

From Philip Melancthon, Commentary on Romans, trans. by Fred Kramer (St. Louis: Concordia, 1992), 239-284.

"Therefore I shall tell in orderly fashion what the church is, that it should be heard, that approved testimonies should be used, and that nevertheless the doctrine should be judged from the Word of God in order that the highest authority should remain the authority of the Word, according to the saying: 'If anyone teaches another Gospel let him be anathema' [Gal. 1:8].

"First, when I say church, I do not understand popes, bishops, and others who approve of their opinions. . . . I call the church the assembly of those who truly believe, who have the Gospel and the sacraments, and are sanctified by the Holy Spirit, as the church is described in Ephesians 5 and John 10[:27]: 'My sheep hear my voice.'

"It is necessary that this true church always remain, because the kingdom of Christ is everlasting and it is written [Mt. 28:20]: 'I shall remain with you until the end of the world.' Nevertheless, we must know that this true church is not always flourishing equally, but often is only small, and is to be divinely restored later when true teachers are sent, as in Noah's time the church was oppressed and an assembly of only a few persons. . . .

"These words admonish us most earnestly that we should not think of the church as a secular state, nor measure it by the succession of bishops, nor by the degree or position of popes, but declare that the church is with those who retain the true doctrine of the Gospel. It is necessary that there be in that assembly some who truly believe. For to this assembly belong the promises. Isaiah takes away this venerable title from his princes and high priests, and says a small seed is left in the people who were called the people of God. . . .

"I have cited these testimonies for this reason, so that first it might be considered what the church is, and so that the mind may be led away from the carnal opinions which imagine that the church is the papal state tied to the orderly succession of bishops, as kingdoms are upheld by an orderly succession of rulers. But with the church it is a different matter, for it is an assembly not bound to an orderly succession, but to the Word of God. The church is reborn where God restores the doctrine, and gives his Holy Spirit. Paul testifies in Eph. 4[:11] that the church is ruled and preserved in this manner, not by orderly succession: 'He gave gifts to men, apostles, prophets. . . .' He teaches that the true church is where Christ is at work and where he bestows true teachers. . . . Let us not permit ourselves to be scared away from the Word of God by the false protection of the name church.

"Second, after it has been said what the true church is, one must add that the true church is small and consists only of saints. It retains the true doctrine of the Gospel, the articles of faith, or, as Paul calls it, the source of the truth. Yet this same true church sometimes preserves the doctrine purely and clearly, but at other times less so. . . .

"There remains some true church, which holds fast the articles of faith, but at times less pure, obscured by some incorrect opinions and holding some erroneous views. . . .

"For Paul says: 'No man can lay another foundation except that which has been laid. But one builds on it gold, another wood, stubble. . . .' [1 Cor. 3:11] He understands the foundation as the article of faith, that is, the sum and substance of the Christian doctrine, the doctrine about the

benefit of Christ. But to this, he says, some add useful teaching, explanation, and true spiritual acts of worship; this he calls gold. Others add stubble, that is, opinions which are not fitting and contain something erroneous, even as in the beginning immediately ceremonies were laid down which brought errors in their train.

"Thus I consider Ambrose a true member of the church. Nevertheless, he says about the forty-day fast: 'The other fasts are voluntary; this one is necessary.' This opinion is stubble added to the doctrine of faith.

"Basil added monasticism, although it is stubble, and praises this kind of life with excessive and false praise, although he was rebuked by his bishop. Scripture frequently reminds us that it is not a light error to institute new acts of worship. . . .

"Furthermore, writers often felt more correctly than they spoke, because most were quite negligent and improper in speaking, and they borrowed many statements and formulas from the common people which contain something erroneous. Thus Augustine takes the term satisfactions from the common people, although he openly rebukes the errors about satisfactions. He tortures himself in explaining the statement 'Every sin is voluntary' when he discusses original sin, although the saying is a civil saying that speaks about outward transgressions. . . .

"I have added these things in order to show that the ancients at times borrowed unsuitable ways of speaking from the people, as is accustomed to happen in all ages.

"Meanwhile, men are defeated by the judgments and examples of the crown--which is not godly--so that they are drawn into superstitions by some human imagination, as at the Synod of Nicaea. If the one man Paphnutius had not objected, the opinion of those who wanted a decree made that priests should abstain from their wives would have been approved. Custom defeated Cyrian [sic] and many others, so that they approved prohibition of marriage.

