

Professor Georg Sverdrup

Essays and Addresses

On the Congregation

Edited by

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Contents

1 First Section	1
1.1 What Is at Stake?	2
2 The Free Church Body	4
2.1 The Congregation	4
2.2 The Ministry in the Free Congregation	11
2.3 The Pastoral Office and the Priesthood of the Laity	17
2.4 The Diaconal Office in the Congregation	21
2.5 The Fellowship of the Congregations	25
3 Do You Want a Congregation?	38
3.1 Is It Pride?	38
3.2 Will ye have congregation?	41
3.3 What is congregation?	42
3.4 The Body of Christ	44
4 Sixth Section	46
4.1 Congregation and Congregational Life	46
4.2 The Conditions for the Formation of Congregations	53
4.3 The Significance of Mission for the Church	59
4.4 The Unity of the Believers	66

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The texts presented herein are historical documents. English translations and editorial materials are provided for educational and research purposes only. They do not claim doctrinal, ecclesiastical, or institutional authority. The original source texts remain definitive.

The English translations in this volume were generated primarily through artificial intelligence-based language tools operating under detailed scholarly instructions. These translations were subsequently reviewed, evaluated, and corrected through an independent secondary AI process for semantic, theological, and stylistic fidelity to the original Norwegian sources. Editorial responsibility in the present edition is limited to methodological design, critical oversight, and presentation; the original source texts remain authoritative.

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Editorial Sigla.—

Notes marked “—Ed.” originate with Andreas Helland, editor of the 1910 volume.

Notes marked “— Present Ed.” indicate editorial responsibility in the present edition.

Foreword

As the second volume of Professor Georg Sverdrup's collected writings in selection, under the title "On the Congregation," is presented to the public, it will be necessary to preface it with a few orienting remarks. Professor Sverdrup could, in a quite distinctive sense, make the Apostle Paul's words his own: "But I speak concerning Christ and the congregation" (Eph. 5:32). His entire long and busy life had this as its great goal: the glorification of Jesus Christ through the enlivening and liberation of the congregation. And it is surely scarcely necessary to add here that from his innermost heart he believed and confessed: "But this is the work of the Holy Spirit."

Nevertheless, Professor Sverdrup's proper field of labor lay within the narrower sphere of the clergy. There he planted precious seeds in the hearts of his many disciples—seeds which have borne fruit and will surely bear still more glorious fruit. So fully absorbed was he in his work at the seminary that comparatively little time remained for longer written works on the important and far-reaching truths concerning which so many received oral instruction from his lips. He therefore had largely to restrict himself to taking up the pen when it was a matter of illuminating and exposing prevailing errors and clearly revealing threatening dangers to Christian life. But then he could also, like no other among us, cast the light of God's Word upon the churchly struggles and strivings of the day. There will from time to time be those who, in the external circumstances here mentioned, will see a deficiency; others, however, will regard it as an advantage.

Those, namely, who approach the reading of this volume of Professor Sverdrup's writings with the thought that they will find an abstract, scholarly exposition of the question of what the Christian congregation is, etc., will probably to some extent feel disappointed. What they will find instead are popular expositions of a series of principled questions concerning the congregation, and alongside this a considerable number of contributions to ecclesiastical discussion. But what is distinctive about these contributions is that the author always seeks therein to turn the gaze away from what is purely accidental and momentary and toward what is enduring and principled. In this lies their very greatest significance, and in this they differ from so many other contributions to religious and church questions, in that they cast the light of the Word and of history upon the prevailing—partly purely local—conflicts and difficulties. Thereby they are also highly suited to emphasize the exceedingly important truth that God's Word has answers to all questions within the realm of church and Christianity for the one who, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, seeks its answers, and that even the struggles and difficulties of the day have general significance and therefore should not be regarded merely as insignificant and purely accidental events of exclusively local interest and scope. Guided by the basic views here indicated, the author consistently aims to lift the gaze of his hearers and readers upward, in order to help them attain a broad and clear outlook upon the Lord's will and ways.

It has not been without its difficulties to attempt to gather these many treatises, which make up this volume, into suitable groups, and I am by no means certain that I have succeeded even approximately. The selection included here also spans a period of thirty-eight years, and it is self-evident that repetitions will occur in part. I have also sought as much as possible

to adhere to chronological order, so that the author's own perspective through these many years might more clearly come into its own. Nevertheless, I have considered it best in these sections to assemble material from different periods of his active life.

From what has been said above it will be understood that it has not been well possible to avoid mentioning persons and ecclesiastical bodies, sometimes with censure or criticism. Where I deemed it necessary to include the relevant passages, I have not made substantial alterations. In this volume I have also followed—and intend to continue following—the principle which I stated in the foreword to the first volume (page VIII).

It is necessary here to point out that this volume includes, taken from Folkebladet, a larger number of articles which do not bear Professor Sverdrup's signature, but which from time to time appeared as editorial articles in that paper. As is well known, Professor Sverdrup wrote over the years a series of editorial articles for Folkebladet, and it was only after I had convinced myself of his authorship through my own and others' investigations that I included a selection of these articles. There is, of course, always a possibility—although, as I believe, a very remote one—that an error may have slipped in here. These articles are in each individual case marked as editorial articles in order thereby to indicate that they lack the author's signature.

