Valde Palola; The Congregation is not Holy in Itself, SRK Yearbook 2012

"The congregation is pure, but it is sinful at the same time. For this reason, it believes the forgiveness of sins and prays. 'forgive us our sins.' … We are not holy by nature, as a wall could be called white because of its white paint. The holiness in ourselves is not sufficient. Christ is our complete (total) holiness. If what we own is not sufficient, may Christ be sufficient."

This is how Luther portrays the congregation in his commentary to the Galatians. In the congregation one experiences both holiness and the reality of sin. Because of the merits of Christ, its members are righteous and holy by faith, but at the same time they are corrupt by nature because of inherited sin. Many forms of sin and doctrinal errors attempt to corrupt the congregation. The congregation is not pure and innocent (faultless) during this time. Its purity is in Christ. The endeavoring and battling congregation will one day be a victor of eternal life by faith.

A Believer is Righteous and a Sinner at the Same Time

Through His suffering, death and resurrection, Christ has atoned for the sins of all people, and redeemed them from sin and the power of death. With His perfect obedience, Christ liberated people from under the curse of the Law and earned for them the righteousness, which is acceptable to God. It means that God declares that a person is freed from sin and death, and is received as a child and has become an heir of eternal life.

The righteousness earned by Christ is a foreign [righteousness], which means that it a perfect and holy righteousness, which is prepared outside of a person. A person can possess it only by the grace of God. Faith is also a gift of God. The mystery of the righteousness of faith is in this that a person receives faith by grace and can own this righteousness by faith. Of himself, a person will remain corrupt and sinful his entire life.

Being justified by faith, a person can believe as a sinner, yet righteous; as evil, yet holy. Paul assures us: "that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. (2 Cor. 5:19)

The Pious and Holy are Intermixed

In the midst of believers, there are always people who do not travel according to the teaching of the gospel. There are numerous examples of this in the history of Christianity. The notion that there would only be the sincere and holy ones in the congregation does not find support in the Bible.

Luther calls people false believers, who think that they can create a kingdom where there are no evil people, but all would be wise, pious and holy. The anabaptists had such a false notion. They wanted to remove everything from the congregation that was not holy. According to Luther, "there [are] false Christians among the true Christians … and hold the place in Christendom as if they were lords there, and the government and highest places belonged to them … they glory that they are Christians and are among Christians in the church of Christ, although they see and confess that they live unchristian lives." (Luther Church Postil, 5th Sunday after Epiphany)

Jesus compared the kingdom of heaven to a farmer, who sowed his seed into the field. (Matt. 13:24-30) While sleeping, the enemy came and sowed tares also among the wheat, and went away. But when the blade sprang up and brought forth fruit, then appeared the tares also. As pods were forming, it became

evident that there were also tares in the field. The workers became concerned and wanted to uproot the tares. But the master forbade this action, because the wheat would be uprooted at the same time. Both were allowed to grow until harvest time. At that time, the tares would be gathered and burned. The wheat would be harvested and put into granaries.

According to the parable, the Christian cannot sit in the judgment seat. This is only the duty of God. God sees into the heart of a person and judges correctly. As humans, even as a Christian congregation gathered together, incorrect decisions may be made. On the basis of the parable, Jesus wanted to make life secure for a Christian in the congregation.

According to Luther, there may be questions in life where we need to have patience and long-suffering for each other. There are always sin, errors, impurity and wretchedness in the life of a Christian. In this, love can as if looks at issues between the fingers and withstand upsets. One can have faith, hope and forbearance in all things. May there be forgiveness in life, but not allowing the defense of sin and errors.

Personal Watching is First and Foremost

Jesus' parable of the wheat and the tares teaches a Christian to watch first over their own endeavor of faith. The parable of the ten virgins teaches us the same lesson (Matt. 25:1-13) According to the parable, there were five foolish and five wise virgins. They all had a lamp, so they would be prepared to go and meet the bridegroom in the darkness of the night. The foolish virgin's oil had run out of their lamps, at the time when the bridegroom arrived. They had forgotten to keep an oil vessel with them. The got left outside of the wedding chamber. The lack of an oil vessel portrays that the foolish virgins had rejected the gospel. Perhaps they had been reminded, but they did not take heed of the advice. They had perhaps begun to examine matters with their rational mind: I have done this, but I have not done that. They had forgotten what Christ had done on their behalf. Therefore, they had no faith by which God declares a person to be righteous. Lacking this righteousness, they got left outside of the wedding chamber.

The wise virgins were obedient to the gospel. Personal care of the life of faith was important for them. Paul's instruction about the power of the gospel was true in their lives: "For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, "The righteous shall live by faith." (Rom. 1:16-17)

Doctrinal Differences

According to Luther, there should be patience and forgiveness in questions of life. In doctrinal matters, there can be no give-or-take (must be absolute) in the congregation. "The doctrine is from heaven, life is of the earth … there can be no fault in doctrine, nor is there any forgiveness needed. Doctrine and life cannot be compared to each other. Even the smallest jot [or tittle] of doctrine (Matt. 5:18) is more important than heaven or earth. Therefore, we cannot transgress doctrine in the least. We can easily look at errors in life through our fingers. I make errors every day, regarding life and behavior. All the other saints stumbled, and they admited it in the Lord's Prayer and Creed. But our doctrine is pure, and thanks to God, all points of doctrine are sure and are based on the Holy Bible. The enemy would want to blotch them and overthrow them. Therefore, he [the devil] deceitfully attacks with his blatant

arguments, that love and unity of the church cannot be harmed (transgressed).” (Luther, Galatians Commentary)

Paul encountered a sermon in Galatian that was contrary to the truth of the gospel. The so-called false preachers in Galatia demanded circumcision (or the fulfillment of the Law of Moses) of those who had come into faith. Paul fought valiantly on behalf of the gospel. He considered the truth of the gospel to be so important that those who spoke in a contrary way were accursed, even though an angel from heaven was preaching (Gal. 1:8).

According to the Bible, the congregation is founded upon the foundation of the prophets and the apostles, where Christ is the chief corner stone. (Eph. 2:20) For this reason, we can say that the congregation of God is the pillar and ground of truth (1 Tim. 3:15). Powers inside or outside cannot change this. In spite of the changes and pressures of time, the kingdom of God will be unchanged till the end of the world.