

### ***The Church's One Foundation***

In the name of Jesus the Christ, the Son of the living God, dear friends: I really like that last hymn [*The Church's One Foundation* LSB 644]. And my best guess is that while it may not be anybody's all time favorite, it still ranks pretty high on most of your lists. The reason I like it is that it combines a lot of good, solid, Christ-centered theology with a very sing-able and memorable tune. What more can anyone want in a hymn? ... Well, perhaps a bit more. You see, as much as I like it, I do have an axe to grind with it. It contains a statement that is at best misleading if not just plain wrong. Did you catch it? It's in the very first line. If I were to ask you what the Church's one foundation is, what would you say? "Jesus Christ her Lord", right? Well, *that is* how the song goes; but no, biblically speaking it's not correct. And unfortunately, because this hymn and several other hymns like it make the same assertion, a lot of Christians go through life thinking that Jesus Christ is indeed the foundation of the Church that bears his name.

Now, I'm sure the hymnwriter, one Samuel J. Stone, meant well. And maybe I should grant him a smidgen of poetic license because after all, the line sounds good and seems to make sense. And it is *close* to the truth; but that's exactly the problem. It's so close that if we're not careful, it's easy to overlook the error. And errors in theology are never a good thing. Even seemingly little ones can lead to big problems down the road. And so while I still like the hymn very much, I think it serves as a perfect example for us why we should be careful not to derive our doctrine from the hymns we sing; but rather why we should instead always go to the source, that is, to the Holy Scripture. That's the only place to get the church's teachings and it's where we need to seek the answers to all of our theological questions.

And having said this, you might be tempted to think, "Oh, that's it then! If the Church's one foundation isn't Jesus Christ per se, it must be the Holy Scriptures through which Jesus is revealed to us." *That sounds* about right ... and there are a lot of churches and church bodies out there that claim the Bible as their one and only foundation. Sometimes you'll hear them say things like, "No book but the Bible and no creed but Christ". That *sounds really* good. But there are a couple problems with it. One is that there are a lot of different churches making that same claim *but* they're all teaching different things – things that flatly contradict what others making the same claim are teaching. Some of them teach doctrines that are clearly heretical and antichristian—which begs the question, if they all are built on the same foundation, the Bible, how can there be so many differences? If it's true that they have the same foundation, they should in fact be the same church saying the same thing. The fact that they're not only proves that the Bible isn't really their one foundation.

The other problem is that Jesus, in today's Gospel reading, says that he's going to build his church on a solid rock foundation – *and it isn't the Bible he's talking about*. So, if you say the Bible is the foundation of your church, you're arguing with Jesus, in which case you're in a very untenable position if you want to call yourself one of his followers.

And by now maybe you're wondering, "Okay, if Jesus Christ isn't the one foundation of the Church, and neither is the Bible, what is then?" Good question. And

like I said, Jesus gives us the answer in today's Gospel reading. So, let me give you a little background on the text. The story takes place near the very end of the Galilean phase of Jesus' ministry. He's been traveling throughout the region on and off for over two years now, preaching, teaching, performing miracles, calling sinners to repentance, and proclaiming the Good News of the kingdom and the forgiveness of sin. It would be accurate to say that Jesus is at or near the apex of his popularity. Huge crowds keep coming to see him to be healed of their afflictions and hear him teach. He's a major celebrity; and as such there are all kinds of stories and rumors circulating about him.

It's in this context that Jesus pulls his disciples aside and asks them what all those people are saying about him. And the disciples should know. They've got their ears to the ground. They've stood there among the crowds and listened to the whispered comments and speculations. So, they answer Jesus, "Here's what folks are saying: some people think that you are John the Baptist come back to life (remember, he had been beheaded by King Herod), others think that you might be Elijah, or Jeremiah, or one of the other prophets who have returned."

