

Summer sermon series on the 3rd Article of the Creed – July 18, 2010 –
Faith Lutheran, Radcliff, KY
Based on 2Timothy 3:15-4:5; Hebrews 10:24-25
Pastor Paul Horn

Test Your Church

- I. Using God's Word to separate**
- II. Using God's Word to unite**

Today we will say, "See you later," to yet another military family. Sometimes that's hard for a congregation to deal with... with so much turnover. Yet, we realize that it is our duty to equip soldiers and their families and then send them on to their next duty station. Soldiers and families sometimes have a problem when they move to a new town. A new town means a new church. How do they base their decision? Friendly people, a pastor who has a sparkling personality, worship that is entertaining, fun and exciting ministries? Are these good things to base such a decision? How does the Lord want us to go about deciding which church to join?

In our confession of faith we say, "I believe in the holy Christian Church, the communion of saints." Last week Holy Scripture taught us that the Church consists of all people who believe that Jesus is their Savior. Only God knows those who are truly members of his Church. God alone looks at the heart. We cannot judge someone's heart. But we know there are members of this Church wherever the gospel is preached and the Sacraments are used. Wherever a group of people come together to hear the gospel a church, we know that the Holy Spirit will use those Means of Grace to bring people in that group to faith. This gathering of people around the Word and Sacraments is what we refer to as a visible church, a congregation, or church body.

I have here a copy of Friday/Saturday NewsEnterprise. And listed on this page is the number of churches in Hardin County. That's quite a few, huh? First of all, does God want us to join a church? Many feel they do not need public worship. They can worship at home, in a deer stand, fishing boat, or camp site. From our Verse of the Day in Hebrews 10:24-25 our God tells us, "Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encourage one another." Encourage each other to gather for public worship. Yes, God does want us to gather together for worship!

But with all of these churches, how does a soldier and his or her family make their decision? What does God say? In 1John 4:1 the apostle tells us to test every church that preaches God Word carefully because there are many false prophets in the world. The state of Wisconsin recently passed a law allowing dairy farmers to sell fresh milk directly from their farms. Opponents of the bill are afraid that the bacteria in fresh milk might cause some to get sick. If they're uneasy with this idea, they can purchase their milk in the store, where it is homogenized and pasteurized, it's been tested! All vitamins are baked out of it, but it's safe. God directs us to test the kind of spiritual milk we drink, so that it's not full of spiritual bacteria that could be harmful to our souls.

God wants us to test churches that teach God's Word. How do we test churches? We look at their confession – a written statement of what believe. If someone wanted to find out what we believe, we could hand them a Book of Concord which includes all of our Lutheran Confessions.

We also have this pamphlet entitled, “This We Believe,” statements of what we believe as the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod. All of the articles of faith state that we believe what we do because God’s Word dictates it. And because churches don’t always practice what they preach, God wants us to test their practice as well.

What if, when we test the church’s teachings and practice, we find that allow something that is contrary to God’s Word? They either add to or subtract from God’s Word? What does God tell us to do? This will happen... because the Apostle Paul said in our Second Lesson (2Timothy 4:3,4), “There will come a time when people will not put up with sound doctrine, instead to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths.”

Some of those myths... perhaps you’ve heard of Joel Osteen, a leader of a church in San Antonio, Texas. In an interview some years ago he was quoted as saying, “I don’t feel that I need to preach the law to my people. They’re beat up enough already about their sins.” In other words, “My people don’t need to hear that they’re sinners. They should feel good about themselves. After all, God wants them to be happy.” Oprah still spreads her gospel that there are many ways to heaven and everyone is getting there in his or her own way. There are many churches around the world that preach to their people, “Try your hardest. Be a good person. God will be satisfied with your best.” This is what people want to hear. These are the lies Satan uses to drag more and more souls away from God to himself.

Jesus’ own disciples, not the 12, but his others disciples, when they heard Jesus teaching them in John 7 that to be saved for everlasting life, they had to believe in him and his teachings, they grumbled and said, “This is a hard teaching. Who can accept this?” From that time on many of his disciples left him, no longer followed him.

Are we guilty of the same when we do not want to hear some of Christ’s teachings? We want to hear that we are pretty good people, that we’re not that bad. On Monday morning I opened up an e-mail that read, “Pastor, Just wanted to tell you how much I didn’t like the sermon yesterday. It hit to close to home. I found myself trying to rationalize myself out of the equation. Surely not me, Lord! The harder I tried to convince myself this was not about me the more I squirmed in my chair and realized it was. I just wanted to thank you very much for presenting me with a sermon I didn’t like.”

