



Why Not?

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“**W**hy Church?” It is a good question. Perhaps every generation of believers should answer it. However, until the past few decades it would have seemed an odd question, especially for Lutherans, who were once schooled in Luther’s catechisms and the Lutheran Confessions. They might have replied, “Why not?”

Formerly, Lutherans could have responded clearly and concisely citing just two of the confessional writings, *The Augsburg Confession* and *Luther’s Small Catechism*:

1. The Church: Augsburg Confession Article 7 states that the Church is “the assembly of all believers among whom the gospel is preached in its purity and the holy sacraments are administered according to the gospel.”¹
2. The Gospel: Luther’s explanation in the Small Catechism of the third article of the Apostles’ Creed, the article in which we say we believe in “the holy catholic church,” declares that the Holy Spirit uses the proclamation of the gospel to call sinners to faith in Jesus.
3. The Sacrament of Holy Baptism: The Small Catechism cites Mark 16:16: “Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not

¹ Martin Luther, “The Augsburg Confession,” in *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, ed. Theodore G. Tappert (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1959), 32. Hereafter cited as BC.

People give various reasons for having a church, many of which are inadequate or even wrong. Many churches move to the core of their existence human elements that cannot sustain the Church, which can only be sustained by having a living relationship with Christ as its very center.

believe will be condemned.” The benefits of baptism include the forgiveness of sin, deliverance from death and the devil, and the gift of eternal salvation.

4. The Sacrament of the Altar: The Small Catechism’s explanation of the Lord’s Supper speaks of the same benefits as in baptism. Luther focuses on receiving the body and blood of Jesus for the forgiveness of sin, “for where there is forgiveness of sin, there are also life and salvation.”²

Those few brief sections from the Lutheran Confessions make it rather obvious that the Church is at the center of the Holy Spirit’s work to save sinners. Who wouldn’t want total forgiveness for all sin? Who wouldn’t want salvation and eternal life? Who wouldn’t want to be included in Jesus’s complete victory over sin, death, and the devil? Who wouldn’t want to be in the Church? Who wouldn’t give thanks and praise to Jesus for his Church? Which believer would ask, “Why Church?” Unbelievers, doubters, skeptics, and rebellious adolescents might ask the question, but who else would?

Evil, sinful people, of course. Which we all are. Let’s be honest in confessing our sin. Though we repeatedly confess we believe in “the holy catholic church,” we all doubt it. In the midst of a congregational spat or a denominational division or conflict, who among us isn’t tempted to flee the Church?

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Tragically, millions of people in North America and Europe have walked away from the Church, or at least the institutional manifestations of the Church. Whether or not they have lost faith in Jesus, God alone knows. However, in light of what Augsburg Confession Article 7 confesses the Church to be, they have definitely walked away from the assembly of believers. That is not a good or healthy move, but more about that later.

Many people have in effect answered the question “Why Church?” with, “Who needs it? Why bother? I don’t need it.” Unfortunately, it is understandable why so many people now believe the Church (or at least its institutional manifestations) is not necessary.

There are good reasons why there should not be church. I am intentionally using a lowercase “c” here in order to distinguish between “a church” and “the Church.” A “church” can be a congregation or parish in any tradition or denomination. It can also be a denomination or a tradition (Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, or Protestant). However, a “church” is not the “Church.” The “Church”

² Luther, “Small Catechism,” in *BC*, 352.

is manifested in “churches,” but is far more and far greater than any “church.” It is the “one holy catholic and apostolic church.” Here are some good reasons for *not* having church.

A FAMILY CHURCH

“This is my family’s church. My whole family is buried in the church cemetery.” The Church is not a possession of any earthly family, nor is it centered on an earthly family.

As in most misunderstandings of the Church, there is an element of truth in it. The Church is indeed a family, but its members are children of the heavenly Father, not an earthly father. It is a family whose members reach out to members of any and all earthly families. Family blood relationships of this world count for nothing. The only blood that matters and unites in the Church is Jesus’s blood.

Many Lutheran congregations in North America exist only because earthly families founded churches with great faith and sacrifice. However, Jesus’s difficult words in Matthew’s Gospel make it clear that a church’s unity is not in an earthly family: “Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law” (Matt 10:34–35).

