

A CHRISTIAN HOLY PEOPLE

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FROM MARTIN LUTHER'S
On the Councils and the Church

Translated by
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FOREWORD

At some point in the search for a church home the simplest of questions may occur to the Christian: How do I know when I have found it? How can I be sure I am really in a Christian church? Sure, weekly gatherings of Christians nowadays are embraced or abandoned for all sorts of reasons: Building location, worship times, musician quality, youth programs, educational opportunities, preaching skill-level, mission outreach and even congregational indebtedness. None of these reasons for accepting or rejecting a given community of believers, however, really touch on what constitutes the true Christian church on earth.

So what does? That is subject of the short work which follows. There Martin Luther poses this question and on the basis of Scripture, comes up with seven distinctive marks which identify the Christian church! He then goes on to explore the extent and the limit of the power of the church on earth, especially when representatives of individual Christian communities gather together to decide matters touching on the church at large. What role might Christian homes and schools play in that bigger picture? What about the government? Luther touches on these matters as well!

In short, what the following work contains is a brief primer on the essence of the Christian church in the world in these end times. As the extensive *Afterword* explains, it is

taken from a section of one of Luther's more famous works, his *On the Councils and the Church*, which first appeared in 1539. It is a brand new translation by Holger Sonntag, divided into chapters with study questions for ease of use.

Any Christian who takes a few moments to work through this text will most certainly benefit from the effort, as most assuredly have I as I prepared this edition.

Paul Strawn

Spring Lake Park, Minnesota

June 2011

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CHRIST'S HOLY PEOPLE

Many people talk endlessly about the make-up of the Christian church. Regardless of what is said, stick with the Apostles' creed: "I believe in a holy Christian church, a communion of saints."

The church is as the creed states: A communion of saints. It is a group of people who are Christians and holy. Put another way: The church is Christ's holy people.

***The church is Christ's
holy people***

Admittedly the meaning of the word *church* is unclear. Originally it did not have the meaning found in the creed.

In Acts 19:39–40, for example, the city clerk calls *church* that assembly or people who had come together in the city square. He says there: “Let it be settled in a regular *church*.” And having said this, he let the *church* go. In this and other places *church* means nothing other than an assembly of people—whether Christian or not.

The world contains many peoples. But Christians are a specially called people. This is why Christians are not called simply *church* or a *people* but a *Christian holy people* that believes in Christ.

Why is the church called a *Christian holy people*? The church has the Holy Spirit who daily makes it holy! The Holy Spirit makes Christians holy not only—as the Antinomians foolishly claim—through the forgiveness of sins, which Christ has purchased for them, but also by doing away with, purging and killing sins. This is why the church is called a *Christian holy people*.

The expression *holy Christian church* means “a people that consists of Christians and is holy,” or more commonly: “Holy Christendom,” or “all Christendom.” In the Old Testament the church is called simply “God’s people.”

If the Apostles’ creed had stated “I believe that there is a *Christian holy people*,” all confusion about the word *church* would have been avoided. The expression *Christian holy people* would have easily and powerfully described what is and is not church.

Whoever would have heard this expression a *Christian holy people* could then have quickly surmised: “The pope is not a people, much less a *Christian holy people*. The same is true of the bishops, priests, and monks. They also are no

Christian holy people. They do not believe in Christ or lead holy lives, but are the devil's evil shameful people. He who does not rightly believe in Christ is neither Christian nor a Christian. Whoever does not have the Holy Spirit against sin is not holy. This is why they cannot be a *Christian holy people*, that is, a holy and universal church.”

However, since we now use this ambiguous word “church” in the Apostles’ creed, the common man thinks the church is simply a building. Artists paint it that way. Or, if they are really good, they depict the apostles, disciples, and Mary as they were gathered on Pentecost, the Holy Spirit hovering above them. Even though it is a depiction of the *Christian holy people* of only one particular time, it is a good thing.

***The common man
thinks the church is
simply a building***

The expression *Christian holy people* however should not be used exclusively to describe the church during the time of the Apostles, but should be used continuously until the final judgment. A *Christian holy people* continually exists on earth. Within that people Christ lives, works and governs. Christ does so through redemption, that is, by grace and the forgiveness of sins.

Within this living *Christian holy people* the Holy Spirit also dwells. The Holy Spirit enlivens and sanctifies, that is, he daily purges sins and renews life. Why? So we do not remain in sins, but can and will lead a new life in all kinds of good works!

As St. Paul teaches, this is what the Ten Commandments demand. Christian holiness comes about when the

Holy Spirit gives people faith in Christ, thereby making them holy, Acts 15:9. The Holy Spirit creates a new heart, soul, body, work and being. He writes the commandments of God not *onto* tables of stone but *into* hearts of flesh, 2 Cor. 3:3. According to the First Table of Moses in particular (commandments 1-3) the Holy Spirit grants us true knowledge of God so that we, enlightened by him with true faith, are able to resist all false doctrine, overcome all faulty thought and error, and remain pure in faith against the devil.

The Holy Spirit also grants strength and comforts simple, despairing, weak consciences against the accusations and afflictions of sins. If he did not, souls would fall into depression or despair. They would also grow afraid of suffering, pain, death, wrath and the judgment of God. But strengthened in hope and comforted, souls boldly and joyfully overcome the devil.

The Holy Spirit also grants true fear and love of God

The Holy Spirit also grants true fear and love of God so that we do not despise God and grumble against his strange judgments, or grow angry because of them. Instead, we love, praise, thank and honor him in all things, good or bad.

This is what is called a new, holy life in the soul according to the First Table of Moses. It is also called the three chief virtues of Christians, namely, faith, hope and love (1 Cor. 13:13). It is the Holy Spirit—acquired for us by Christ—who gives, does and works this. He is therefore called the Sanctifier or Giver of Life.

The old Adam is dead and cannot do it. The Old Adam

can only learn it from the law. He would otherwise not know this about himself.

In the Second Table (commandments 4-10) and according to the body, the Holy Spirit also makes Christians holy. The Holy Spirit enables Christians to obey parents and other authorities willingly. He also moves Christians to act peacefully and humbly, not to be angry or vindictive or evil. He would that we be patient, kind, helpful, brotherly and mild. The Holy Spirit also works within us to prevent us from being unchaste, adulterers and undisciplined, but chaste, disciplined either with wife, child and servants, or without wife and child.

Moreover, the Holy Spirit would that we not steal, practice usury, be greedy and practice price gouging, but that we work honestly, earn our living decently, lend, give and help gladly wherever we can. Likewise, that we not lie, deceive or gossip, but are kind, truthful, faithful, constant and all the other things that are demanded in the commandments of God.

This is what Christian holiness is

This is what the Holy Spirit does! He makes holy and awakens the body to such new life until it is accomplished in the life to come. This is what Christian holiness is. And Christians must always be on earth, even if they are only two or three, or just children, as there are, unfortunately, only few older people who have this holiness.

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1. What are Christians called?
 2. Who makes Christians a *Christian holy people*?

3. What is the church called in the Old Testament?
4. Who is not a Christian?
5. What does the common man think when he hears the word 'church'?
6. In whom lives both Christ and the Holy Spirit?
7. What makes Christians holy?
8. On to what does the Holy Spirit write the commandments of God?