Now, isn't that interesting? You've got all these people looking at the same person. They're hearing him teach exactly the same things, and they are seeing him perform the same miracles. All the input is the same. But they've all got a different perception of whom they are seeing and hearing. And to be fair, everything they're saying about Jesus is positive. John was widely regarded as a great prophet of God, and certainly the others were held in the highest esteem. So, for people to be saying such things about Jesus demonstrates that they were very enthusiastic about him and thought him to be a true prophet sent from God. The trouble is that they were only partly right about him. I mean, he *was* sent from God; but their conclusions about who and *what* he was, were completely wrong. Say it another way: confronted by the same truth in the person and work of Jesus, what *they said* about that truth was wrong. Oh, it was complimentary. It sounded good. *But it was wrong.*

Okay, having heard these various mistaken beliefs held by people, Jesus then asks his disciples, "What about you guys? Who do you say I am?" We heard Peter speak up on behalf of the disciples, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." This we know to be the correct answer; but notice that Jesus doesn't praise Peter for being so brilliant. Rather he says that Peter is *blessed*. He's been given a gift – the gift of spiritual insight by the Father in heaven. He had been given the gift to, when confronted by God's truth in the person and work of Jesus, to believe and confess the *right thing* about that truth. And this, Jesus says, is the rock upon which he will build his church: not himself, nor God's revealed Word; but the correct, true, and divinely inspired confession of faith. It's not what God says; it's what we say about what God has revealed to us. That's what a church is built on: its statement of faith. And the true Church of Christ is built on the statement or confession of faith that accurately reflects exactly what God has revealed.

It might be helpful to think of it this way: Jesus and God's Word come down from above like rays of light from the sun. You can't build anything on them. But ideally, the church's foundation – its statement of faith – should be like a mirror perfectly reflecting back everything that's being revealed from above. So then using this analogy, it's pretty obvious that what we want to do is ensure that our mirror is perfectly clean and polished so that it reflects all the light that God reveals in Jesus, his Son. You see, the reason we have all these different churches out there saying all kinds of different things is that the

mirrors are messed up. We all have the same light. We're looking at the same Jesus. We've got the same Bible revealing to us what he said and did. The input is all the same, and there's nothing wrong with it. The problem is with our mirrors. Most have something on them that's absorbing or bending the light rather than reflecting it. And mind you, it may not be the whole surface of the mirror that's blocked or distorted, so that it may be that some of God's revelation of himself, his will, and his plan of salvation in Jesus Christ is accurately reflected while other parts are not.

And having said this, it might be tempting to ask, "Just how much of the light of God's revelation in Jesus Christ needs to be reflected back in a church's confession of faith for it to be truly founded on the rock and therefore a part of the true Church of Christ? What's the minimum requirement?" In response it needs to be said that as tempting as it is to ask, it's the wrong question. When it comes to God and his Word we shouldn't be asking "How little do I need?" but rather "How much can I get?" We don't want to find ourselves making judgments about which parts of God's revelation of himself in Jesus are unimportant, nor do we want to effectively be playing "chicken" with peoples' eternal souls by cutting it as close as we can. Instead, we should think of every deviation between God's pure revelation and our confession of it as destructive and something to be avoided. So instead of asking how little of God's revelation does a church's confession need to reflect, we should be concentrating on making sure that our own mirror is free of the sorts of defects that can block or bend the light.

What sort of defects? Well, the filth of sin, for one. It happens when a church decides to declare good and wholesome something that God has condemned in his Word, or when certain sins are tacitly condoned by a church's silence about them. Some good examples include abortion, euthanasia in the form of "doctor assisted suicide", sexual relations outside of marriage, and divorce. I don't need to tell you that what churches say about these things varies widely. The question is, "Does what we say and practice accurately reflect what God has revealed? Do we condemn sin in ourselves and in others with the same vehemence that God does, or do we block some parts out?"

