

### **“Timeless Classic Doctrine #11: The Invisible Church”**

There was a timeless classic event that precedes our sermon lesson for today. It was a showdown between Baal & Asherah Community church of Samaria, with notable members King Ahab, Queen Jezebel, and 850 prophets, and First Christian church of Tishbe with notable member, the prophet Elijah. This showdown wasn't a church softball game. It was a showdown to prove which visible church's God would prove that he was the one true God. Go home today and read through 1 Kings 18 and be reminded of how the one true Triune God proved in impressive fashion that the God believed in and confessed by Christian churches is the one true God. Our sermon lesson for today provides us with a wonderful opportunity to discuss timeless classic doctrine #11: The Invisible Church. 1 Kings 19:1-15a,18.

**Now Ahab told Jezebel everything Elijah had done and how he had killed all the prophets with the sword. <sup>2</sup> So Jezebel sent a messenger to Elijah to say, “May the gods deal with me, be it ever so severely, if by this time tomorrow I do not make your life like that of one of them.”**

**<sup>3</sup> Elijah was afraid and ran for his life. When he came to Beersheba in Judah, he left his servant there, <sup>4</sup> while he himself went a day's journey into the desert. He came to a broom tree, sat down under it and prayed that he might die. “I have had enough, LORD,” he said. “Take my life; I am no better than my ancestors.” <sup>5</sup> Then he lay down under the tree and fell asleep.**

**All at once an angel touched him and said, “Get up and eat.” <sup>6</sup> He looked around, and there by his head was a cake of bread baked over hot coals, and a jar of water. He ate and drank and then lay down again. <sup>7</sup> The angel of the LORD came back a second time and touched him and said, “Get up and eat, for the journey is too much for you.” <sup>8</sup> So he got up and ate and drank. Strengthened by that food, he traveled 40 days and 40 nights until he reached Horeb, the mountain of God. <sup>9</sup> There he went into a cave and spent the night.**

**And the word of the LORD came to him: “What are you doing here, Elijah?” <sup>10</sup> He replied, “I have been very zealous for the LORD God Almighty. The Israelites have rejected your covenant, broken down your altars, and put your prophets to death with the sword. I am the only one left, and now they are trying to kill me too.” <sup>11</sup> The LORD said, “Go out and stand on the mountain in the presence of the LORD, for the LORD is about to pass by.” Then a great and powerful wind tore the mountains apart and shattered the rocks before the LORD, but the LORD was not in the wind. After the wind there was an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake. <sup>12</sup> After the earthquake came a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire. And after the fire came a gentle whisper. <sup>13</sup> When Elijah heard it, he pulled his cloak over his face and went out and stood at the mouth of the cave. Then a voice said to him, “What are you doing here, Elijah?” <sup>14</sup> He replied, “I have been very zealous for the LORD God Almighty. The Israelites have rejected your covenant, broken down your altars, and put your prophets to death with the sword. I am the only one left, and now they are trying to kill me too.”**

**<sup>15</sup> The LORD said to him, <sup>18</sup> Yet I reserve seven thousand in Israel—all whose knees have not bowed down to Baal and all whose mouths have not kissed him.”**

This world is filled with visible churches. History is filled with visible churches. A visible church is two or more people gathered together for spiritual activities in a certain location. Visible churches come in two forms: Christian and non-Christian. The Baal & Asherah Community church of Samaria is an example of a non-Christian visible church since the confession of that church was that they didn't believe in or follow the Triune God. The first Christian church of Tishbe was a Christian church since the confession of that church was that they did believe in and follow the Triune God. St. John's Evangelical Lutheran church and Holy Trinity Catholic church in Newburg are both examples of visible Christian churches. The members of the Jehovah's Witnesses church that knock on your door, the Jewish churches in Mequon/Thiensville, and the Islamic churches in Milwaukee are all examples of visible non-Christian churches. What is God's assessment of all of these non-Christian visible churches? **"Salvation is found in no one else (Jesus), for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved"** (Acts 4:12). **"For great is the LORD and most worthy of praise; he is to be feared above all gods. For all the gods of the nations are idols, but the LORD made the heavens"** (Psalm 96:4-5). Idolatry is believing in and following a false god. While some of these visible churches do positive charitable things in communities around the world, they are hurting people when it comes to helping people be prepared for eternity. Non-Christian religions are easy to spot and it's an easy decision to avoid joining in spiritual activities with them because they don't worship the one true Triune God. That is the decision that the Prophet Elijah made in the verses leading up to our sermon lesson. Listen to Jesus speak about the result of worshiping the Triune God (small gate/narrow road) vs. worshiping an idol (wide gate/broad road). **"Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it"** (Matthew 7:13-14). While it is easy to see the need to avoid joining in spiritual activities with non-Christian visible churches, it's more difficult to see the need to avoid joining with other visible Christian churches who share some similar beliefs, but disagree on others. Jesus helps clarify the situation for us with these words: **"If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free"** (John 8:31-32). So how many doctrines of Scripture is God okay with us ignoring? Zero. How many human teachings is God okay with us adding to Scripture? Zero. Will all false teaching lead to Hell? Not necessarily, but that's a dangerous game to play figuring out how much false teaching you can embrace and still go to Heaven. The Bible is filled with passages warning us to watch out for false teachers and false doctrine. Listen to this classic warning (note: yeast = false teaching, dough = an individual's or church's spiritual beliefs) - **"A little yeast works through the whole batch of dough"** (Galatians 5:9). So out of love for our own souls and as a loving witness to others who don't fully embrace the truth we are very selective and often times don't join in spiritual activities with visible Christian churches who don't fully embrace the truth of Scripture. The apostle Paul reminds us how critical it is that we do this through his words to Pastor Timothy. **"Watch your life and doctrine closely. Persevere in them, because if you do, you will save both yourself and your hearers"** (1 Timothy 4:16).

