

# Is “church” an “active noun,” the subject of sentences? In the NT never

Colleagues,

It’s so commonplace in our rhetoric these days that “the church” is the grammatical subject of sentences. “The church is doing this or that, or it isn’t, but it ought to.” One of you sent me a jeremiad this week bemoaning what all “the church” is not doing that it should be doing. Which nudged me to check the New Testament. Granted, the NT epistles are full of such critique of the congregations to whom they were addressed. But never once is there a sentence like the one in quotes above—either commendatory or critical—about “the church” doing or not doing something. Even more, never once is “the church” the subject of ANY sentence! That’s the case for every one of the 112 listings for the Greek word “ekklesia” that I found in the NT.

Never does “the church” show up in the nominative case, namely, as the subject of a sentence. It’s always in the objective case. Either as the direct object on the receiving end of someone else’s action—“Christ loved the church; I (Paul) persecuted the church”— or following a preposition—“in, of, to, by, with, for the church”). In two places that I found, the plural “churches” does become the subject of a sentence. End of Romans and end of I Corinthians: “The churches of Christ (of Asia) salute you.” But that’s hardly a mandate for what “the church” ought to be doing.

But why this disparity when compared with our penchant to make “the church” the subject of sentences, HEAVY sentences, that go far beyond “your fellow Christians in the neighborhood say

hello”—when the rock whence we are hewn (or claim to be) never does? Are we talking about the same thing? My hunch is no. Herewith some rambling thoughts.

1. During the Fall and Spring semesters at St. Louis University, a Jesuit institution, a couple of us still-surviving Seminex folks show up (we're invited) for a brown-bag lunch and theological conversation every Friday noon. There are other non-Romans around the table too. With no second thought we all regularly make “church” the subject of sentences in our conversation. But what/who are we talking about? When the Roman folks do so, they most often mean THE church, the Roman Catholic Church. Occasionally after all these years, ecumenical etiquette will sometimes intervene. “Yes, of course, you folks are church too, but here I'm just talking about Roman Catholicism.” I wonder if that is a clue. Also when we non-Romans put “church” in the nominative case in our thoughts and words.
2. Might it be that when “church” comes to mean an institution—not only the Roman church, but the ELCA, PCUSA, ECUSA as well—it becomes an “active noun,” the subject of sentences? And what nudges us to do so is that we can “see” that entity, the people, the building where they work, the address where our contributions go. Au contraire in the NT “church” is only a “passive noun,” always in the objective case grammatically—on the receiving end of the action of some other subject. “Christ loved, Saul persecuted, the church.” Does that mean that there is no assigned “agenda” (“what you ought to be doing”) to put the church into the nominative case, make it the subject of sentences with verbs to follow? If there is an agenda for what the church ought to be doing, what is it? Why no NT testimony in that direction?

3. Another thing I noticed is that “the church” is never criticized in NT texts. With one possible exception, the book of Revelation. There the “seven churches”—clearly designated as worshipping communities in “7 cities of Asia” – are critiqued. But even here it is a bit indirect: “To the angel of the church in Thyatira (et al.), write . . .” and then comes the riot act. Even here they are not critiqued as being failures as “church.” Their “churchiness” is their de facto “coming-together at such-and-such a location.” Even though in Paul’s many epistles, the Corinthian congregation, Galatian congregation and others are subject to his stern diagnosis, it is never the “church” that gets the harsh words. How come?
4. If the apostle doesn’t envision “the church” in Corinth to be the subject of a sentence, to have an action assignment, an agenda to fulfill, then whatever their de facto failures, they couldn’t be failing “in the nominative case.” Is there perhaps a “passive agenda” for the church? Is there a right way, a wrong way, to be on the receiving end of the action of some other—more specifically One Specific Other—and thus to be, or not to be, “church?” If so, it’s clear that the church in Corinth (et al.) is failing that. Their rightful location on the receiving end of rightfully done action coming from The Subject of their existence as Christians is skewered. Even so, as “church” they elicit no negative verdict from the apostle. Why doesn’t Paul tell them: “As church, you’re a failure?”
5. Makes me wonder how the Augsburg Confessors used the word church. I have no access to a concordance to the Book of Concord, so I’ll just grab from memory. Augsburg Confession VII “It is also taught among us that one holy Christian church will be and remain forever. This is the assembly of all believers among whom the Gospel is

preached in its purity and the holy sacraments are administered according to the Gospel.” Sounds mostly like being on the receiving end. Especially when you think of the alternative Roman notion of church, against which the confessors were confessing—very much an active subject of the sentence right here at Augsburg calling the confessors to shape up or else.