The historical notes which I have considered absolutely necessary to provide have been inserted at specific places, either as introductory remarks to the individual sections or in the form of notes beneath the text.

The headings chosen by the author himself have, with few exceptions, been retained. Where groups of articles deal with the same matter, I have added such a common title as the content seemed naturally to suggest.

The portrait of the author which accompanies the present volume was taken in 1895 and is considered one of the best from that period.

With regard to the publication of the work, I ask to inform the reader that a change has been made in the order announced in the subscription prospectus, in that the third volume will bear the title: Augsburg Seminary and the Lutheran Free Church.

With the wish for God's blessing upon it, this second volume of Professor Georg Sverdrup's collected writings in selection is sent forth to our church people on both sides of the sea.

Augsburg Seminary, January 25, 1910.

Andreas Helland

1 First Section

Under this Section are grouped some of the articles which are particularly suited to clarify the principal side of the Christian congregation, or, in other words, to supply the answer to the question standing over the first piece: "What is at stake?" This piece is therefore also to be regarded in a special sense as an introduction to this volume, inasmuch as it both presents the question from a principal point of view and at the same time intimates its practical significance for the solution of our ecclesiastical task as an Evangelical Lutheran Free Church in this land. It also appeared at a time when the "Conference" was passing through severe inner conflicts, while at the same time it had to endure violent attacks from without. But it was precisely in this period that the free-church direction within this church body was purified and matured to a clear consciousness of its calling and its responsibility toward our people and its ecclesiastical task. — The second piece, "The Holiness of the Congregation," is a small series of articles from the period immediately prior to "the Union," and for this very reason acquires increased interest as a testimony that the author never lost sight of the main matter, not even in the rushing current of the time of union. — The third and fourth pieces, "The Liberation of the Congregation" and "The Vivification of the Congregation," appeared at the time when the failed attempt at union, by the unmerited grace of God, set as its fruit "The Lutheran Free Church." The statements by Professor Sverdrup included in this Section were thus without exception published at what we may with full right designate as important turning points in the history of our Church. At every decisive stage of development he stepped forward with his admonishing and warning word: Forget not that it is the Congregation that is at stake. — Ed.

1.1 What Is at Stake?

Source: Quarterly Journal for the Norwegian Lutheran Church in America. Edited by Prof. Sverdrup and Oftedal. Third Year (Vol. III), 1877. Pages 110–112. — Ed.

This section appears on pages 1–4 of the original volume. — Present Ed.

The conflict that is being waged between the Synod and the Conference is beginning to grow more animated once again. No one can fail to see this—some with joy, some with heartfelt sorrow; some rejoice over the conflict, because they believe it will bring about the destruction of God’s Church; some mourn over it for the very same reason. Some take pleasure in the conflict, because in it they discern the tokens of a better day for the young Free Church; some lament it, because it must end in the downfall of clerical dominion. We do not concern ourselves with these moods and feelings; we know that they must accompany ecclesiastical development everywhere, and have accompanied it from the Church’s earliest days. We do not believe that the conflict can cease so long as the Church is a church in conflict; but we ask this: what is it that is being contended over, what is it that is being fought for? We ask ourselves whether we are contending rightly; for the manner in which our opponents conduct their struggle, they themselves bear the responsibility, and we are not set to judge them. What is at stake? If it is an unnecessary strife, then we will put an end to it; if it is a necessary strife, then it is also a sinful strife, and we will repent of it. Our settled conviction is this: that in this conflict what is at stake—is the congregation.

There has not yet, for any extended period of time, existed anywhere a Lutheran Free Church. From the earliest days of the Church there have been only very few and very small Christian free churches, persecuted and despised. We therefore stand on a ground both difficult and perilous. Young and inexperienced, so weak and fragile, we are to seek the true form of the Lutheran Free Church. Is it any wonder that there are difficulties and dissension? A great work can never be accomplished without many and severe struggles. But the greatest conflict must arise between priestly power and congregational freedom. The lordly conception, inherited through centuries, which church government and bishops and priests have exercised within the Church, cannot yield to a true and inward cooperation between congregation and office without costing a struggle. Equilibrium cannot be restored again without perilous rending. In these rendings we live, and we do not deceive ourselves when we expect that they will continue yet for some time.

It is our conviction that all that we gather together under the term Wisconsinism¹ is an attempt, within the Free Church, to preserve the priestly power of the Norwegian State Church by means of a straitjacket of doctrinal propositions, all of which aim at one goal: to make the congregation into a will-less mass in the hand of the priest. Against the free, living congregation, the doctrine of world-justification is the most violent assault; against the congregation’s self-edification, the Wisconsin doctrine of lay activity is directed; against the congregation’s unhindered and unmediated access to the mercy seat in the blood of Jesus, the doctrine of absolution is aimed; against the congregation’s right to test the spirits by God’s Word, the assertion that the pure doctrine is God’s Word stands in direct conflict.

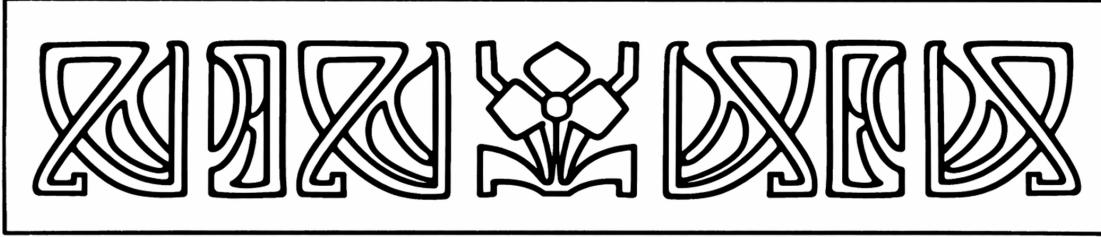
¹On the meaning of this expression, see the present work, Volume I, page 108. — Ed.