"Likewise, the entire Nicene Synod, overcome by the consensus of the crowd or of the time, approved the canons of penitence which afterward brought forth intolerable errors. Great examples frequently deceive even the godly, as the example of Antony darkened the understanding of many. Until now I have been speaking of the godly. Although they are holy, very many are weak. . . .

"From all this the conclusion follows: Although the true church, which is small, retains the articles of faith, that true church can hold errors which obscure the articles of faith. Moreover, many fall in such a way that they completely approve of wicked errors against the articles of faith, although some do perhaps return to their senses.

"First of all when the authority of the church is appealed to, one must ask whether it was the consensus of the true church, agreeing with the Word of God.

"Then one must say that extant writers often were persons who had lapsed, and perhaps some are not even members of the church.

"In the third place this distinction must be added: In the assembly which is called the church

there is a great multitude of ungodly persons, many of whom enjoy higher authority than others, through a show of religion or a reputation as teachers. Such were the high priests at the time of Jeremiah among the people of Judah, and the ungodly priests who appealed against Jeremiah [18:18] to the authority of their position and the law and to their promises: 'The law shall not depart from the priests.' They denied that their assembly could err, while at the same time they were completely in error and disagreed with Jeremiah. Likewise, at the time of Christ there were very few godly people, for instance Zachariah and Simeon.

"Moreover, when an ungodly crowd has control in the church, it establishes many false and ungodly things in the name of the church. . . .

"The entire church, which is [if considered as] the multitude of those who dominate in the church, can err, as high priests and priests erred at the time of Jeremiah and of Christ. Although beside that multitude there are some pious persons who hold fast to the articles of faith, these also, moved by the examples, can assent to certain errors. It comes about that they retain the articles of faith less purely. For example, Bernard appears to have thought more correctly than others, although he assented to many errors, such as the abuse of the Masses, the power of the papacy, vows, and the worship of the saints.

"Therefore, the authority of the crowd must not be appealed to against the Word of God, but it is necessary that one return to the rule: 'If anyone shall preach another Gospel, let him be anathema' [1 Cor. 16:22; Gal. 1:8]. Let the highest authority be that of the Word which was divinely taught. Thereafter that church which agrees with that Word is to be considered authoritative as Christ says [John 10:27]: 'My sheep hear my voice.' As Augustine said: 'The question is: "Where is the church?" ' What, therefore, shall we do? Shall we seek it in our words, or in the words of the church's head, our Lord Jesus Christ? I think that we should seek it in the words of the One who is the truth, and best knows his own body.

"But there the objection is raised: 'If the authority of the church is repudiated, then too great a license is granted to the wantonness of human minds. When the statements of the church have been rejected, many will think up new and impious interpretations of Scripture.' Although this danger is not to be despised and it is profitable to curb that licentiousness, one must see, on the other hand, to what extent the authority of the church is to be consulted. . . .

"I ask, therefore, whether it is not profitable to oppose the authority of the church to such men [as Servetus]. Here I answer: As the Gospel teaches that the church should be heard, so I always say that assembly which has the Word of God and which is called the church should be heard, even as we also command that our pastors be heard. Therefore let us hear the church when it teaches and admonishes, but one must not believe because of the authority of the church. For the church does not lay down articles of faith; it only teaches and admonishes. We must believe on account of the Word of God when, admonished by the church, we understand that this meaning is truly and without sophistry taught in the Word of God. . . .

"Also the first church has authority as witness of the apostles. I am speaking of dogmas, not about human traditions. For dogmas are intended to be firm and perpetual. Human rites are not intended to be perpetual or immutable. Neither did the apostles err in doctrine. Therefore it is profitable to hold fast where the most ancient writers appeal to the authority of the apostles.

"Thus about the Trinity they cite these: Origen [!], Tertullian, Irenaeus, Gregory of Neocaesarea [Pontus], Alexander the bishop of Alexandria, and many others who, since they testify that the doctrine of the Trinity was received from the apostles, powerfully strengthen the godly. Therefore such testimonies are not to be despised.

"I said that the writers are to be heard, as now we say also that preachers are to be heard, because some remain in the church who hold fast the truth, some more purely, others less purely. But one must add that the hearers should judge according to the Word of God which always remains the rule for doctrine. . . .