6. Curiously the earlier Augsburg article V on “ministry” does not use the word church at all. But that may not be so strange when you consider what they confessed “ministry” to be. Not clergy, nothing at all about the ordained. Not even diaconal service expected from Christians, although “diakonia” is the classic term. AC V “ministry” is not first of all focused on ministERS. Rather it is the God-instituted transmission mechanism(s), the pipeline(s), whereby Christ’s forgiveness (AC III) can get to sinners in subsequent centuries so that they too be rendered righteous by faith (Art. IV). Which prompts the question: How do you get such faith? Answer (AC V): “In order that we may obtain such faith, God instituted the ministry of teaching the Gospel and administering the sacraments. Through these media (pipelines) he gives the Holy Spirit, who works faith . . . in those who hear (are on the receiving end) of the Gospel.” It is these media that create church. Church is people on the receiving end of the pipelines.
7. But who manages these media? Article XIV. “Our churches teach that nobody should preach publicly in the church or administer the sacraments unless he is regularly called.” That’s a very skimpy sentence for getting to “official” pastors. In Melanchthon’s subsequent commentary on AC 14, he says more. But we never get to anything about “ordained clergy.” He says that “self-appointed” pastors are a no-no, but the Augsburg accent is not on “who” is the right

person to do it. Instead the point is that these media get done “right,” that what God put into the pipeline on Good Friday, Easter, Pentecost, actually comes out “purely” [unadulterated by “other” Gospels] at the other end where the folks are gathered in times thereafter. That pipeline-flow is what takes non-church sinners and makes them church (forgiven sinners). Nothing else church-ifies humans. So Melancthon can conclude: “We know that the church is present among those who rightly teach the Word of God and rightly administer the sacraments.” Sounds like church equals folks gathered at the receiving end again.

8. One more from the BoC, from Luther’s catechisms, his explanation of the third article of the creed. “I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ my Lord, or come to him. [No pipeline, no connection to Christ.] But the Holy Ghost has called me by the [preaching of the] Gospel, enlightened me with His gifts, sanctified and kept me in the true faith. Just as He calls, gathers, enlightens and sanctifies the whole Christian church on earth, and keeps it with Jesus Christ in the one true faith.” No pipeline-flowing, no church.
9. Luther’s Large Catechism further elaborates: “Where Christ is not preached, there is no Holy Spirit to create, call, and gather the Christian church, and outside it no one can come to the Lord Christ.” “Therefore there [is] no Christian church.” Commenting on the term “communion of saints” in the credal text he says that better than the word “communion” would be the word “community.” “This is the sum and substance of ‘communion of saints’: I believe that there is on earth a little holy flock or community of pure saints under one head Christ. . . . Of this community I also am a participant and co-partner in all the blessings it possesses. I was brought to it by the Holy Spirit and incorporated into it by the fact that I have

heard and still hear God's [Gospel] Word, which is the first step in entering it. . . . Until the last day the Holy Spirit remains with this holy community of Christian people. Through it he gathers us, using it to teach and preach the Gospel. By it he creates and increases sanctification, causing it daily to grow and become strong in the faith and in the fruits of the Spirit." Sounds pretty close to pipeline-stuff. Christ is the wellhead, the source of the flow. The Holy Spirit sees to it that the pipeline flows. The church is a community gathered at the end of the pipeline.

10. Now the catechetical question: What does this mean? Might it mean some of the items that follow?

- A. The members of the body have callings to be engaged in world-work, they are indeed subjects of sentences in the nominative case, but "the church" does not.
- B. Since "the church" is both head and body (Christ and those membered into him), it ill behooves the members—even with the best of intentions—to articulate agendas for "the church," agendas that implicate both head and members. That's the Head's prerogative.
- C. The specific action-items he does mandate for his disciples—preach my Gospel, do baptism, do the Lord's Supper, do absolution in my name—sound like pipeline-flow stuff. The work of getting sinners Christ-connected and keeping them there. They do not mandate any specific sort of action that we might call "world-work." Their locus and focus is "God-in-Christ and us." They do not specify any "church-assignment" for the "church in the world." If they did, there would have to be NT texts using "church" in the nominative case, as the subject of action sentences. Since these do not exist in any NT texts,

where are the warrants for sentences changing the grammar? If The Head confines his churchy agenda to pipeline business, who are we to disagree?