A FRIENDSHIP NETWORK

“All my friends are in this church.” The Church is not a social club or social network centered on the friendships of this world. Good friendships are a wonderful blessing, but a church’s primary purpose should not be a gathering place for people who like each other and have common interests. The Church is a gathering place for sinners.

The truth in this misunderstanding and use of a church is that friendship is very important. However, the most important friendship is centered on and with Jesus, which is praised in the familiar hymn “What a Friend We Have in Jesus.”

AN ARM OF A POLITICAL PARTY

“The church must take a stand in support of [fill in the blank of any political party’s platform or a social cause].” The Church is not a political lobbying group focused on proclaiming and supporting any political party or government, or the latest social agenda fad. The Church is the place where the gospel is proclaimed. Jesus’s first proclamation of the gospel following his baptism was, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel” (Mark 1:15). The Church serves God’s kingdom, not a worldly political party or government.

The truth in this misunderstanding is that the Church is indeed about a kingdom and authority, but it is the present and coming kingdom of God, not a worldly regime. Christians are not united by their political beliefs and opinions. They are united by their confession of faith in Jesus. In a healthy church, people will disagree about political matters.

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AN ENVIRONMENTAL ECOJUSTICE AGENCY

“The church must save the earth.” Not even almighty God is saving the earth. God is preserving it, but the present heaven and earth are passing away (Matt 5:18; Rev 21:1). The present creation is passing away as a completely new and good creation is coming. The arrogance and presumption of nonbelievers to think they can save the earth is understandable. There’s no limit to the height of sinful pompousness. However, when Christians believe they can save the earth, it is startling. Apparently, ignorance of some of the most basic words of Scripture abounds in churches.

The truth in this misguided notion is that Christians are indeed called to be good stewards of the earth. We are called to care for the environment, even while this earth is passing away. However, the Church’s mission is not to save the earth. Its mission is to save sinners.

A PERSONALITY CULT

“This is [fill in the name of any preacher, pastor, or evangelist]’s church.” The Church is not a personality cult centered on a charismatic leader. Lamentably, Christians often take their eyes off Jesus and put their trust in sinful human beings. They would do well to pay attention to Psalm 146:3–4:

Put not your trust in princes,
in a son of man, in whom there is no salvation.
When his breath departs, he returns to the earth;
on that very day his plans perish.

The truth of this misunderstanding is that one person is indeed at the center of the Church—Jesus, and no one else. All honor, glory, and praise go to the Father and Son, not a Christian leader no matter how gifted. Every Christian leader will at some point let you down. Jesus will never do that.

AN INSTITUTION IN NEED OF SUPPORT AND PRESERVATION

“We must pull together and give generously to keep the church going.” The Church is not an institution in need of being preserved and saved. As Jesus promised: “And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it” (Matt 16:18).

The Church doesn’t need to be saved. Sinners need to be saved. The Church is a movement, the work of the Holy Spirit whereby sinners are saved. Once attention is focused on saving a church, be it a congregation or a denomination, the attention has turned away from Jesus and is focused on institutional survival.

This misunderstanding is correct in that believers are indeed called to be generous in their giving and support for the Church, but it is giving for the sake of making disciples, not preserving an institution.

A PLACE OF CORRECT WORSHIP AND LITURGY

“This church must be the place where worship is [fill in the blank with any form of worship, from the most complex liturgical form to the simplest praise band form].” The Church is not a place where there must be perfect exercise of any particular human rite or liturgy. There has never been a single rite or liturgy used by the whole Church, so there is no single right way to do liturgy and worship.

The truth about this misunderstanding of the Church is that good worship and liturgy, no matter how complex or simple, are very important, but not because they must be done perfectly or be a particular form. They matter because all worship and liturgy should proclaim Jesus Christ, glorify God, and draw sinners to faith and love in Jesus to receive forgiveness of sin, abundant and joyful life in this creation, and eternal life in the new creation to come.