It is because these doctrines and propositions stand in the way of the free congregation's development among us that we exert so much force in combating them.

It is the congregation that is at stake: what it is, and what right and authority it possesses. And because this is our conviction, therefore we cannot relent or enter into compromise. We gladly desire to confer concerning these matters with our opponents; we gladly wish to test whether our conviction is well grounded. We also desire opportunity to contend orally for the same cause for which we write. But this we believe is the advantage which the "open declaration"² has brought us in the struggle: that it has become ever more clear that that about which the struggle turns, that which is at stake, is nothing else—nothing less—than the congregation, the free, living, believing, and witnessing congregation.

And concerning how we may labor best for the congregation, how we may promote its good, how the blood and death of Jesus may rightly be preached for the salvation of men—concerning these things it is that we desire to confer with all those among our countrymen in America who stand upon the ground of the Lutheran Confession.

²"Open Declaration" was published under the date January 20, 1874, signed by Professors Even Oftedal and A. Weenaas. Its purpose was, in brief and pointed terms, to set forth "what we contend against, and how we will contend," and its publication at the time occasioned a violent opposition. A couple of years later, Professor Weenaas withdrew the "Open Declaration," insofar as he had "co-signed" it, in a postscript to the second edition of his book Wisconsinism, Illustrated by Historical Hostile Acts. Quite shortly thereafter he published in The Standard a "concise account of my withdrawal of the 'Open Declaration,'" and again in the same paper a couple of weeks later a rather more detailed "Explanation of my withdrawal of the 'Open Declaration.'" In this latter article he declares that he "now, as before, assents to what is essential in the 'Open Declaration,'" and that the withdrawal is only "a withdrawal of my signature from the 'Open Declaration' in the form in which it was published." — Ed.



2 The Free Church Body

Source: "Lutheraneren og Missionsbladet" 1877 Nos. 20, 22; 1878 Nos. 2, 3, 7, 10, 23, 25. Separate reprints in "Gammelt og Nyt," first booklet, 1897. — Ed.

This section appears on pages 54–100 of the original volume. — Present Ed.

2.1 The Congregation

It is already a long time since the Norwegian church bodies began their activity in America, and there have already been many experiences during that time, both bitter and joyful; and the people have learned much in this school, which is not easily forgotten. For that which has cost weeping and tears, that which has many a time torn apart the tenderest bonds—at times between pastor and congregation, at times between brethren within the same congregation, at times between husband and wife, parents and children—that is written into a man's heart in such a manner and with such bitter pain that it is not erased so long as there is yet life and breath.

But if these are exceedingly costly things, which no earnest man sets aside or passes over lightly, then there is a seal yet more costly which has been set upon God's congregation: it is the blood that has been smeared upon its doorposts, the precious blood of Jesus Christ, by which it has been purchased for God to be His free, pure, undefiled Bride. And God has therefore not left His congregation without guidance in His holy Word; but the people whom He has obtained for Himself, these He also instructs concerning the way in which they are to walk.

Therefore, when we are to consider these matters, we must first trace back to God's own Word, and thereafter we shall judge, insofar as it is possible for us, also the experiences that have already been made in America and the results to which the development has come. We shall begin with that which is first—and which is also last—in the church body: the congregation.

God Himself is the Founder of the Church; He is her Father, He is her Staff and Support; the Son is her Redeemer, her King, her Head, her Bridegroom; the Spirit is her Life, her Freedom, her Advocate, her Pledge. The Church herself is a gathering of human beings whom God has justified through faith in His Son, born again unto the life of the Spirit and granted the right of sonship and the life of children, an inheritance in heaven with the Son and the eternal life of love in the Spirit.

But when we thus speak of the Church as the fellowship in the Holy Spirit, the communion of saints, and of the glory of this fellowship, then we are speaking of invisible and eternal things, which are the object of faith, not of sight. Yet nothing can be the object of faith which has not been revealed. No one can believe in God if God were only invisible. But because God has been revealed in the flesh, because the only-begotten Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, has made Him known, therefore faith is possible. The invisible, upon which faith relies, is also visible through its revelation. The Apostle Paul even says expressly that God's invisible being, His eternal power and Godhead, are perceived from the creation of the world. So it is also with the communion of saints.

The Church: she is invisible, because her life is hidden with Christ in God; she is visible, because her life, God's own Holy Spirit, is given to her through visible means, the Word and the Sacraments; visible, because she consists of truly visible human beings; visible, because she possesses recognizable marks and indeed is a shining light in the darkness of the world, a city set upon a hill that cannot be hidden.