"...not all decrees of synods are to be approved without exception. Yet one must confess that godly synods deserve honor because they preserved some articles of the Christian doctrine, and with respect to these it is profitable to hold fast to the witness of synods and antiquity. . . .

"Therefore the testimonies of antiquity offer no defense for more recent abuses, which are partly different from present customs, and if they contain something wrong, they ought not to be opposed to firm testimonies of Scripture, because also other ages had their unsuitable customs. This is my answer very simply and without sophistry with respect to the words offering and sacrifice. . . .

"For the errors of the godly must not be opposed to the Word of God, and the godly in the church also have their weaknesses at all times. . . .

"Some of our more astute adversaries, although they see that Augustine's and our interpretation is truly the meaning of Paul and of the prophetic and apostolic Scripture, nevertheless thrust on us the opinion of Origen, Jerome, and Chrysostom. They cite the authority of who knows what persons, not because they truly with all their mind approve of them, but only in order to create a smokescreen for the inexperienced, lest they should appear to have been defeated. . . .

"Such statements which one meets here and there in Augustine show sufficiently clearly that he thinks the same about grace and about faith as we teach. Thus he also says in *De Spiritu et Litera*: 'From the Law we fear God. However, through faith we flee to mercy.' Here he learnedly distinguishes the Law from the Gospel. . . .

"Although I have passed over many things that were absurdly said, I have not collected these errors of the ancient writers in order to take away anything from their true praises. I believe that there were very many pious and outstanding men among them--some even exceptionally well deserving--but not even they wanted to have their pronouncements placed ahead of the teaching of Christ. Those who now oppose the authority of the ancients to us are greatly misusing their testimonies. Although the seeds of errors were scattered in those times, such abominable abuses had not yet found their way into the church. . . .

"I have said which is the true church. It is clear that we faithfully retain and guard the doctrine of the catholic church of Christ taught in the prophetic and apostolic Scriptures, and also in our confessions. It is clear that we think of the catholic church as Christ thinks. I add also this, that the foremost writers--Ambrose, Augustine, and a few others--think the same, if they are properly understood, and a few things are forgiven them which at that time did not come into

controversy. . . .

"I know that it is possible to quote many things from the writings of the ancients which fight against our statements. And everyone quotes what seems suitable for his own pleasure, so that from the same flowers the bees gather honey but the spiders poison. But let deceits be far removed from the judgments of the church. I shall not appeal to all writers, but to the better ones--Ambrose, Augustine, and others to the extent that they agree with these. Although they themselves at times said wrong things, they will forgive us if we rebuke certain things as long as we follow the clear and sure meaning of the divine Scriptures, and do not depart from the symbols, and hold what they themselves saw and intended but were not always able to make clear. For it is beyond doubt that the kind of doctrine which we profess is truly the consensus of the catholic church of Christ, as the symbols, the saner synods, and the more learned fathers show. This is how I answer the more moderate persons who oppose the authority of the church or the fathers to us. . . .

"Finally, the divine Scripture in both its parts is full of such speeches which command us to flee the enemies of the true doctrine and the true church, and to embrace the true doctrine, to love, aid, and adorn the true church. Let us not think that the church is merely a Platonic state. The true church is the assembly in which the pure doctrine of the Gospel shines forth and in which the divinely delivered sacraments are rightly administered. In such an assembly there are bound to be some living members of the church who render God true worship, who repent, call on God in true faith, show zeal and labor for spreading the Gospel, show their confession, serve their calling, and perform the pious duties commanded by God. They are exercised by dangers of every kind in which they practice calling on God and other good works. This I declare to be the true church, to which the godly everywhere on earth should be joined in belief, will and confession. And I consider our churches to be like that by the grace of God, since they profess the pure doctrine of the Gospel, which is without any doubt in agreement with the understanding of the catholic church of Christ. . . .

" 'Blessed will be those who love the church' [cf. Ps. 122:6]. He promises defense, successes, and perpetual salvation to those who love the true church. With these words the godly should arouse their minds to care for the service of the church, and should not only strengthen themselves against the threats of tyrants, but should also fortify themselves against the sophistry of those who falsely cite testimonies of antiquity and the church for the defense of their ungodly dogmas. It was my desire to instruct students to some extent for the purpose of refuting these."