That is the truth we all do not want to hear: we are sinners. When our sinful actions are pointed out, they offend our God, that we have earned his wrath and punishment. This individual didn’t want to hear that...when I wrote that sermon, I didn’t want to hear it. But the purpose of the truth of God’s law is to crush those who are comfortable in their sin, to show them how they have offended their God. And then, the truth of God’s Word in the gospel raises up the broken hearted and contrite, and reassures the penitent sinner, “Here’s what Christ Jesus has done about your sin. He has put it out of his mind. He has hurled it into the depths of the sea. As far as the east is from the west so far has he removed your offenses from him.”

This is what your God wants you to test – the preaching and teaching of a congregation. Does it hold true to his Word? What does God want us to do if we find people who persist in mixing

something false with God's Word? God forbids us from joining in fellowship with anyone who persists in mixing anything false with God's Word; not to pray with them, not to worship, not to join in Bible study, not send our children to their VBS. We might say, "It's not all that bad. There aren't too many differences. They believe in Jesus. It can't hurt, right?" God wants us to separate ourselves from anyone who persists in mixing anything false with God's Word. Period. Why?

In 1John 1:5,6 the apostle tells us that God is light and he is Truth. He cannot and will not tolerate the darkness of false doctrine. Because we are his children who love the truth of God's Word we will separate out of love for the truth of God's Word.

But it can't hurt... right? In 2Timothy 2:17 the apostle Paul warns young Pastor Timothy about the dangers of false doctrine. He compares it with gangrene. I wanted to show you a picture I had found on the internet of gangrene, but it was too gross. Gangrene is a disease that kills tissue in the body, either because of lack of blood flow to certain area of body or hardening of the arteries, The Mayo Clinic website said, "Seek immediate attention!" A surgeon will have to cut out the disease. In severe cases, they may have to amputate. If we say, "It's just a little bit of gangrene, it won't hurt!" And we ignore. It will kill us. If we say, "It's a little false doctrine. It won't hurt us," and we ignore it... it won't stop, and like gangrene, it will keep spreading until it weakens or finally destroys our faith. We will avoid any church that adds anything to or subtracts anything from God's Word for the sake of our own souls.

Finally, God tells us to separate from those who persist in mixing in false doctrine to warn them about the great danger to their souls. Paul wrote to Pastor Titus in 1:13,14 and said, "Rebuke them so that they will be sound in the faith and pay no attention to myths." I know this is a silly example, but let's say you're invited to a wedding reception and you come to learn that the chef has a grudge against the wedding party family and he's poisoned all the food. Would you just get up and leave? Or would you warn others of the danger the food holds for them? And so, God wants us to separate to warn people who are still eating the poisoned spiritual food of the danger they are in.

But you know that folks will say, "You are selfish and unloving! We are all Christians. We all love Jesus! Why this close-mindedness?" Someone told me once, "Pastor Horn, you would have more members if you allowed open communion." Someone once said to me, "Why do you have to use church discipline on a couple who is living together even though they're not married? They love each other..." I've had other pastors from this community approach me and say, "Why don't we work together to do outreach and reach more people? Who cares which church they go to, right?" Would it make things easier for our church? Maybe we'd have less hurt feelings? Church isn't about the numbers. It's not about making everyone happy. Unloving and selfish? Just the opposite. God tells us it's the most loving thing to do. Out of love for God's Word, out of love for our own souls, out of love for the souls of others, we separate from those who persist in false doctrine.

What does God want us to do if we find people who hold to his pure Word? He wants us to join in fellowship through worship. Do you have a hobby? Video games, playing music, making quilts, MMA or UFC, shooting rifles and handguns? You join a club with others who enjoy those same activities so that they encourage you and you them to continue in your hobby. God

wants us to get together with fellow Christians to be encouraged by them to keep on believing in Jesus, and they in turn are encouraged by us.

God also wants us to join in fellowship through prayer. Have you ever gone in for surgery, or had been sick or were dealing with a major life issue? And the pastor came by or called you and said, "The church is praying for you." Weren't you thankful, knowing that other Christians were asking God to watch over you? God wants us to pray with and for one another.

God also wants us to join in fellowship through education. Have you ever seen a young tree on hill, blown by the wind? It grows up bent and twisted. Our children and young adults are being blown by the winds of the outside world, through cable television, the music they listen to, their peers, and the internet. Parents are responsible for the spiritual upbringing of their children. When they join together in a church, that family of believers stands together around the child or young adult, so that they are shaped and formed by God's Word. They assist the parents to do this work. So that our young people remain strong in the faith and are not blown away by false doctrine we join together in education.

So when a family moves to another city, how do will they decide which church to join? For those who have come to know and believe what this Christian congregation teaches and believes, they simply need to find another Lutheran church. How do you know if your church continues to preach and teach the Word of God in its truth and purity and administering the sacraments properly? God says, "Test your church with his Word. Talk to your pastor about his teaching and preaching. Examine the Scriptures daily." Test your church to separate and to unite, out of love for our God and his Word. We pray, "Lord, grant while worlds endure, we keep your teachings pure throughout all generations. Amen." (Christian Worship 293 – *God's Word is Our Great Heritage*)