belong to the flock of Christ, is not one of His sheep, pastured by Him and obeying His voice.

The objection is raised that Christ compares the Church to a field in which wheat and tares are growing. But the objection is owing to a wrong interpretation of the parable. Christ has given us the key that unlocks its meaning. He does not say: “The field is My kingdom.” In that case the Church would be a society composed of good and evil members. But He says: “The

field is the world.” Matt 13, 38. The *Apology of the Augsburg Confession* emphasizes this fact. The Savior likens His Church to a field in which tares grow together with the wheat; to a net in which good and bad fishes are caught; to a marriage feast to which foolish virgins come with others; and to which, according to another parable, one gained entrance who is not dressed in the proper wedding garment. By means of all these parables Christ does not mean to describe the essence of the Church, but the outward form in which it appears in this world and its lot among the men of this world: although it is composed only of good sheep, only of regenerate persons, still it never presents itself in the form of a congregation that is made up of none but true Christians. In its visible form the Church can never purge itself of hypocrites and ungodly persons, who find their way into it. Not until its consummation in the life eternal will the Church appear triumphant, entirely purified, and without blemish, separated from those who were not honestly and sincerely joined to it, but only sought their own secular interest in an outward union with the Church. While hypocrites and sham Christians profess Christ with their lips, their heart is far from him. They are serving their carnal lusts and not the Lord alone. In Luke 14, 26 the Lord says: “If any man come to Me and hate not his father, and mother, and wife, and children, and brethren, yea, and his own life also, he cannot be My disciple.” In this passage Christ passes judgement on all who do not want to renounce what they have. But not until all are gathered before the judgment-seat of Christ will these people become known as hypocrites. *We may see people going to church, but we cannot see whether they belong to the Church.* It is impossible to declare regarding individuals that they are true members of the Church. No man, but only God, knows whether they are. To the eyes of God alone the Church is visible; to the eyes of men it is invisible.

The error which we are now discussing is the primary falsehood (πρῶτον ψεῦδος) of our time. It is an awful error. For those who are addicted to this error pretend to be good Lutherans, opposed to the papists, and yet they have only changed weapons with the papists. Formerly the papists defended the false doctrine now under review; now Lutherans dare to set up the claim against them that the Lutherans, aye, the Lutherans, are the Church outside of which there is no salvation. Lutherans of this stripe become and object of ridicule to the papists. They take over the part formerly acted by the Pope and his rabble. The only inferences that can be drawn from this state of affairs

would be, either that the Pope's Church is the true Church or that the true Church had perished before Luther came. But Scripture says that the true Church cannot perish; it shall continue until the end of time. Now, until the sixteenth century there was no Church denominated "Lutheran." In fact, no Church since the days of the apostles has had the pure doctrine as our fathers had it. Hence, either Scripture has lied or the Roman Church was the true Church and Luther's reformation was rebellion. That is the vexing dilemma in which all those are placed who wish to maintain the false doctrine concerning the Church sketched above.

Its worst feature, however, is undeniably this: Making a person's salvation depend on this membership in, and communion with, the visible orthodox Church means to overthrow the doctrine of justification by faith. True faith has been obtained by people before they join the Lutheran Church. It is a fatal mistake to think that Luther before becoming a Lutheran — *sit venia verbo!* — did not have the true faith. Though we esteem our Church highly, may this abominable fanatical notion be far from us, that our Lutheran Church is the alone-saving Church! The true Church extends throughout the world and is found in all sects; for it is not an external organism with peculiar arrangements to which a person must adapt himself in order to become a member of the Church. Any one who believes in Jesus Christ and is a member of His spiritual body is a member of the Church. This Church, moreover, is never divided; although its members are separated from one another by space and time, the Church is ever one.

A false inference is drawn from the fact that Scripture speaks of external ecclesiastical communities, such as those at Rome, Corinth, Philippi, Thessalonica, in Galatia, and those in Asia Minor to whom the Lord issued letters through St. John. All these visible communities are called churches. Hence it is claimed that the Church is visible. — Now, Luther, in order to keep people from imagining that the Pope is the Church, has translated ἐκκλησία by "congregation," which is a correct rendering. The inference drawn from the use of this term when applied to local churches is wrong, because the Scriptures, as a rule, employ this term when referring to no local congregation, but to the Church in the absolute sense, and that is an invisible community. The term is applied to local organizations because the invisible Church is contained in them. In a similar manner we speak of a stack of wheat, although

it is not all wheat, but a good deal of hay and straw is in the pile. Or we speak of a glass of wine, although water has been mixed with it. In such instances the object is denominated *a potiore parte*, from its principal content. Thus visible communities are called “churches” because the invisible Church is in them, because they contain a heavenly seed. False Christians and hypocrites are given the name of “members of the congregation,” when in reality they are not members. Since they confess the name of Jesus, we apply to them this title charitably, assuming that they believe what they confess. We cannot look into their hearts. We leave that to God. We do not judge them, except when they become manifest as ungodly persons. In that case we cease applying the title to them, but put them away from us and call them heathen men and publicans.

