

JOHN 8:31–32. (EHV)

Jesus said to the Jews who had believed him, “If you remain in my word, you are really my disciples. You will also know the truth, and the truth will set you free.”

In East Perth, Australia, there is a sculpture known as the Impossible Triangle. If you approach the sculpture from the north, east, or west, it looks like a field goal post that Paul Bunyan or some other mythical person or creature got mad at and tried tearing apart. But approach it from the south and it is impossibly beautiful—beautiful because it is a perfect equilateral triangle, and impossible because you can tell that each angle consists of two bars joined together at 90 degrees. Ask any mathematician. All the angles in an equilateral triangle add up to 180 degrees, so none of the angles can be 90 degrees. And yet, with this perfect equilateral triangle, it is clear that each angle within it is 90 degrees. Impossibly beautiful.

This is a good illustration for the two perspectives from which God’s Church is able to be viewed. We have the human perspective, which is like the north, east, or west view. The Church does not always look pretty to us and never looks perfect. Sometimes it looks downright ugly. But God has the south view. What he sees is impossibly beautiful.

Today as we continue our Christian doctrine sermon series, let’s look at the doctrine of God’s Church, with a capital *C*, and see how it relates to our church membership—church with a lowercase *c*.

1. *The* Church

Let’s first ask God’s word this question: Which church is the saving church? The favorite passage John 3:16 answers that question: “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.” Who shall have eternal life? Whoever believes in Jesus as the Son of God sent by God the Father and given over to death by him for the sins of the world. Mark 16:16 says: “Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned.” Faith in Jesus is the ultimate defining characteristic of all those in the saving church.

The saving church includes all those, and only those, who believe in Jesus as their Savior from sin.

But the question becomes much more difficult when we try to pry further and ask, “How many people belong to this church?” or, “Show me which individuals in particular belong to this church.” Faith in Jesus is something that exists in the heart. Yes, it always shows itself in good works, which we call fruits of faith, but those are not completely reliable because on the one hand, people can profess the name of Jesus and do good works but only for show, as hypocrites, and on the other hand, even unbelievers can do things that are outwardly good, but with sinful motives.

Faith in Jesus itself exists in the heart (Romans 10:10), and only the Lord can see what’s in the heart (1 Samuel 16:7). So only the Lord can see for certain if there is faith in Jesus in the heart. That is why we call the only saving church the *invisible* church. We cannot identify it with any visible organization or church body. The only saving church is not the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod. It is not the Evangelical Lutheran Synod or any of our sister synods

around the world. It is not the Roman Catholic Church or any other denomination. It is an invisible church, whose members are known only by God.

We also call this church the Holy Christian Church or the communion of saints, which means the fellowship of saints. We call it that because of the “south” view God has. Through faith in Jesus God sees each of the members of this church as radiant, holy, blameless, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish.

So there is only one saving church, the invisible, holy Christian church. And this church is radiant and blameless, without any blemish. Then why, oh why, are there so many different Christian church organizations and church bodies who disagree so strongly with each other and often act in disappointing and even despicable ways?

The answer is twofold: First, on this side of heaven, any Christian church organization or church body can only be filled with sinful human beings. Yes, some or many of those human beings may also be true believers who are righteous in the sight of God through faith in Jesus. But at the same time they are always struggling against sin here on earth—constantly stumbling, tripping, and even falling. This sinfulness means that sometimes Christians are not able to resolve their differences in a godly, satisfactory way, and so one church body turns into two or more.

Second, as we heard in our Second Lesson, Jesus and his apostles prophesied that there would be false prophets who would sneak in among Christians. And keep that in mind—they will *sneak*. Jesus called them “ferocious wolves,” but said that they come to us “in sheep’s clothing” (Matthew 7:15). Peter said that “they will *secretly* bring in destructive heresies” (2 Peter 2:1), in fact, that their heresy and false teaching would not be immediately obvious even though they would deny the redeeming work of Jesus himself! Jesus even said that the false Christs and false prophets who would appear would be able to perform signs and miracles so great that they will very nearly deceive even those whom he has chosen from eternity to be his own (Matt. 24:5, 24).