The Church is therefore both invisible and visible, just as God Himself is invisible and visible (see John 14:9: He that hath seen Me hath seen the Father). Just as no one could believe in God if He were not revealed, so no one can believe in the communion of saints if it is not revealed. God has revealed Himself in His Son, who Himself is the Word of God; the Church reveals herself in believing human beings, who live by the Word and the Sacraments a spiritual life, rich in the fruits of mercy. And just as God's revelation in the Son is in humiliation, in lowliness, in poverty, within the bounds of time and space, so also the Church's revelation is in frailty, in inconspicuousness, in contempt, bound to definite times and definite places. Yet we must hold fast that just as it is the one and the same true God who is invisible and revealed, so it is also the one and the same Church of God that is invisible and visible; for thus says the Word of God: Ye are the light of the world; a city that is set on a hill cannot be hidden.

But we add at once that, as there is a likeness between the revelation of God and the revelation of the Church, so there is also a difference. For God has revealed Himself in the Son in a perfect manner, both through the perfect Word and the perfect act of love; the Church, on the other hand, can reveal itself in a perfect manner only through the Word and the Sacraments, and even there it will often fail to do what it nevertheless, by the grace of God, is able to do.

By contrast, its act of love is never perfect. It has sin in its flesh, and even in its best activity this will cleave to the Church's work; therefore the Church, like every individual Christian, must daily pray: "forgive us our debt!" Thus the visible Church will often present a spectacle which is not only frail and lowly, but also defiled by sin. Its glory is not merely hidden; it is, alas, often darkened by hideous stains. Among these stains are all the "dead members" of the Church; yet even the living members must many a time complain of themselves that the power of darkness is great in their flesh.

Holy Scripture speaks of the Church in two ways. It speaks of one Church and of many churches. It is of the one, indivisible Church that Jesus Christ speaks when He says to Peter: Thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my Church (Matt. 16:18). It is of this Church

that Paul writes to the Ephesians: And gave Him to be Head over all things to the Church, which is His body, the fullness of Him that filleth all in all (Eph. 1:23). And again: Christ loved the Church, and gave Himself for it; that He might sanctify it, having cleansed it by the washing of water with the Word; that He might present it to Himself a glorious Church, not having spot or wrinkle (Eph. 5:25–27; compare Col. 1:18; Acts 20:28).

But the Word of God also speaks of many congregations: a congregation in Jerusalem, a congregation in Rome, congregations in Macedonia, congregations in Asia Minor. And each one, taken by itself, is called the Church of God (1 Cor. 1:2). Are these two different things, two kinds of congregations? God forbid; for then they could not be called by the same name. It is the one congregation which shows itself in different places, as Acts 20:28 shows most clearly. It is one and the same Body of Christ which reveals itself in different places. God sent the Son once, among one people, in one land; but the Son has sent His messengers to preach everywhere and in all places His own Word of repentance and forgiveness of sins, in order to gather in every place those who are grafted into the true Vine, those who become members of His Body. All that is said of the one holy Church is also said of each single congregation in every single place. The whole congregation, which we are accustomed to call “the Church”—a word which Holy Scripture never uses—is invisible and visible; the individual congregation is precisely the same: its holiness is hidden and, alas, often darkened by sin; yet its light also shines through the Word, through the Sacraments, through believing people’s self-sacrificing love toward poor, lost souls. The Church is therefore not a higher kind of society than the congregation, but it is the gathering of all true congregations; it is in every place where there is a congregation, and it is in no other place. That Scripture uses one and the same word everywhere is proof enough that it makes no distinction between Church and congregation. — Our Head, Christ, was revealed once to bear the sin of all; His Body, living and active by the Spirit, is revealed everywhere the Word is preached, and at all times. The Kingdom spreads until it fills the whole earth.

We will with all our might hold fast to this: that it is one and the same congregation which is invisible and visible; and we believe that this is of the utmost practical importance. We know well that the mockers say: a thing cannot be both visible and invisible; it must be two different things. A fool also says in his heart: There is no God. A fool also says: God is invisible; He cannot be manifested in the flesh. But the Word of God, which says, “Our life is hid with Christ in God,” the same Word also says: “Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works.” Why do we emphasize this? Because this talk of a visible and an invisible congregation has, alas, become the cause of no small lukewarmness and indifference among us.

There is, for example, a man who belongs to no congregation; according to his own imagination he belongs to the fellowship of believers, but in a visible congregation he will not be, for it is so defiled, so unclean, so mixed. Thus he remains outside; it is not the visible congregation that matters—he does not go to church, he does not partake of the Sacrament; it is all unclean through its muddled state. Thus a soul is lost, and thus God’s congregation loses a laborer, because he would have the invisible congregation and its glory, but not the dust and shame of the visible.

There is a man who is a pastor in a congregation. He labors with the notion that the

congregation which has called him as pastor is merely the visible congregation; the invisible congregation is another matter. His visible congregation is only an outward circle, outside of which perhaps one or another may be received into the invisible congregation by faith. Thus he becomes indifferent as to how the congregation appears; thus the congregation becomes indifferent toward itself; thus the salt through indifference and mockery loses its power—wherewith then shall it be salted?

No, this spirit of mockery and lukewarmness, which we all carry with us from the state church, must be cast out. We must give heed to this: that each individual congregation is God's congregation; each individual congregation which is bought with Jesus' blood; each individual congregation is one of the seven golden lampstands which John saw. Each of them shall be the manifestation of Christ's body in the world. If this were to become truly alive to us, what earnestness and holy stirring would not come upon us all who are in the congregation, and what a heavy responsibility would fall upon us for the wretched condition which our sins have given to God's congregation.

