H.J. Begemann

Church of our Lord Jesus Christ

Lord’s Day 21 speaks of the church as a matter of faith. An essential part of faith.

That is an important fact and the starting point of all our speaking and thinking about the church. We live in a time when people think of the church as an outdated thing. The church doesn't matter. As long as you believe, they say.

It really comes as a matter of faith. Without faith nobody will be saved. Without a bond with the Savior Jesus Christ there is no salvation. No real and eternal happiness.

Believing is of vital importance. And that is why the catechism also asked in Lord’s Day 7: What is true faith? And: what should a Christian believe? Then the answer was clear: everything we are promised in the gospel. The articles of our Catholic and undoubted Christian faith summarize this.

Now in the summary of those promises it also says: I believe a Holy, Catholic, Christian church, the communion of saints. A Christian must believe that too: the church. Because the church is also promised us in the gospel. That the Son of God gathers, protects, and sustains her. That's what the Lord promises us in His Word.

So I have to believe the church. And believing is not the same as having your own vision, having an opinion. To believe it is to say amen upon God's Word.

In Lord’s Day 21 we learn to say amen to God's promises about the church.

I may proclaim the Word of God to you as summarized in the apostolic confession with the words:

I BELIEVE A HOLY, CATHOLIC, CHRISTIAN CHURCH, THE COMMUNION OF SAINTS, AND THE FORGIVENESS OF SINS

And we see successively:

*1. I believe the church*

*2. I have a task in the church*

*3. I have peace in the church*

**ONE**

I believe a church.

The Son of God gathers, protects, and sustains the church.

You cannot say a meaningful word about the church without mentioning its owner. The church is not ours, not the organization below, of people. No, the church is from above. She is the great cause of the Son of God in this world. From the beginning of the world to the end. From a to z, His great work. The church is His. And in that the church differs from all other meetings and organizations of people in that it is His, from above. The Son of God gathers, protects, and sustains her. And if that is the living content of your faith, a matter of a living belief, not dead capital, but a reality of faith that is experienced, then for that reason alone you can no longer be indifferent to the church ... the church doesn't matter.

The church doesn't matter? But she is His big enterprise in this world! His harvest. Fruit in his labor. Bought with his precious blood. He who speaks disgracefully about the church, speaks disgracefully about Christ’s work in this world.

That the church is the cause of Christ is made clear to us in various places in scriptures. Christ is the Bridegroom, the church His bride, whom He recruits. The church is the body of Christ, while He is her Head. The church is the flock of Christ, of which He is the good Shepherd. Whoever says church says Christ. And whoever says Christ says church.

They belong together inseparably. A unit of life, like the head with the body.

Wanting to belong to Christ through faith, but not giving a care about the church. The Bridegroom, but not interested in the bride. Choosing the Head, but in the meantime carelessly passing by the body. All that is impossible.

It is unlawful to speak contemptuously about the church. Paul says to the elders of the church at Ephesus: "Watch then for yourself and for all the flock over which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to feed the church of God, which He Himself has acquired through His Own blood." (Acts 20:28). He who speaks disgracefully about the church speaks disgracefully about the blood of Christ!

"What it comes down to is that you believe." Yes, certainly. What do you believe about the church? Do you believe she is paid for with the precious blood of Christ? His property that He watches over? Very precious in his eyes? Then you can't rail against the church. You are to love her. You always see her as His work in this world.

The church work is not a human work. People do not form a church. People are unable to do that. It takes divine powers to assemble the church from the fallen human race.

It is the Son of God who, as a Shepherd, brings his sheep together into a flock. He does this through his Spirit. And the Spirit uses the means of working faith: the Word of God, the Bible. Christ lets that Word be proclaimed worldwide. Because, so it is written in that same Word - how will people believe in Him of whom they have not heard? And how will they hear without preaching? And how will one preach without being sent? (That is, without being sent by Christ!) Through His Spirit and Word, Christ takes sinners, haters of God and their neighbors, away from the bondage of sin and Satan. He breaks their chains. He overwhelms their hearts. He overcomes them through his love. He gives them salvation. They become his sheep. And we listen to no one else but to his voice alone. And He saves them and gives them eternal life taking death away from them.

He gathers them in His time up to the church above and He fills the wedding hall.

The church that He assembles through His Word and Spirit, He also protects at the same time.

He, who has received all power in heaven and on earth from the Father, He, the prince of the kings of the earth through whom the Father rules all things, surrounds his people with the most wise care and sustenance. He protects his sheep against wolves and mercenaries.

No, that does not mean that the church will always enjoy a peaceful life. It has been called to fight and to bear the cross and it has been predicted: "You will have tribulations in the world." (John 16: 33). But Christ will not cause her to suffer. The gates of the realm of the dead, the powers of corruption will not overwhelm her, will not destroy her (Mat.16: 18) Christ, who has conquered death, He protects and preserves us with his power against all the enemies of the church.

And apart from the fact that the Son of God gathers His church and protects her, He also sustains her.