Deciding which visible churches to unite with and support can be difficult. It's difficult because, like the prophet Elijah experienced, there will be persecution connected to our spiritual stance. Not joining with some visible churches in spiritual activities will make your relationship with those groups varying levels of uncomfortable and awkward. Some people will accuse you of being unloving and close minded. Other's will accuse you of being arrogant and unenlightened. Still others will mock you and belittle your beliefs. In some

extreme cases your life might be threatened or harmed. It can lead us to feel like and say with the prophet Elijah, **“I have had enough, LORD”** (1 Kings 19:4). And standing up for the truth of all of God’s Word can feel very lonely, like you are the only one who cares about what God says. Maybe not as lonely as the prophet Elijah felt, but lonely nonetheless. **“I have been very zealous for the LORD God Almighty. The Israelites have rejected your covenant, broken down your altars, and put your prophets to death with the sword. I am the only one left, and now they are trying to kill me too”** (1 Kings 19:10). At times like that, a very comforting thing to remember is the timeless classic doctrine: The Invisible Church. **“Yet I reserve seven thousand in Israel—all whose knees have not bowed down to Baal and all whose mouths have not kissed him”** (1 Kings 19:18). Did Elijah know about some of these 7000 Christians in Israel making his “I’m the only one left” comment an exaggeration? Possibly. We all have been guilty of exaggeration when we are emotional. But I’m certain that Elijah was unaware of most of those Christians. Those Christians were invisible to Elijah because either they lived in a different part of Israel and he never met them before or persecution had led them to hide their faith, or he did know them and their words and actions didn’t scream out “orthodox (correct believing) Christian.” Yet in our sermon lesson we find God comforting a lonely and persecuted prophet Elijah with the doctrine of the Invisible Church. As humans we can’t read hearts and minds, but God can. And with that divine ability he could see that 7000 in Israel believed in the Triune God and believed that Jesus Christ was their eternal Savior. What a comfort for Elijah! There is no doubt that those 7000 Christians needed to mature in their Christian faith so they stand out more as salt and light in a world of unbelief. And while those 7000 believed in the Triune God and Jesus Christ as their eternal Savior, it is entirely possible that some of the 7000 were also embracing other spiritual teachings that were not completely in agreement with the Bible. God cuts through all the visible church shortcomings and failures and comforts Elijah with this thought - it wouldn’t just be God and Elijah in Heaven. 7000 others would be there too!

The timeless classic doctrine: The Invisible Church (aka: Holy Christian Church or Communion of Saints as we confess in the Apostles Creed) is comforting for us as well. Rejoice in this picture of the Invisible Church in Heaven for eternity. **“There before me was a great multitude that no one could count from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands. And they cried out in a loud voice: ‘Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb. They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. Therefore, they are before the throne of God and serve him day and night in his temple; and he who sits on the throne will spread his tent over them. Never again will they hunger; never again will they thirst. The sun will not beat upon them, nor any scorching heat. For the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd, he will lead them to spring of living water. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes”** (Revelation 7:9-10,14-17). Did you notice what unites the members of the Invisible Church? A common belief that Jesus life, death, and resurrection has secured forgiveness of sins and eternal life in Heaven for them. Find comfort that there will be more than just 360,000 WELS Lutherans in Heaven. Find comfort that there will be more than just the members of the 31 other Lutheran church bodies around the world, all smaller than WELS, in which we enjoy full visible church doctrinal unity. Rejoice that some Christians from non-Lutheran visible churches are part of the Invisible Church. Rejoice that there are some Christians that aren’t members of any visible church on this

earth who are part of the Invisible Church. Rejoice in the Invisible Church! At the same time remember that God alone carries out ministry in that realm because he can read hearts and know who has faith in Jesus and who doesn't. God alone makes the decision on how much false teaching he is willing to allow and still let someone into Heaven. God asks us to carry out Gospel ministry in the realm of the visible church so we need to continue to make decisions about which visible church we unite in spiritual activities with because God says false teaching is dangerous and can cause someone to lose their place in the Invisible Church. But while we engage in that challenging work, find comfort in the timeless classic doctrine of The Invisible Church. Amen.