We know that we cannot search hearts and reins, and assuredly many will come in who do not have on the wedding garment; but should it then become so easy a matter for anyone to run about the shops in the city and change congregation by gathering the shop assistants' names in a book, because he bought clothes in one place and flour in another and tobacco in a third? Many will assuredly come at the invitation, "Come, all!" and many will afterward be a shame to the congregation; but then perhaps one and another would pause and reflect, if it were so that to enter the congregation were the same as to say: "From now on I will be a witness of Jesus Christ; He has indeed bought me with His blood."

No one can prevent hypocrisy; but a living preaching of the congregation's true nature can, by God's grace, nevertheless prevent much levity and indifference, both among pastors and among members of the congregation.

It was altogether impossible to point to any "more convenient time" for the formation of a truly Free Church than that in which the Norwegians came to America. It is superfluous to remind the reader that the Norwegian Church, from the beginning of this century down to our own day, has experienced a season of awakening such as, so far as history knows, it has never had before. And however dark and dead it may unfortunately still be in many places among our people, there is yet scarcely a single family in the whole Norwegian nation that has not in one way or another come into contact with "the Awakening" or with "the awakened." Some have been seized by the Spirit of God, and through deep distress over sin have learned to know the Saviour as their Saviour; others have gone along with the stream, and without themselves coming to any personal experience of the life in God, they have nevertheless acknowledged the Christianity of the awakened as a living fruit of the work of the Spirit, and many a time have they silently sighed within themselves: "Oh that I were as one of them! Let my soul die the death of the righteous, and let my last end be like his." Though they have lacked full sincerity to experience both the depths of sin and the depths of grace, yet the Awakening has not passed them by altogether untouched. Some have also followed the awakened in hypocrisy, and these have unfortunately many times become such blemish of shame as have offended the children of God and have caused the name of God and the work of His Spirit to be blasphemed by the children of unbelief. Some have conceived a

thorough, almost devilish hatred of this work of God, and they have not only mocked when the shame of the hypocrites was laid bare, but they have also called the movement toward God and the joy in the Lord fanaticism and madness. But almost no one has been able to gain complete footing in peace, wholly untouched by this mighty movement. Nearly all have in one way or another been either for it or against it.

But it is then an evident fact that such a time of decision as this was a peculiar hour of the Lord, which He Himself had chosen, that a free congregation might be formed which was permeated by a living consciousness of what faith in Christ and the Christian life are. It was an hour of the Lord in which a choice and a decision took place in so many hearts; and in such a time the setting apart could also occur which was necessary in order that the free congregation might be formed of those who would voluntarily confess Christ. Mass Christianity and the mass congregation were judged by the Awakening; and when the free congregation was formed, those who in their hearts hated and persecuted all living Christianity would naturally withdraw themselves. And thereby the self-governing congregation became able truly to be governed by the Spirit of Christ, even though it might number many dead members; for even these had yet, in a certain sense, bowed themselves under the Word of God, which many of them gladly wished might bow their hearts to a full knowledge of the truth, that they too might become children of God.

Neither can we be blind to this, that it was a special grace of the Lord that He, precisely at the time when, according to His counsel, the free Norwegian congregations were to be formed, led us out to this new land, where we had to begin entirely anew. We came to a land where the freedom of the congregation was respected by the state, where it stood open to every man, unhindered by the laws of the country and unimpaired in his civil rights, to be within or without the congregation. We came to a land to which we brought nothing with us save the Word of God and our sound confession; where there was no old church property to contend over, no church government from which to seek permission, no clerical estate that could at once begin to preserve the old privileges of rank, so far as it might be done within the free church.

The Norwegians stood in great poverty in the foreign land; but before them lay the prairie, and there was required only the Lord's blessing and strenuous labor, that there might arise a flourishing garden both in temporal and in spiritual things. We thank the Lord that both have accompanied us unto this day; and if it may now at least to some degree be said that there exists a free church body among the Norwegians, then this is owing to the Lord's wondrous governance, that at the same time as the fire of revival passed through Norway, He led so many Norwegian men and women, who were seized by His Spirit, across the sea to a land of freedom, where the congregation was permitted to grow in peace with that growth which the Lord granted by His grace.

It has been for the good of the Norwegian-American congregation that the Word of the Lord in the old land had awakened souls both to living love and to conscious resistance against Christ; for for a free church to begin in the lukewarmness and sleep in which the state church finds its greatest peace and comfort—that is the most dreadful thing of all.

It thus came almost as an uncomprehended gift to the congregations that were founded

in America, that at the very establishment of the congregation there had to prevail so full a voluntariness as the conditions of human conditions nearly demand. It cannot indeed be denied that, despite the great separation wrought by the "Awakening" between "living Christians" and "dead children of the world," and despite all the altered circumstances, yet in America also "custom and usage" worked very powerfully toward leading people to enter the congregation. It is likewise true that no Christian can think without sorrow of the many, many Norwegians who in the foreign land have altogether forsaken their Church, and that therefore those who earnestly desired to promote the welfare of the congregation were glad to have as many of their countrymen as possible within it. It must also be admitted that, both on the part of many pastors and of congregational members, there was an anxious fear concerning the pastor's salary and the expenses, which led them to employ various unsatisfactory means in order to induce people to enter the congregation. And finally, the whole lonely condition in the foreign land naturally came in as a powerful incentive, urging men in every way to unite themselves together.