He gives her bread, the living bread that comes down from heaven and gives nourishment, gives true food unto eternal life. He ensures that his flock is led into the grassy pastures of the Word. He won't let them lack anything. He will give everything that is needed to sustain her.

If the Son of God gathers, protects, and sustains you through His Spirit and Word, then there is also a clear obligation. Then you must also let yourself be ruled by his Spirit and Word. That Word must also be preached pure and unabridged in the church . No stones may be given for bread. Then everything must be directed to the pure Word of God and everything that is contrary to it rejected and Jesus Christ acknowledged as the only Head.

Of course, if you know the church that way, believing that the church is from Him, then you also confess that only He is in charge of the church. That everything must bow to Him and His Word. That is: acknowledging Him as the only Head.

He demands from His church that she give false doctrine no chance, she guards against a godless life; guards against any sin. In your own life and in the life of the entire church.

And you always have to grant the Word unobstructed access. Only in this way the good Shepherd brings his sheep together. And we are not only called together but also bound together in unity of the true faith. Yes, the miracle of the church is that it brings together people from all nations and races. So that people of different disposition and development, of different age and social position, allow Christ to gather them in his church, in unity of true faith.

That miracle is worked by Christ's Spirit! But ... not outside of us. That is why we must strive to preserve the unity of the faith, worked by the Spirit, also through the bond of peace (Eph. 4: 3). And that takes effort.

You must seek and sustain that unity of true faith by joining or staying with the church. You cannot stand on your own. You cannot keep aloof from the church. According to God's Word, it is the calling of all believers to separate themselves from those who do not belong to the church and to join the church. There is the commission to let yourselves be gathered where Christ, the good Shepherd, calls. Follow me! And now the questions come: Where is the church of Christ then? How can you still find your way in the jumble of the ecclesiastic forest ?

Where can you find that church?

And yet ... that is not very difficult. As long as you know the Bible. Because from there we know that Christ gathers His church by His Word and Spirit. The church is there where people want to listen to that Word of God. The church of Jesus Christ is where the preaching is pure and where the sacraments are administered as Christ instituted them. Christ’s church is where discipline is practiced to help the church member who gets off track. The church is not where that struggle is abandoned. And it will also become increasingly clear in this world where the address of the church is, because Christ's church will be increasingly left alone and isolated and will therefore increasingly stand out.

The hallmark of Christ's church will always be that it keeps the Word pure; and that stands out in a deluded world. You often hear that at the gate of heaven we will not be asked of which church we have been a member. But that is a misleading reasoning. We will certainly be asked. Christ says in Mat. 12:36: Every vain word that people have spoken will be accounted for it the day of judgment. Every word will come to judgment, so how much more our church choice.

Was our choice of church also a choice of faith? Was I a member of this or that church because it was my belief that Christ called me there, that in my hometown He gathered His local church there? Or was I indifferent to his church and I reasoned: oh well, if you only believe, the church doesn't matter. So church choice doesn't matter?

No, go to the Bible, know the scriptures, and the choice of church will not be difficult. And then preserve the unity of the church, submit to its teaching and discipline, bow your neck under the yoke of Jesus Christ and serve the up-building of your brothers and sisters with the gifts that God gives you.

**TWO**

And by this I have arrived at the second point. First we saw: I believe the church. Now: I have a task in the church.

The church is the community of saints. In the second question and answer something very beautiful is said of the church.

This gathering of believers on the foundation of God's Word forms a very unique community. That community is the result of Christ's work of redemption. He himself had to give up all life relationships for it. He was forced out of the community of his people, of his family, of his friends. He has even been forced out of his Father's fellowship! He was without fellowship, so that we would never be abandoned again. We would never miss God's fellowship.

That there might be room again for this confession is why all of us who have been incorporated by true faith in Christ will be one body. That is now the communion of saints: we are incorporated into Christ by faith. By this the most important thing is said: It is fellowship with the Lord Christ. He has acquired and granted it.

And then there is also the communion with each other. First vertically (the bond of everyone with our Head Christ) and then also horizontally (with each other as members of the same body). The catechism declares that believers all have fellowship together and individually as members of the Lord Christ and share in all his treasures and gifts. As members of Christ we are placed next to and together.

Christ the Head does not let his gifts descend on members who are separate, but on his body. Just as the head of a person sends his impulses not to a loose collection of arms and legs, hands and fingers, but to the members of the one body, so it is with the church.

The members of Christ do not receive treasures and gifts of Christ, the Head, separately in separate corners, but with each other as one body, first all together and therefore also personally. And then it is also clear that you have a task in the church.

You never stand empty-handed. Treasures and gifts of the Lord Jesus Christ, and so the catechism immediately includes, that everyone in this community is now obliged to use their gifts for the good and salvation of the other members willingly and with joy.

