

Today we celebrate the festival of Pentecost, which is a word meaning 50. The events of Pentecost took place 50 days after Jesus' resurrection from the dead as the disciples were gathered in Jerusalem awaiting orders for their new life in Christ. The significance of this day is easy to understand for Pentecost marks the birth of the Church on earth. I like the word "birth" because it conveys an important aspect of the Church- her passivity. The Church was not made or formed or organized, but created and birthed. The Church was formed in utero over the course of Jesus' 3 year ministry. She spent these years gestating and developing as Christ shaped the minds of the 12 disciples. And in the fullness of time, she was brought forth, begotten not made, born not of the will of flesh and blood, but by the power of the Holy Spirit. The idea of birth is entirely passive. In the same way we did not choose to be born, so the Church did not choose to come into existence. Conceived first in the mind of God, developed under the tutelage of Christ our Lord, she receives her birth certificate. By thinking of the Church in this way we avoid the danger of making the Church too secular, too worldly. It is easy to do this for the Church indeed has a secular aspect to her. She exists in the world, and, as such, she is subject to the laws of nature and society. She too must render to Caesar what is Caesar's. She too has worldly obligations- bills to pay, buildings to maintain, employees to keep. But although she has a worldly structure, she does not have a worldly mission. For the Church exists for the world, but she is not of the world. This is why as Lutherans we confess that there are in fact two different dimensions to the Church. There is the visible Church and the hidden, invisible Church. The visible Church is what can be perceived with the physical senses. This brick and mortar existence is seen with our eyes. We see people gathering, and worshipping, working and socializing; there are physical tasks being done and physical people doing the work. Of course the visible Church has marks to distinguish her from every other secular business or organization. There is the preaching of the Word of God and the administration of the Sacraments. These birthmarks indicate where the true Church on earth is located, where she is to be found in real time and space.

But the visible church is not the full expression or the full essence of the Church. It is but a reflection of a much deeper spiritual reality. The true identity of the Church is not to be found in a state of *Becoming*, but of *Being*. As long as the Church exists in this fallen world she will remain in state of becoming. Always moving and progressing towards a heavenly goal. Each historical context demands consideration. Although the Word of God

does not change, how the Church organizes, structures, and governs herself does. Although Christ is the same yesterday, today and forever, the same cannot be said of the Church. For the Church is always in a state of flux as she tries to meet the spiritual needs of human beings. And whatever is in a state of movement and becoming has not reached its final perfection. Change and movement are not signs of progress and enlightenment, but are rather indicators of decline. Movement means there is a lack, a deficiency, a need for something more, which is to be found somewhere else. Perfection on the other hand is stable, immovable, unchangeable, permanent. Perfection is a state of completion and therefore no further progression is required. The visible Church will remain in this state of Becoming as long as she is situated within the changing world around her.

But there is a higher reality to the Church, which must be confessed; this higher reality is an article of faith and must be believed. We call this higher plane of existence the hidden<sup>1</sup>, invisible Church. The contrast between the visible Church and the invisible Church could not be more striking. If the visible Church is always in a state of *Becoming*, the invisible Church exists in a state of *Being*. The visible Church is characterized by actions, the invisible Church by rest. The visible Church is governed by the will of man and must submit to his judgements, the invisible Church is governed by the will of God and knows only God as Judge. The visible Church is a conflicted community, the invisible Church is the gathered communion of saints. Admission into the visible Church is an act of reason, choice and decision. Admission into the invisible Church is an act of God and faith. And this distinction between the two is logical to understand for consider the makeup of the visible Church. Not everyone who attends a local church does so for the right reason. All kinds of people attend church: the seekers, the agnostics, the curious bystanders, the hurt, the proud, the broken; critics and do-gooders, atheists and believers; Lutherans and Baptists, Methodists and Presbyterians, Protestants and Catholics alike, all gathering together within the very broad structure known as the visible Church. But this hodgepodge of diversity is not the true Church. It is wheat and chaff coexisting together until the Divine harvest. It is God's elect intermingled with God's enemies. The true Church is invisible. She is not in a state of Becoming she exists in a state of perfect

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<sup>1</sup> Lutheran Reformers were careful to avoid the term "invisible" as not to imply the true Church could not be found on earth. They stressed the visible reality of the Word and Sacraments as Marks of the true Church, which can be seen and identified. Hence their preference for "hidden" rather than "invisible". Although I agree wholeheartedly with this belief, I still prefer the term "invisible". Therefore, I have chosen to retain St. Augustine's original expression as I believe it emphasizes more pointedly the contrast between the visible Church's constant struggle and recreation by the Word of God, and the invisible Church's complete subsistence in Christ.

Being. As God Himself is unchangeable, so she too is unchanging. She is not searching for identity she has her fixed identity as the body of Christ. She is not culturally diverse, she is spiritually harmonized. She is not in a state of flux, but is at perfect rest. She is not to be found in one geographical place or period of history, in one physical building, nor even in one human church denomination. She exists above and beyond all earthly categories and labels. She transcends all race, gender, and political affiliation. She is seen only by God. She exists solely in the wounds of Christ. Where Christ dwells there the true Church is gathered. She is complete, she is perfect, she is the spotless bride of Christ. This is the confession we make dear brothers and sisters in Christ that all who confess with their mouths and believe in their hearts that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God take up residence within this invisible Church. This spiritual kingdom of God knows no bounds; it is not governed by chance or circumstance. It is the eternal realm of our eternal God.

For now we exist in two kingdoms. The Church visible and the Church invisible exist alongside each other. We must live with the tension, and accept the glaring contradictions between the two. For side by side exist holiness and ungodliness, beauty and ugliness, symmetry and disfigurement, saint and sinner, worldly judgements and heavenly grace and forgiveness. This duality must be endured because it can never be resolved by us. We must wait patiently on the Lord. We must wait for that glorious Day when the visible and the invisible are merged together into one seamless reality; when what is unseen becomes seen, what is invisible becomes manifest, when the God who loves to hide finally reveals Himself and gathers His people from the farthest reaches of time and the far corners of the world to dwell with Him in the One, Holy, Universal and Eternal Church. Amen.

In Christ,

Pastor Jeremy Mills  
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