Now, the Lutheran Church, too, as a visible community, is called a “church” in a synecdochical sense. It is, therefore, an awful mistake to claim that men can be saved only in the Lutheran Church. No one must be induced to join the Lutheran Church because he thinks that only in that way he can get into the Church of God. There are still Christians in the Reformed Church, among the Methodists, yea, among the papists. We have this precious promise in Is. 55, 11: “My Word shall not return unto Me void.” Wherever the Word of God is proclaimed and confessed or even recited during the service, the Lord is gathering a people for Himself. The Roman Church, for instance, still confesses that Christ is the Son of God and that He died on the cross to redeem the world. That is truth sufficient to bring a man to the knowledge of salvation. Whoever denies this fact is forced to deny also that there are Christians in some Lutheran communities in which errors have cropped out. But there are always some children of God in these communities because they have the Word of God, which is always bearing fruit in converting some souls to God.

The false doctrine concerning the Church which we are studying involves a fatal confounding of Law and Gospel. While the Gospel requires faith in Jesus Christ, the Law makes all sorts of demands upon men. Setting up a demand of some kind as necessary to salvation in addition to faith, the acceptance of the Gospel promises, means to commingle Law and Gospel. I belong to the Lutheran Church for the sole reason that I want to side with the truth. I quit the Church to which I belong when I find that it harbors errors with which I do not wish to be contaminated. I do not wish to become a partaker of other men’s

sins, and by quitting a heretical community I confess the pure and unadulterated truth. For Christ says: “Whosoever shall confess Me before men, him will I confess also before My Father which is in heaven. But whosoever shall deny Me before men, him will I also deny before My Father which is in heaven.” Matt. 10, 32–33. Again, Paul writes distinctly to Timothy: “Be not thou ashamed of the testimony of our Lord nor of *me*, his prisoner.” 2 Tim. 1, 8.

From the fact that men may be saved in all the sects and that in all sectarian churches there are children of God, it by no means follows that one can remain in communion with a sect. Many people cannot comprehend this; they imagine it is an utterly unionistic principle to hold that a person can be saved in any of the sects. But it is true, and the reason is that we are saved by faith, which some members of sectarian churches may have. However, if I perceive the error of my heretical community and do not forsake it, I shall be lost because, though seeing the error, I would not abandon it. I can still remember the time when I became a believer. Then I also joined the unionists. Some persons approached me with the intention of bringing me into the Lutheran Church. But I told them that I was a believer and did not choose to belong to a Church that claimed to be the *alone*-saving Church. Afterwards I found some good writings, which showed me that the Lutheran Church claims to be the *only Church that has the pure doctrine*, but does not claim to be the alone-saving Church, and admits that men can be saved in the sects if they are not aware of their error. As soon as I learned this, I quit the unionistic community and joined the Lutherans. I had long known that the Lutheran Church has the truth, but I refused to endorse the aforementioned papistic principle. Then I understood that one does not have to condemn any one who is in error regarding some article of the Creed, but only those who have seen their error and still want to abide in it.

Let me show you that this is indeed the doctrine of our Church. In the *Preface to the Book of Concord* (Mueller, p. 16. 17; *Trigl. Conc.*, pp. 19. 21) we read: “As to the condemnations, censures, and rejections of godless doctrines, and especially of that which has arisen concerning the Lord’s Supper, these indeed had to be expressly set forth in this our declaration and thorough explanation and decision of controverted articles, not only that all should guard against these condemned doctrines, but also for certain other reasons they could in no way have been passed by. Thus, as it is in no way our

design and purpose to condemn *those men who err from a certain simplicity of mind, but are not blasphemers against the truth of the heavenly doctrine, much less, indeed, entire churches*, which are either under the Roman Empire of the German Nation or elsewhere; nay, rather has it been our intention and disposition in this manner *openly to censure and condemn* only the fanatical opinions and their obstinate and blasphemous teachers (which, we judge, should in no way be tolerated in our dominions, churches, and schools), because these errors conflict with the express Word of God, and that, too, in such a way that they cannot be reconciled with it. We have undertaken this also for this reason, *viz.*, that all godly persons might be warned diligently to avoid them. For we have no doubt whatever *that even in those churches which have hitherto not agreed with us in all things many godly and by no means wicked men are found who follow their own simplicity, and do not understand aright the matter itself, but in no way approve of the blasphemies* which are cast forth against the Holy Supper as it is administered in our churches, according to Christ's institution, and, with the unanimous approval of all good men, is taught in accordance with the words of the testament itself. We are also in great hope that, if they would be taught aright concerning all these things, the Spirit of the Lord aiding them, they would agree with us, and with our churches and schools, to the infallible truth of God's Word. And assuredly, the duty is especially incumbent upon all the theologians and ministers of the Church, that with such moderation as is becoming they teach from the Word of God also those who either from a certain simplicity or ignorance have erred from the truth, concerning the danger to their salvation, and that they fortify them against corruptions, lest perhaps, while the blind are leaders of the blind, all might perish."