You see, brothers and sisters, Peter tells us that Satan prowls around like a roaring lion (1 Peter 5:8), but he does not make his appearance as a roaring lion. He knows that we know that roaring lions are bad for us. No, he disguises himself as heavily as possible. He is even willing to tolerate a lot of truth if he can use it as a cloak to hide just one error that he can get us to believe.

I think about this often when I am fly fishing. Once I was on a stream in Montana when there was a spruce moth hatch going on; spruce moths were flying around everywhere and the trout were having a feast. Even in the rapids, big trout were leaping out of the water and snatching the spruce moths. So I got out my flybox and opened it up. And what do you think I tied on? A grasshopper imitation? A stonefly? No, of course not. I tied on a pattern that closely resembled the spruce moth. Of course, there was one important addition to this thing that looked like a spruce moth—a hook.

That’s how Satan works through most of his false prophets. He is content to hide even just one or two or a handful or errors beneath a lot of truth, because he knows that error breeds more error. The apostle Paul compares error left unchecked to yeast and gangrene that spreads and grows. So error can be an effective hook through which Satan eventually gets us to deny Jesus Christ as our Savior and thus gets us into his net. And let me assure you that Satan is not a catch-and-release fisherman.

That's why there are so many different Christian church bodies—human sinfulness and many sneaky false prophets.

2. Your church

But God still wants us to go to church. Jesus himself went to church every week (Luke 4:16), and if ever there was a guy who didn't need it, it was he. And the writer to the Hebrews encourages us not to give up meeting together, but to do so all the more as we see Judgment Day approaching (Hebrews 10:25).

So if all Christian church bodies are filled with sinful human beings and if there are many sneaky false prophets, then which one of the many church bodies out there should be our own?

That's where our sermon text comes in. Jesus said, "If you remain in my word, you are really my disciples. You will also know the truth, and the truth will set you free." And when Jesus talks about his word, how much of it are we talking? Jesus told his disciples before he ascended that they should teach all nations *everything* he had commanded them (Matt. 28:20). Paul told the Christian elders in Ephesus that he was innocent of the blood of all people because he had not hesitated to proclaim the *whole* counsel of God (Acts 20:26–27). Whatever teaching of Jesus we are familiar with, anywhere in his Word, is a teaching we should hold on to. And we should constantly be striving to get acquainted with more of his teaching.

Brothers and sisters, the most important thing to consider when deciding on church membership is not what the church or church body looks like on the outside, how friendly they are, what their music is like, how many youth programs they have, how charismatic the pastor is, or anything like that. Remember that any church you join is going to be filled with sinful human beings, including yourself and myself. The most important thing to consider is: What does it teach? The church you should join is one that strives to hold to Jesus's teaching, *all* of Jesus's teaching. Because wherever you have a church striving to hold to all of Jesus's teaching as found in his word, there you will also find Jesus's teaching bearing fruit and you will find members of the invisible, holy Christian church. You will find true believers. And you yourself will regularly have your faith strengthened.

That of course means that not just the pastor, but also the laypeople should be familiar with Jesus's teaching. In fact, Jesus's teaching is so important that Paul says this in Romans 16: "Watch out for those who cause divisions and offenses contrary to the teaching that you learned, and keep away from them." (vs. 17). When Paul says keep away from them, he does not mean we cannot work with them or play cards with them or talk to them. We would not be able to live in the world if that were the case. He means that we should not associate with them religiously. We should not act as if we are united in the same faith. If they confess faith in Jesus as their Savior, it may be that we are united in the same faith. It may be that we are both members of the invisible, holy Christian church. But we cannot read hearts like God. All we can do is judge and analyze teaching. And if the teaching is not the same, then Paul says keep away from them.

