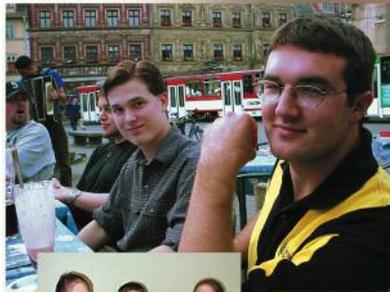


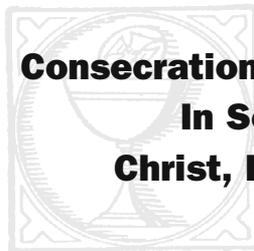
For the

# LIFE of the WORLD

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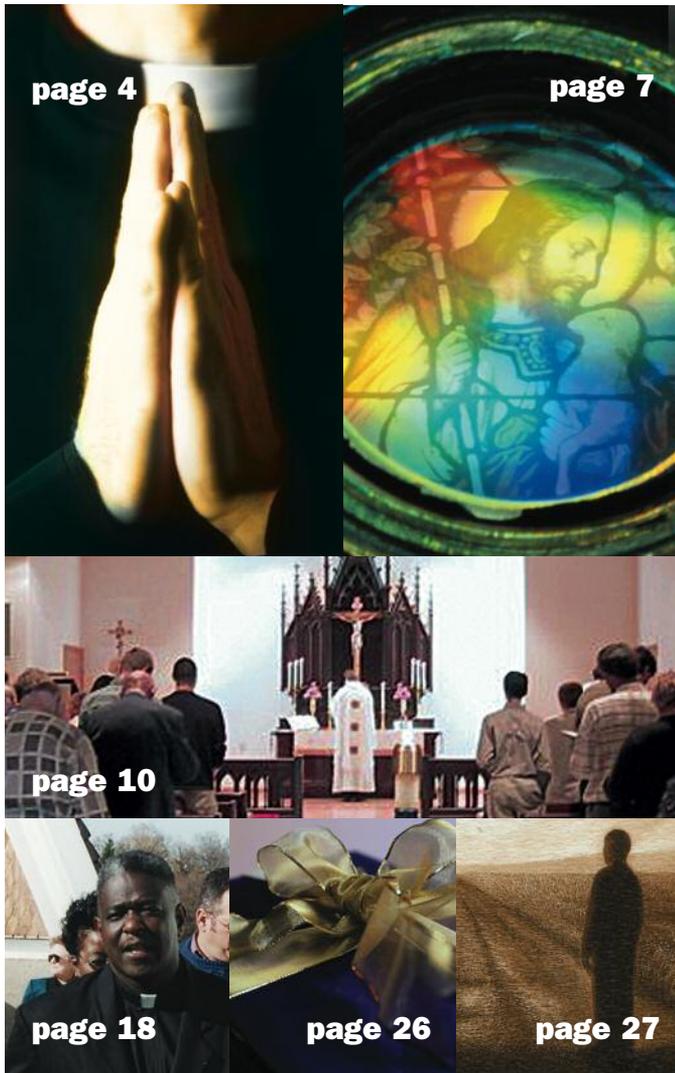


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# In Search of the True Church

By the Rev. Dr. Cameron A. MacKenzie

When Christians move into a new community and look for a church to join, they might be confused. The list of different denominations is enormous, and many congregations no longer conform to the traditional teachings of their church body anyway. These days, the name “Methodist” or “Baptist” or “Lutheran” on the signs out front may tell the newcomer very little about the churches in his neighborhood. So the question, “Where is the true Church?” becomes a very practical one.

In most instances, following a favorable first impression of a worship service, the next step for the visitor will be a conversation with the pastor. More than anyone else, the pastor is the public face of his church, and what he preaches and teaches is, for all practical purposes, what his church stands for and believes. Denominational affiliation may be anachronistic and official statements of faith dead letters, but the words of the pastor are a good indicator of a congregation’s real doctrine and practice.

But is there any *theological* reason for making the identification between the pastor and his church? The answer is “yes,” since the office of the public ministry is an external mark or sign of the church—at least, according to Martin Luther!

The question of “where is the true Church” is one that Luther and his fellow reformers also had to answer, especially when leaders of the old religion—the bishops, cardinals, and pope—rejected the Reformation but still claimed the title of “Church.” How were people supposed to

know who they should listen to? Or who they should follow? What signs or marks had God provided to lead people to the Church that was His in reality and not just in name?

Although we usually think of just Word and Sacraments as such marks, Luther in his 1539 treatise, “On the Councils and the Church” (AE 41:9-178), enumerates *seven* such signs, and number five on his list is the calling of pastors. However, at the heart of each of them,

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including the office of the ministry, is the Gospel. Indeed, the first and most important mark of the Church is the Word of God, by which God creates and sustains faith in Jesus Christ, the Savior. “God’s Word cannot be without God’s people,” Luther wrote, “and conversely, God’s people cannot be without God’s Word.”