You may cite this fine passage if you meet with such as reproachingly say that the Lutheran Church claims to be the alone-saving Church. True, the Formula of Concord has condemned the *doctrine* of the Reformed, but this condemnation does not apply to those who err in the simplicity of their hearts, but only to obstinate false teachers and blasphemers. People who admit that Christ has said this or that, but refuse to believe, people who begin to *utter shocking blasphemies against the true doctrine, are not to be regarded as children of God*. Yet there are others who have been reared from a child in a certain error, but are holding fast their Savior; these are not wicked persons, though they may promptly turn away a Lutheran who approaches them.

The preface continues: “Wherefore, by this writing of ours we testify in the sight of Almighty God and the entire Church that it has never been our purpose, by means of this godly formula for union to create trouble or danger to the godly who to-day are suffering persecution. For, as we have already entered into the fellowship of grief with them, moved by Christian love, so we are shocked at the persecution and most grievous tyranny which is exercised with such severity against these poor men, and sincerely detest it. For in no way do we consent to the shedding of that innocent blood, which undoubtedly will be required with great severity from the persecutors at the awful Judgment of the Lord and before the tribunal of Christ, and they will then certainly have to render a very strict account and suffer fearful punishment.”

The Lutheran confessors here refer to a rumor that was being spread by the Calvinists that the Lutherans in Germany would imitate the Romanists in France and institute a St. Bartholomew’s night of their own. The Lutherans asseverate [assert] in this passage that they are not planning to persecute anybody. The blood of the Huguenots will be only on papists’ hands. In general, the Lutherans condemn none but those who condemn themselves by resisting the known truth.

From the preface which *Luther* wrote to the theses against indulgences which he had published previously we can see what a grievous task it was for him to forge his way to the true knowledge. He writes (St. L. Ed. XIV, 452 f.) : “Of the manifold sufferings and trials through which I passed that first year and the year following, of the great humiliation that I had to undergo, — and that was genuine and not feigned, for it reached the degree of despair, — of all these things little is known to these self-confident spirits who, after me, have attacked the majesty of the Pope with great bluster and audacity. Still, with all their skill they would not have been able to harm a hair on the Pope’s head if Christ had not previously inflicted a deep, irremediable wound on him through me, his puny and unworthy instrument. Nevertheless, they carry off the glory and the honor as if they had done it, — to which honor they are welcome for all I care. But while they were looking on at my loneliness and jeopardy, I was not very cheerful, confident, and certain of my affair. For many things which I know now — God be praised! — I did not know at that time. Verily, I did not understand, nor did all the papists together understand, the character of an indulgence; it was revered merely oft account of long-established usage and custom. My object in inviting men to a disputation concerning it was not to

reject it, but really to find out its virtue from others, since I knew absolutely nothing about it myself. Since the dead and dumb masters — I mean, the books of theologians and jurists — could not give me sufficient information, I desired to seek counsel from the living and *to hear the Church of God itself*, asking such godly persons as might be enlightened by the Holy Spirit regarding this matter to take pity on me — and not only on me, but on the entire Christian Church — and give us a true and reliable account of indulgences. Many godly men were greatly pleased with my theses and thought highly of them. But I found it impossible to regard and acknowledge them as members of the Church, endowed with the Holy Spirit. *I only regarded the Pope, the cardinals, bishops, theologians, jurists, monks, and priests and was waiting for the Spirit from them.* So eagerly had I taken in their doctrine, or, I might say, devoured it and guzzled it, that I had been filled to bursting with it and was not sure whether I was awake or sleeping.”

To this day the papists seek to keep the people with their Church by telling them: “You know that we are the true Church. No matter what the Church teaches, if you want to be a true disciple of Christ, you must hear the Church. If the Pope decrees that he is infallible, or that Mary was conceived without sin, or that the saints must be adored, you must accept these dogmas. You may not consult your reason. The true Church has set up these dogmas, and it cannot err. If you fall away from the Roman Catholic Church, you fall away from the true Church.” This is the bait with which they hook the people.

Luther continues: “When I had disproved all the arguments against me with Scripture and thus overcome them, I scarcely succeeded, by the grace of Christ, in overcoming, with great anxiety, trouble, and labor, this one final argument, that I must hear the Church. For with all my heart I was much more in earnest and much more reverent in regarding the Pope’s Church as the true Church than these abominable and blasphemous perverters, who are now opposing me boastfully with the Pope’s Church. If I had despised the Pope as those despise him nowadays who are praising him highly with their lips, I should have been afraid to see the earth open and devour me as it did Korah and his mob.”

Luther had already discovered the untenableness of nearly every papistic teaching, except this one point, which, he says, troubled him greatly at the beginning and kept him from becoming really assured of the truth and being

cheerful. The papists themselves cooked the soup which they had to eat later. God's hour had come for revealing the Antichrist.

May God keep you from becoming entangled with this false teaching concerning the Church, *viz.*, that the Lutheran Church is the true visible Church of Jesus Christ *in the sense that one can be saved only in this Church!* The Lutheran Church is indeed the true visible Church; however, only in this sense, that it has the pure, unadulterated truth. As soon as you add the qualification "alone-saving" to the Lutheran Church, you detract from the doctrine of justification by grace through faith in Jesus Christ and confound Law and Gospel. May God keep you from this error for the sake of your own soul and those that will be entrusted to your care!