- D. [From the November 2005 issue of the LWF magazine LUTHERAN WORLD INFORMATION (an issue entirely devoted to HIV/AIDS)] “The HIV/AIDS crisis is a unique opportunity for the church to prove its witness to the world.” “The church’s task in situations dealing with HIV/AIDS should be to equip congregational members . . . .” “Time is up! The church must respond now.” “The church cannot be silent about this issue.”
- E. But what about all the work, godly work, e.g., re: HIV/AIDS, that’s needed in our wilting world? All those imperatives, especially the Grace-imperatives, both from you, Jesus, and from the apostles throughout the NT?
- F. Do we have a clue from the NT in the many chapters of ethical admonitions, the “grace-imperatives,” that do indeed put Christians in the nominative case with manifold mandates to “do this” and “refrain from doing that”? Of course, but note they are not mandates predicated to the “church.” Instead they are predicated to the members who already have a multi-faceted “address” in the world with relationships galore. And with every one of those relationships—parents-children, wives-husbands, buyer-seller, learner-teacher, citizen-governor, etc.—there are already agendas galore. Most often more than even Christ-confessors can handle.
- G. A clear signal that the HIV/AIDS agenda is not “church-work” comes in the several articles in the LWI issue where collaboration with Hindus, Muslims, and Buddhists is portrayed. These co-workers are

clearly not “church,” nor would they want to be designated as such. But even as God’s creatures apart from Christ, they perceive God’s call to help and they are doing so. Christ-disciples join with them, also initiate helpful actions on their own, all of them as God’s left-handers. Good stuff, godly stuff, Hallelujah stuff. Yet if “pipeline” stuff does not happens, it’s not “church-work.” Care, yes, but not redemption until the pipeline spigot opens. God’s left hand, but not (yet) the right hand. And therefore not church-work, despite the entire LWI issue claiming the contrary.

- H. There may well be other ways to understand why “church” is never a sentence subject in the NT. I’ve obviously done my reading using Lutheran lenses and the Augsburg Aha! These lenses (at least my peering through them) have been challenged more than once from what I’ve posted over the years. But the concordance reality about “church” in the NT came to me as a surprise. If you have another take on this non-nominative reality about church in the NT, tell me about it.
- I. For it vividly contrasts to our age where the churches (plural) are making statements left and right about what “the church” (singular) has to say about this or that slice of life in our world. Even to say “the church says” is already a bit of chutzpah if the NT never does so. And in the swarm of church denominations today (recent count: 30,000 [sic!])—even if church-in-the-nominative case were kosher—who speaks for “the church?”
- J. The tradition of the Augsburg Aha! does allow certain sentences that begin with “the church says.” More precisely it’s “the head of the church’s body



says.” Such sentences are: “Believe the good news. Take and eat. I baptize you . . . Be of good cheer, your sins are forgiven.” When Christ is talking this sort of talk, the church’s head is in the nominative case—and the church’s members (de facto or potential) are in the objective case. It’s pipeline stuff.

- K. But more than once we hear: “Sure, all Christians know that already. Now let’s get to the stuff that’s still frightfully frazzled in our world.” Not so, says Augsburg. “Pure Gospel” is the unique agenda of “the church.” And proclaiming it is beset by multiple hazards. Just to keep it “pure” when proclaimed is already tough. Especially when you move to “cross it over” into the real life of just one real person. So for “the church” to devote its full time to that task is hardly frivolous.
- L. As I was working on this posting, I happened to glance out the window (we’re in a 4th story condo) at a bird-feeder on the lawn below. Was that my analogy? The birds gather (and chatter) at the feeder. Their main purpose, of course, is to feed, and that they indeed do—with vigor. Then they fly away to their normal “secular” daily lives. At the feeder they don’t get a new agenda, or even extra info, for living in their world. They seem to get such programs from other sources. And they don’t hang around the bird-feeder all day. But they are indeed nourished by what they find there. Exactly how it benefits their secular agendas I can only theorize. But it surely does. If I could get in on their chatter, I’d doubtless learn more. A condo neighbor fills the feeder every day, thus inviting them to come back tomorrow for more.

Granted all similes limp. But this one teases me.

Peace and Joy!

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