Since the Church consists of believers and since the Holy Spirit creates belief in the heart only by the Gospel, we know that the Church exists wherever the Gospel is being preached, taught, and confessed. As St. Paul says, “The Gospel . . . is the power

of God for the salvation of everyone who believes” (Rom. 1:17).

But how does the Gospel come to people? For many of us, it first came in Baptism! So Luther argues that Baptism is also a mark of the Church because this is how the Holy Spirit applies the Gospel to individuals. Referring to Titus 3:5, Luther calls Baptism “the holy bath of regeneration . . . with which we are washed of sin and death by the Holy Spirit, as in the innocent holy blood of the Lamb of God.”

And how are baptismal gifts renewed and sealed? Clearly, through the preaching and teaching of the Word as we mature in the faith, but also through the Sacrament of the Altar in which we receive the body and blood of Jesus “given and shed for you for the remission of sins.” So when Christians gather to hear these words and to eat this sacred meal that, too, is a sign that the true Church is there.

Of course, Holy Communion is normally a group activity—sinners kneeling together, confessing their faith together, and receiving the sacred elements together. But sometimes we need to hear the Word personally and privately. Indeed, sometimes we need to be confronted with our personal sins and led to repentance *before* we hear the word of forgiveness. Referring therefore to Matthew 18 and our Lord’s counsel for forgiving and retaining sins, Luther describes the Office of the Keys as still another mark of the Church, “Now where you see sins forgiven and reproved in some persons, be it publicly or privately, you may know that God’s people are there.” This, too, then is a means by which the Word

is applied to people.

But now, who is supposed to do all of these things: Preach, baptize, commune, forgive and retain sins? Who has responsibility for the marks? In one sense, of course, everybody. Early in the Reformation, Luther recovered the Biblical doctrine of “the priesthood of all believers.” Relying on passages like 1 Peter 2:9

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(“You are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His wonderful light”), Luther contended that God had entrusted the Word to every Christian—the Word which, as we saw above, is the center of each mark of the Church. So every Christian has the responsibility for telling his neighbor about the good news of Jesus!

Furthermore, in his well-known *Concerning the Ministry*, addressed to the Bohemian Christians in Prague, Luther is very clear about his belief that responsibility for Baptism, Communion, and the Office of the Keys as well as the Word in general belongs to every Christian:

There is no other Word of God than that which is given all Christians to proclaim. There is no other baptism than the one which any Christian can bestow. There is no other remembrance of the Lord’s Supper than that which any Christian can observe and which Christ has instituted. There is no other kind of sin than that which any Christian can bind or loose. (LW 40:34-35)

But Luther’s point in reminding the Bohemians of their priestly responsibilities is to convince them that they have the right to call pastors to do these things for them rather than remain dependent on church officials who refuse to provide them. Luther is *not* arguing that every Christian should carry out each of the marks when and how he personally





desires. For Luther also recognizes that God has established the office of the public ministry for the regular and routine carrying out of these tasks.

Therefore, when we return to “On the Councils and the Church,” we see Luther maintaining that a fifth mark of the true Church is that “it consecrates or calls ministers. . . . There must be bishops, pastors, or preachers, who publicly and privately give, administer, and use the aforementioned four things or holy possessions (i.e., the Word, Baptism, Communion, and Office of the Keys) in behalf of and in the name of the church.”

For Luther, it is a necessity that churches have pastors—a *divine* necessity. For one thing, Luther relies on Ephesians 4 (“[Christ] gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers”). This shows that God has established these offices in the Church and that only “some” Christians are appointed to each. Even though God no longer gives apostles and prophets, He still gives pastors and teachers to serve His people with the Gospel.

Furthermore, Luther also speaks practically. “What would happen,” he asks, “if everyone wanted to speak (the Word) or administer (the Sacraments), and no one wanted to give way to the other?” Obviously, disorder and confusion. Just as serious is a point Luther does not make here and that is, What would happen if *no one* wanted to do these things on a

particular occasion? But God has guarded against both eventualities by assigning the ministry of the Word and all it entails to a man, to a pastor. Luther writes, “It must be entrusted to one person, and he alone should be allowed to preach, to baptize, to absolve, and to administer the Sacraments.”

It was an important part of Luther’s teaching that God assigns to *every* Christian a certain vocation in this life; and *every* vocation is God-pleasing when one carries it out according to God’s commandments in faith toward Him and love toward others. But among the vocations, Luther singles out only the Gospel ministry as a mark of the Church.

Of course, this is not on account of the sanctity of the pastor. Luther knew that pastors were sinners just as much as any others. Nor do pastors exercise “priestly” powers that other Christians do not possess, since all Christians are God’s priests. But to pastors alone has God entrusted the responsibility of preaching the Word and administering the Sacraments publicly in every congregation and thus, through these means of grace, bringing forgiveness, life, and salvation to God’s people.

Since the days of the apostles, God has placed men into this office and will do so, according to His promise, until the end of time. When looking for the true Church, therefore, you can be sure you have found it when you find pastors carrying out their God-given responsibilities in accordance with God’s Word. For where pastors are preaching God’s Word in its truth and purity, the Holy Spirit is there gathering God’s people, the Church. You can count on it!

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