Yet it must be said that, as a rule, a full voluntariness prevailed in the founding of congregations. It is the Lord's command that we shall "compel them to come in," and it is therefore not our task to investigate whether those who enter have on the wedding garment or not. The Lord Himself will examine that in His own time. But the "compulsion" of which the Lord speaks is not any sort of outward constraint; rather it is as when a kindly man urges a foreign traveler to lodge in his house by showing such friendliness that it becomes impossible to refuse his invitation. We must say that just as important as it is that there be full freedom in the founding of a congregation, so necessary it is that there be a truly earnest "compelling to come in" through the Word of God. It must be the Word that gathers a congregation.

Even among the Norwegian emigrants, who indeed all were once received into God's Church through baptism, it would have been far better if one had never organized any congregation or gathered congregational members in any other way or by any other means than through the preaching of the Word of God, publicly and privately. For even baptized persons are many times, alas, in such a condition that it is better both for themselves and for the congregation that they "stand without" and are the object of the congregation's influence in that way, than that they be within and perhaps there sleep the deepest sleep, precisely because they are "in the congregation." Many times, too, overly hasty admissions into the congregation have soon brought about manifest scandal within it, and then one has had to resort to church discipline and exclusion; and as necessary as this means is, we nevertheless know, alas, that its application is bound up with such great dangers both for the congregation that disciplines and for the one who is disciplined, that in many cases and in many congregations it would be better if one could avoid it.

We therefore lay the greatest weight upon this: that the congregation must be gathered by the Word of God, and that the Word's urging, drawing, and entreating is the only thing that shall be used to bring people into the congregation. If God's Spirit is permitted to work this purpose in a man, that he desires admission into the congregation, then he is a true increase of the congregation, even if he has not yet come to the peace of faith with God; without this, he is only a diminution of the congregation's true strength. We will here only add that there is far from everywhere that faithfulness in "compelling them to come in" which there

ought to be. There is a dreadful lack of this, that all pastors and all congregational members in this respect can say with Paul, "The love of Christ constraineth us," to bear forth the testimony of Christ's death before all without distinction. May the Lord send us, in all our church bodies and in all our congregations, many true crying voices that compel them to come in, so that the Lord's house may be filled.

Nevertheless, it cannot be concealed that there are a considerable number of congregations in America which have been established upon a foundation altogether different from the preaching of God's Word. There are even, within the small circle where we are known, congregations whose very existence we fear is owing to party-spirit and hatred, and to purely temporal motives. And there are many members entered upon the rosters who would never have been there, had not purely outward, purely temporal advantages been employed as a lure to draw them in. There has not everywhere been the proper regard for the freedom of the people, nor yet the proper reverence for the purity of the congregation. It is therefore natural that such congregations will reap as they have sown. They have at times had a rapid growth, because passion and fanaticism are indeed powerful forces for swiftly driving a congregation up to a certain height; but they carry the germ of death within themselves, and unless the Spirit of the Lord breathes into them a warmth other than that of passion, the artificial fire of fanaticism will soon devour them.

The first thing, therefore, which is of importance for a congregation, is that it be founded in a right manner. And we must rejoice over the infinite grace of the Lord, who has so wondrously prepared the way for the establishment of the free congregation, so that it may truly be said that there are many congregations in all communions in America which have been spared many, many adversities, because there were few irregularities at the founding. It was indeed to be expected that the transition from a state church to a free church, even in the most favorable cases, must bring with it great difficulties; and we ought not to marvel if some must suffer much on account of their lack of understanding; yet there is in truth great cause to thank the Lord, because He has spared us as much as He has done.

That which has constituted the difficulty has naturally been this, that some have wished to receive too many, others too few. The Wisconsinites, who began by being Grundtvigians and therefore ascribed to Baptism a false significance, and who ended by preaching the justification of the world³ and therefore ascribed to Absolution a false significance, have by their very doctrinal position been driven, quite naturally, to an extreme laxity in the founding of congregations. For it is precisely the same thing whether one places a Catholic significance in Baptism or in Absolution: one is thereby also necessarily driven, in practice, to follow a Catholic conception of the congregation. One may therefore be quite certain that where the justification of the world is preached, there the consciousness of the congregation lacks life and power to a high degree. We hope, however, that this is not often the case.

On the other hand, the Elling Society⁴ did indeed, in its time, go to the opposite extreme. The "old constitution" was assuredly not in full accord with the order of the Kingdom of

³Universal Justification — Present Ed.

⁴The synod founded by the well-known layman Elling Eielsen, "The Evangelical Lutheran Church." See also Collected Works I, 223. — Ed.

God in this respect. There were indeed not especially great difficulties connected with being received into a congregation there, more than elsewhere; but the fault was this, that those who were received into the congregation were, by the very act of reception, stamped as “converted, or on the way of conversion,” and this naturally had a harmful influence upon the rightful standing of the congregation. For we all know how quickly the natural man is inclined to take comfort from all such outward things. And there is scarcely any doubt that several congregations, precisely through this delusion that they were Christians more so than other congregations, have lost no small measure of seriousness and sincerity.

With these providential dealings of God and these peculiar dangers before our eyes, we therefore believe that the best founding of a congregation is that which at one and the same time is a sifting out from all those who either live in complete indifference or in outright denial, and likewise a gathering of all those who, by the Word of God and by nothing else, are freely constrained to enter.