The sin of pride can be a greasy smudge on the mirror that hampers its ability to reflect the truth. It happens when churches permit human reason, worldly wisdom, or so-called scientific knowledge to overrule what God has said. Again, you know very well that in some churches the first eleven chapters of Genesis are considered a myth, that the miracles of the Old Testament as well as those performed by Jesus are denied, and that in some churches even his resurrection from the dead is denied. It's just not scientific. In some churches the Sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper are denied their power and reduced to mere symbols because people prefer to limit God's Word to what they can easily understand. Some churches throw out the Lord's clear instructions regarding the roles of men and women in the church because they are judged to be out of date or repressive. We know it happens. The question is, "In what ways are we allowing our imagined wisdom to block out the light of God's truth?"

The accumulated dust of tradition can dull or tarnish the mirror. It happens when ceremonies and rites are dutifully obeyed and mindlessly observed without ever thinking about why we are doing them or what the words we're repeating mean. It happens when more attention is paid to form than to substance. The question is, "How dusty is our mirror? And do we need to give it good buffing, so it really shines again?"

And one more example of the many I could name, the warping of legalism can reshape a church's mirror so that the image it reflects is distorted – like in a fun house mirror that makes people look thinner or heavier than they are. Specifically, what legalism does is make the reflected image of Christ and his saving work for us on the cross look smaller, sometimes so small that it disappears altogether; and then it makes the people in the church and their works, their offerings, their praise, or their *whatever* seem to be what's all important. The question is, "How is flat and accurate is our mirror? Is our confession of faith about what Christ has done for us to save us from sin, or is it more about the things we're expected to do for him?"

Jesus called Peter blessed because by God's grace and the inspiration of the Holy Spirit he accurately reflected the light of God's revelation that he had received so far and confessed the truth about Jesus. By doing so, Peter was standing on the rock. And I can say without equivocation that you are blessed to be part of a church body that has as its rock a tested and true statement of biblical faith called the Augsburg Confession, which asserts the total sinfulness of lost mankind, the true deity and humanity of Jesus Christ, his perfect life lived for us and the complete sufficiency of his suffering and death on the cross as the sacrifice of atonement for our sins, the power of his resurrection from the dead, the Good News that forgiveness and the gift of salvation are ours by God's grace alone through faith in him, and the truth that God works this faith in our hearts by the Holy Spirit who comes to us through God's Word and the two Sacraments that Christ instituted for his Church. It's a solid foundation that accurately reflects the truth of what God has revealed.

But you know, we live in a day and age in which there isn't a lot of denominational loyalty or even awareness. It used to be that when someone called himself a Lutheran, or a Presbyterian, Methodist, Baptist, or Catholic that it meant something. It meant that they took their stand on the confession of their church – that they knew what their church taught and that they agreed with it. They believed it. And, like Peter, they were willing to stand up and say what they believed over and against the nice sounding but wrong things that other people were saying. Today that's not often the case. Today few people understand that the foundation of Christ's Church is a statement of faith. These days folks are more likely to join a church because of the relative friendliness of the congregation, or how relevant and entertaining the pastor's sermons are, or what kind of youth program it has, or what kind of music styles are used in worship, or the general appearance of the facilities, or any number of other factors that have absolutely nothing to do with what makes a church the Church of Jesus Christ.

So, with all of this in mind, the questions I have for you this morning are: What do *you* say? Where, or rather on what, do you stand? Do you know for sure what this church's confession is? How familiar are you with the Augsburg Confession? Are you in agreement with it? If so, do you know *why* you agree with it? Are you, like Peter, willing to stand up and confess what you believe about Jesus before a world that's saying a lot of other contrary things about him? And in what condition is your own personal mirror? Is there anything on it blocking or distorting your reflection of God's revealed truth? In summary, I'm asking you to inspect your foundation. Make sure that you are standing upon the Rock on which is built the Church that the gates of hell cannot prevail against, and like Peter you will be blessed in this life and the next. In Jesus' name. Amen.

***Soli Deo Gloria!***