A REFUGE FROM ALL THE TROUBLES OF THE WORLD

“The church ought to be a place to get away from the world and all of its troubles.” The only people who attend churches are sinners; therefore, it is completely unrealistic to expect that sinners will leave their sins at the door before entering a church. Relationships in the Church are not always clean and harmonious. They are messy, dirty, and challenging.

Furthermore, contrary to what people tend to think about the devil’s activity, namely that it’s outside the Church, the truth is that the devil is most focused on the Church. The devil can do a lot of destructive work in creation, but with one exception the consequences are temporal. The exception is faith. The devil is bound to attack the faith of believers, because it is the one thing by which sinners are justified and saved.

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AN ON-DEMAND CHURCH

“This church should fulfill and satisfy me.” The Church is not an on-demand operation that gives consumers whatever they desire. A church that exists primarily to make people feel good, satisfy them, or give them what they think they need is an idol.

Like all idols, a church will not be able to live up to those expectations. No matter the heart's desire, whether it is satisfying worship, Bible study, small groups, youth ministry, or good coffee at a fellowship hour, there will inevitably be disappointment. Sadly, most people will blame the church rather than recognize and confess they are seeking things that cannot satisfy and meet their deepest needs.

The truth deeply embedded in this misunderstanding is best expressed by Augustine at the beginning of his *Confessions* when he writes about humanity's sinful predicament: “The thought of you stirs him so deeply that he cannot be content unless he praises you, because you made us for yourself and our hearts find no peace until they rest in you.”³ As sinners, we know we are missing something, but we don't know who we're missing, and we search in all the wrong places.

Furthermore, believers are called to obey Jesus. He and his Church do not exist to obey the commands of sinners.

PERFECT THEOLOGY

“There must be pure doctrine and good theology in the Church.” These are essential, but when their importance gets elevated to the extreme, churches can lose sight of or neglect the other essential dimensions of life together in Christ and the Church's primary mission to make disciples.

Gerhard Forde said theology is a necessary evil: necessary because believers must talk about the living God; evil because as soon as we start talking about God, we step out of the relationship upon which all of life depends—the first- and second-person relationship between us and our heavenly Father. Doing theology and articulating doctrines are speaking of God in the third person, which is fraught

³ Augustine, *Confessions*, 1.1.

with danger. We can easily keep God at a distance as though we are in some neutral position, or put ourselves in authority over God. Martin Luther insisted there is no neutral position for sinners. We are always caught in the middle of the most dangerous conflict in all of creation, the conflict between Christ and the devil.

The main point of Forde's book *Theology Is for Proclamation* is that theology is for proclamation of the gospel.⁴ The most important word is not what we say about Jesus (theology and doctrine), but what Christ says to us, and then secondly, our direct response to him. Forde often used the marriage analogy to speak of our relationship with Christ. The most important communication is what lovers say *to* each other, not what they say *about* each other. Talking about a spouse does not a marriage make.

WHAT THE CHURCH IS

All of the above are examples of how churches get sidetracked and lose sight of the main thing—Jesus Christ. Dr. Robert Benne, in a presentation at the NALC Atlantic Mission District conference several years ago, illustrated what has gone wrong with mainline Protestant denominations in North America. He drew concentric circles on a blackboard, with a cross to symbolize Jesus in the center circle. He labeled the circles moving away from the center with some of the items above and others such as “church polity” and “governance.” He labeled the outer circle “sociopolitical views.”

Dr. Benne said that Christians in mainline denominations used to be united at the center circle in their confession of Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. Move away from the center, and differences begin to emerge, such as in worship styles and preferences. At the outer circle, Christians would disagree completely on their socio-political views. The disagreements away from the center circle were okay and healthy as long as Christians were united at the center in their confession of Jesus.

In the past fifty years, mainline denominations moved Jesus Christ to the outer circle and sociopolitical views to the center. Some, but not all, congregations within those denominations have also moved Christ to the perimeter. Increasingly, it is not okay to disagree on sociopolitical matters, but it is okay to disagree on who Christ is. One may disagree on basic parts of the ecumenical creeds, such as whether or not Jesus was born of the Virgin Mary or was physically raised from the dead. Leaders in these denominations will say, “Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life for me, but not for everyone.” They say faith in Jesus is not necessary for salvation.