Let it indeed take time to have a congregation built up; but let it also be well understood that it is neither priest nor congregation that shall judge whether those who enter have on the wedding garment.

If in a place there has long been no preaching, then let a powerful and earnest awakening sermon be heard, perhaps for a long time, before a congregation is organized. Let the Word have time to exercise its work, both unto brokenness and unto resistance, if so it must be, before a congregation is founded.

And remember, that it is not necessary that there must be a priest to preach in such a place; but if you dwell there, and the Lord has given you to know your Savior, then begin at once, wherever you may be, to gather people for edifying meetings and the reading of God’s Word. This is the first beginning toward the formation of a congregation.

There are congregations which have quickly gone under because this was neglected before the congregation was founded.

But above all, let us be careful that it is not the bitterness of party spirit which gathers the congregation instead of the love of Christ.

2.2 The Ministry in the Free Congregation

There is scarcely any question within the Christian Church that has occasioned so many difficulties and so much strife as the question of the ministerial office. Personal passions, zeal and envy without understanding, temporal pride and spiritual immaturity have continually and persistently exerted their influence so as to cast confusion into a matter which concerns not only the upbuilding of the Kingdom of God in the land, but also many personal interests of a purely temporal kind. It was unavoidable that, since ministers are human beings, they should be subject to the frailty of earthly conditions; and when temporal interests became so inextricably bound up with the work for the Kingdom of God, many frictions were bound to arise.

The free church community has no way of escaping this difficulty. For although the state

church may have made the question more complicated and rendered its proper solution impossible, the real struggle concerning the right place of the ministry nevertheless begins in earnest only within the free church. In the state church the ministry is once and for all placed in a thoroughly distorted position, and there is no one who expects or demands that it should be otherwise; but in the free church the demand arises that the ministry shall be in its proper place, and since this is a most burdensome place, the struggle comes both from hostile ministers and from dead congregations against the very nature of the ministry and its authority.

There is nothing in the Word of God that lends any support to the fleshly mind. And although both bishops and popes have labored to interpret the Word of God to their own fleshly advantage and in favor of a proud clerical aristocracy, it is nevertheless just as certain that there is no room in the Word of God for a great and mighty priestly estate that claims a special divine authority and a peculiar position between the congregation and God, different from that of any other Christian. But if the Word of God serves no clerical estate, it all the more strongly emphasizes the necessity of the ministry, of the service of the Word, of the work of proclamation, which is to be carried out by the congregation through such Christian persons as are fitted for it by the gift of grace which the Spirit of the Lord has given them. Thus, just as far as Roman priest-exaltation is removed from faith in Christ and from the truth, just so far is the Quakers' priestlessness removed from the sound form of God's congregation.

We thus soon see that here the way of truth is so narrow, so sharp as the edge of a knife. And it is clear that conflicts were bound to arise here. In America these have assumed such a form that on the one side the claim has been made that minister and congregation are bound to one another as husband and wife—naturally with the understanding that the minister is the husband, and that he thereby enjoys several advantages which the wife, or the congregation, does not possess. Likewise, from the same quarter, the greatest efforts have been made to suppress so-called "lay activity" within the congregation. On the other side there has been advanced the sinful assertion: "The minister is the servant of the congregation," and with that one has thought to have decided the whole matter without further trouble. Both of these views, which in fact may be summed up in the question, "Is the minister the lord of the congregation or its servant?" are equally unfit to give the ministry the significance and the position which the Word of God assigns to it.

In the State Church, the Office and the Priest are at once placed in the most erroneous relation to the congregation, in that the priest is a "royal civil servant" and is appointed by the King without any manner of participation on the part of the congregation. No arrangement can be conceived by which one could come farther away from what is Christian truth in this matter than this. It is absolutely torn loose from every root in the Word of God; it stands so completely outside all connection with congregational life that nothing else can be expected than that it must do harm. And harm it does.

For the priest comes to the congregation as a stranger, remains there as a stranger, and is "transferred" to a "better" calling, without the congregation receiving any other impression than that it has now been the man's means of livelihood for a time, until he could obtain "something better." That this is not a practice favorable to the work and fruit of the office,

anyone can see.

And if the priest himself is also a man who labors as a “royal civil servant,” as he according to the demands of the State Church ought to do, then it is clear that such a man first becomes the King’s servant, then the Church’s servant, and then perhaps, if it can be managed, a very little bit of the congregation’s priest. It is another matter that there are here and there priests in the State Church who, independent of all human ordinances, occupy the place which the Word of God assigns to the priest; but they are few, and they are by no means genuine “state priests.”

He who will be a good “royal civil servant” in the priestly calling must first pass through a godless schooling and thereafter through a highly dubious student life, wherein all sharp edges, all independent conviction, all living apprehension of the truth are ground away; and then, when he has learned to bow and bend both himself and the truth, he is “finished” and can discharge his office by the King’s grace with just as much propriety as a bailiff or a magistrate. If he has become sufficiently polished, he can also confidently reckon that the ladder of advancement will be tolerably easy for him to climb, step by step, until he obtains a “quiet calling” in his old age.