Deciding which church body to join and avoiding religious association with those who do not follow all of Jesus's teaching is what we call the doctrine of church fellowship. As you might imagine, it's not a very popular doctrine in a culture that just wants to live and let live, not ruffle feathers, and just get along with everyone. But actually, it's never been popular. You can read for yourself in the bulletin the words Luther preached almost 500 years ago, where he noted that

many people said that we shouldn't contest so fiercely and get bent out of shape over one article of faith or break fellowship over it. But Luther also correctly pointed out that peace and unity where we sacrifice this or that point in God's word will ultimately result in losing the heart and core of God's word, along with the eternal life it gives.

So what are some teachings to look out for today when you're considering church membership? Permit me to draw your attention to seven in particular. This is not an exhaustive list, and these are not all equally important. But they are all teachings that are contested in our day and age.

First, if a church teaches that we are saved and reconciled to God through our works, even if they only say that our works help save us a little bit, such as by making a decision for Jesus, that is a church to avoid. We are saved through God's gracious gift of faith in Jesus Christ alone (John 3:16; Romans 3:28).

Second, find out if the church teaches that Jesus physically rose from the dead three days after he died on the cross. Paul tells us if Christ has not been raised, our faith is useless (1 Corinthians 15:14), but there are still a growing number of Christian churches and church bodies that say it doesn't matter whether or not you believe that Jesus physically rose from the dead.

Third, find out if the church teaches that baptism and the Lord's Supper are means through which God forgives our sins and saves us. Many large and popular Christian churches today do not. Jesus's teaching clearly does (1 Peter 3:21; Matt. 26:26–29).

Fourth, make sure the church teaches that the Scriptures are God's word and are completely true and without error and thus to be listened to and followed (2 Timothy 3:16–17).

Fifth, find out if the church actually disciplines those who do not listen to and follow any teaching in the Bible, whether they blatantly disagree with it in words or with the way they live (Matt. 18:15–18). Jesus himself told his disciples to be carrying out church discipline in love.

Sixth, find out where they stand on some of the widely discussed moral issues of today, like human sexuality. Jesus's teaching is clear on these issues; find out if they are just as clear (Deut. 22:5; 1 Cor. 6:9–10; 1 Tim. 1:9–11; Hebrews 13:4).

Seventh, I don't know how many times, especially at funerals, that I have heard people casually bring up their church and their pastor, and just as casually refer to their pastor as "she." One of my own distant female relatives once told me very casually that she is a retired pastor. Let me be clear: In God's eyes, men and women do indeed have absolutely equal *status*. It was precisely because Christians valued men and women equally that in the early days of the church, unbelieving men would frequently make fun of Christianity as that religion for women. But that does not mean that God has given men and women the same *roles* on earth. God makes it clear in many places in Scripture, especially Genesis 2, 1 Corinthians 14, and 1 Timothy 2, that he wants positions that involve authority over an entire congregation or church body filled by men. Find out if the church you are going to join upholds Jesus's teaching in that regard.

Fellow saints, let's not lose sight of why church fellowship, why these teachings, why the Bible is so important. Paul tells us that the Holy Scriptures are able to make us wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. When a lot of people were leaving Jesus because of his teaching and Jesus asked his disciples if they were going to leave too, it was Peter who spoke up and said, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life."

Jesus's words are spirit and they are life, in a world dominated by the flesh and by death. Jesus's words are the only thing that breathe unconditional love and forgiveness in a world dominated by hatred and grudges. Jesus's words are the only thing that confer holiness in a world dominated by sin. Jesus's words are the only thing that provide sure hope in a world of doubt and despair. Jesus's words alone tell us the truth in a world of deceit and lies. Jesus's words are the only ones that give the most priceless gift of salvation for free in a world where nothing is truly free.

“If you remain in my word, you are really my disciples. You will also know the truth, and the truth will set you free.” God grant that we may hold to and remain in his Son's teaching, that we may also be set free from sin, death, and devil. Amen.