However, any denomination, any congregation, and any individual can move Christ from the center and replace him with one of the items above (family, friends, worship, doctrine, etc.). If identity and unity in our churches are centered in anything or anyone other than Christ alone, we lose our focus on him and we will be scattered.

⁴ Gerhard O. Forde, *Theology Is for Proclamation* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990).

Since none of the items above are able to live up to what is promised or what is expected, no wonder people leave churches, disappointed, frustrated, disillusioned, angry, and despairing. Idols will do that to you every time. Jesus Christ alone is able to keep all of his promises. He alone is able to live up to all the expectations Scripture promises about him.

Dr. Benne's illustration and the Lutheran Confessions cited above point directly to the affirmative answer to "Why Church?" They point to the one whom Church is all about—Jesus. The whole point of Church is to be in Jesus, to abide in him. In doing so, we know him, trust in him, listen to him, serve him, obey him, thank him, praise him, and love him.

Knowing Jesus is not just knowing *about* him. One could know everything there is to know about Jesus and yet not know him or be known by him. The demons he encountered knew exactly who he was and seemed to know more about him than the disciples at times. Jesus's words to the foolish virgins—"I do not know you" (Matt 25:12)—and to those who don't do the Father's will—"I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness" (Matt 7:23)—are sharp reminders of the necessity of being known by Jesus.

Forde's frequent use of the marriage analogy is helpful for keeping us centered on Jesus. Knowing Jesus is like a husband and wife knowing each other. They know more about each other than anyone else does. They speak to each other at every opportunity. Hence the importance of being in God's Word—the Holy Scriptures and Jesus himself—in the Church's worship, but also in individual and group study and devotions. Jesus's image of the vine and the branch in John 15 is powerful. The only way to have true life is to abide in Jesus as a branch abides in the vine.

Our relationship with Christ is not just a spiritual or ethereal relationship, just as a marriage is more than spiritual and ethereal. It is a physical relationship involving our whole bodies and all our senses. Jesus comes to us and touches us physically. We grasp his body and drink his blood in the Lord's Supper. "Oh, taste and see that the Lord is good! Blessed is the man who takes refuge in him!" (Ps 34:8).

The marriage of husband and wife involves their whole bodies and lives. Their bodies and lives are not their own as individuals, but are mutually conjoined as a couple. So too in our relationship with Christ. As Paul writes, "Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own, for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body" (1 Cor 6:19–20).

God's word about marriage in Genesis 2:24 is literally true—"they shall become one flesh." In John's Gospel, Jesus speaks often about how the Father and Son are one (John 10:30), and that he is in the Father and the Father is in him (John 14:11), and that we are in him (John 14:20).

Furthermore, our relationship with Christ is with his whole body—all the members of his body bound together (1 Cor 12:12). The Church is the place where the head of the body, Jesus, holds and leads the members of the body. The members

are gathered as one in him to love, serve, and obey him. It is vital for the members of Christ's body to be together in worship, fellowship, and service to those in need.

Finally, a husband and wife are to be fruitful and to multiply (Gen 1:28). So too is our relationship in Christ. "You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide, so that whatever you ask the Father in my name, he may give it to you" (John 15:16). The fruit, the multiplication, is the making of disciples: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you" (Matt 28:19–20).

The Church is the center of the Holy Spirit's work of discipling believers for the purpose of sending them out for making more disciples. The verbs Luther uses in his explanation of the third article of the Creed capture the whole activity as the Holy Spirit captures all the saints. The Holy Spirit calls, gathers, enlightens, sanctifies, keeps united in Christ in one true faith, forgives sin, and raises all the saints.

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The resurrection is here and now, daily, as Luther explains God's ongoing baptismal work in and for us, citing Paul's words in Romans 6 in the Small Catechism. Each day we are put to death as sinners and each day raised as saints bearing all of Christ's righteousness. Why Church? To be a new creation in Christ: "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come" (2 Cor 5:17).

Sinners living in the darkness of this world flock to the light and to the good news of Jesus's Gospel. The Church is multiplying in the Global South. It can happen in the Global North if churches will be the Church. Come, Lord Jesus! ☩

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