And think about the Scripture that we have read. Paul uses the beautiful example there of the body in which each has his own place and function from the Lord: eye, ear, hand, foot. And God has put all those members together and put each member in its own place, so that there is no division, no discord in the body, but that all members take care of each other and learn to serve each other.

So the Lord teaches us that in church you have to be a hand and a foot to each other. And you all need each other. No one is superfluous.

If you have the function and gift of a hand in the body of Christ, seize the work that needs to be done and offer help where needed. There can be so much need in the church: the sick, the handicapped, the elderly, the lonely, the unemployed, and so on. And if you have the function of foot in the body of Christ, then go and find them and comfort them there where you can comfort yourself. There is so much to do in the body of Christ, go and find them and comfort wherever you can comfort. There is so much to do in the church for everyone. Each with its own gifts and abilities. So many people are needed who support it together. Elders, deacons, people from the management committee, mutual sisterly help, mission committee, people who prepare the church bulletin, supporting the Theological training. Yes, many hands and feet are needed in the church. Administrators and members of the study associations, men's and women's associations, youth associations.

And yet there are always people who start from the idea that others are obliged to practice the communion of saints. And they complain continuously that it is no longer seen. What does the church actually do for me? But the catechism says so emphatically that everyone is obliged to practice the communion of saints, and it teaches us that we must start with ourselves. If we do that, we will no longer complain, but we will charge ourselves for being still so far removed from the ideal.

So examine whether you use your gifts. Willingly and with joy. For the benefit and salvation of your brothers and sisters. No matter how small those gifts might be in your own eyes.

Anyone who retreats to self-willed isolation becomes cold and lonely, and even harder in his judgment about others. He feels offended all the quicker.

In a body, each member - also the simplest - performs a function at the service of the whole.

I believe in the communion of saints and so I live in it and promote it to the best of my ability. Sometimes you see poignant things concerning it. Sometimes you see very little of it. And that's bad. And yet ... I believe the communion of saints. But remember that faith is also followed by actions. Faith works by love. Faith without charitable works is dead. He who believes becomes fruitful, grows up with his gifts for others, also builds the bond and is strengthened himself.

**THREE**

We come to the third thought.

I believe the church.

I have a task in the church.

And now also: I have peace in the church.

Yes, I have peace in the church. Because whoever gives himself to the church, that is to Jesus, gives himself to his church task, he receives the most beautiful gift that Christ gives to his church.

Among those gifts and treasures that we have in Christ and which the Holy Spirit appropriates for us is, first and foremost, the forgiveness of sins. Yes, the communion of saints lives on the remission of sins. Because those saints are not so holy by themselves. From the beginning I fell away from God, I don't want to live close to Him, I naturally hate God, I am a sinner. But Christ says: You are in the church and I have set you free from all the sins of your life through the atonement of my cross. And so you have peace in the church. Because the peace of the angelic song is attained from the atonement of your sins before the divine countenance. You don't have to be afraid of God anymore. You can look God in the eyes peacefully.

Why? Because God made your hate filled eyes into eyes-of-love. And now I tell you: there is nothing between God and you anymore. He has eliminated everything that was against it. You have peace in the church. No, not that peace that the peoples of the world desire, because that is not the highest peace. But that peace that God has placed in His creation from the beginning and which He brought back with the birth of his Son and which He has sealed in the suffering and death of that same Son.

And now every Sunday you find the ministry of reconciliation taking place here in the church, in the community of the saints. That is the job of the ministers of the Word, of the pastors, the "ambassadors" of Christ. So Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 5: "We are therefore heralds of Christ, as if God exhorted you through our mouths; in the name of Christ, who was made sin for us, we ask you to be reconciled to God, that we might become the righteousness of God in him. " Do you hear that: Our sins charged to him, on His account. His justice for us. Saints? Community of saints? No, not holy in ourselves, but sanctified in Jesus Christ. As we confess for every baptism of every child being baptized: Received and born in sin, yet sanctified in Christ.

Then be reconciled to God. Be busy with it. With that Word of Atonement, with that work of Christ. Recognize your debt. And believe in Christ. There is only one way to salvation: faith in the preached Christ. He has carried off the burden of our sins and God's curse on his cross. That is why there is forgiveness of sins, peace with God.

God never wants to think about it again, whatever may have been. Think about all your sins, including your sinful nature, against which you have to fight throughout your life. He sets you free in Christ! That is the one message from the church: the forgiveness of sins with the blood of Christ. And she doesn't have another message. All other messages have no value.

Whoever accepts this message in faith is not condemned but has peace with God in life and death. For time and eternity. But he who does not believe has already been condemned because he has not believed in the only begotten Son of God.

He who believes, now lives out of the forgiveness of sins and finally enters into the joy of his Lord to sing together with the whole church the song of eternal joy, standing before the throne of God and the Lamb !

Amen.

Sing ~ Ps 93: 1; Ps 93: 2, 4; Ps 122: 3; Ps 125: 2; Ps. 87: 4, 5 (BoP)

Text LD 21

Read ~ 1 Cor. 12: 12-31