But the whole arrangement is in its very essence a complete caricature of God’s order and manner for the congregation, and therefore fit only to bring priest and congregation into a false relation to one another. Even where the priest, as sometimes happens, is an upright man, and the congregation harbors some serious thought, even there this perverted relation—that the priest is the King’s civil servant instead of the congregation’s office-bearer—works in a high degree to the detriment of a united cooperation for the upbuilding of the Kingdom of God.

In the free Church the matter is naturally set right at once; for it corrects itself of necessity. Thus it has come to pass among the Norwegians in America, that since no one sent them pastors, the congregations themselves were compelled to choose them. In this respect it was a piece of good fortune that the Norwegian Church is a state church, and that it is the King who sends pastors to the congregations there. For had it, for example, been the case that an ecclesiastical authority in Norway had sent out pastors, then it would naturally also have sent pastors for the emigrants, and it might have taken a long time before matters had come into their proper order. For the Norwegian King there could be no access to send pastors to a foreign land. Nevertheless, it was not altogether avoided that both people and pastors in the beginning regarded themselves as a branch not only of the Lutheran Church, but also of the Norwegian State Church; and even to this day the Norwegian Synod is often simply called “the State Church.” It is also related that a congregation was organized somewhere in America with the definite understanding that it should belong directly under the Norwegian Church Department, which sufficiently shows that it did not at once dawn upon all that it was truly a Free Church which was in the process of forming.

Those times, however, are now almost past, and it has become a recognized matter that the congregation among us possesses the right of election, and possesses it alone. To be sure, it is used rather frequently, especially in the Norwegian Synod, that the right of calling is entrusted to individual persons or to the church council; yet it is willingly acknowledged that

this is an emergency condition, which ought not to exist. For our part we can by no means find that such necessity is compelling, and we scarcely believe that in our entire fellowship there is any congregation which will do this; and we are assured that none ought to do it. For although it may occasion difficulties for a congregation to obtain a pastor when it must itself extend the call, yet we are also exceedingly apprehensive when we hear that someone wishes to take labor and responsibility from us; for we know that they always take freedom along with them. Therefore we oppose all who would take this "burden" from the congregation, because it cannot be taken away without the congregation at the same time suffering loss in its most precious rights.

A truly congregational election is thus the manner in which our ministers are called, and there has surely never been anyone who has attempted to deny that this is a rightful calling. But by this the question is far from settled whether the minister is lord or servant within the congregation. The circumstance that he, in full accordance with God's Word, is chosen by the congregation, does not yet determine his future position. It has indeed been shown that the Free Church, with ministers chosen by the congregation, has been able to go to the greatest extremes on both sides. In particular, hierarchical tendencies readily unfold themselves within the Free Church.

There are two ways in which the clerical calling easily presses its way into God's Church where it is left entirely to itself. The minister and the clergy may strive after power either from the basest motives or from the noblest motives without true insight into the nature of the congregation. There are, namely, ministers who seek power for base gain's sake. Their number has unfortunately always been great. In the Free Church these have an excellent opportunity. They employ as their means the most pitiable form of politics. They establish associations in which clerical agreements secure them against the possibility that the congregation might obtain any other minister than the one upon whom the ministers themselves have agreed. When they are thus secure from that side, they then secure themselves against the congregation's ability to depose them by inducing the congregation to accept such provisions concerning the removal of the minister as in fact render this impossible. Then, by personal means, they secure for themselves certain "fixed men" in every congregation, and then the demands begin gradually to rise. That in this way matters may be driven quite far is evident enough to all who know how things stand among large portions of our people. And when such a minister at the same time suppresses all lay activity within the congregation, seeks to dampen every awakening wherever it is perceived, and with a blind eye passes by dancing and drink and debauchery within the congregation, so that in the end the religion of the people consists in going to church and paying the minister, then it is clear that the people, while asleep, lose their Christian freedom, because they have no use for it.

But if we turn ourselves, with the utmost abhorrence, from this kind of seduction of office, which alas in the Free Church is like a corroding poison that all too quickly leads the people partly into the hands of sectarians, partly into brazen denial of God, there is yet another form of priestly domination which appears so good that we are almost tempted to wish for more of it than is found in America. For there are pastors who, penetrated by the consciousness of their great responsibility and their holy calling, labor with untiring zeal for the salvation of souls, but who forget the congregation's own responsibility and the congregation's calling

to labor with the gifts which the Lord has given it by His Spirit. They proceed on the assumption that the congregation is no congregation at all unless it consists of nothing but, or almost nothing but, living children of God. And in order to know who these children of God are, they establish a mold of them according to their own experience, and then measure others by this measure. When it then appears that this uniform does not fit all, there is accordingly only a poor congregation left, and the pastor becomes ever more zealous to draw as near as possible, by his influence alone, to the goal of uniformity. This kind of hierarch also has a decided enmity toward the freedom of the congregation, toward lay activity, toward all activity in the congregation that is not directed by himself. They indeed labor for the Christian life according to their understanding of it; but since they hinder the true movement of life, they readily kill the life of the congregation by a suffocating uniformity. For this kind of endeavor the Free Church also affords a very wide field, and it invites this sort of zealous labor, because for a time it appears exceedingly fruitful and edifying. It is, however, precisely along this path that the Catholic Church has come to its perfect priestly dominion.

These two forms of priestly rule might seem altogether to repel one another and to be incapable of agreement. Experience, however, shows the contrary. The Free Church has at all times had both forms, and it is the lust for power that reconciles the sharpest oppositions. There are certain principles in which these two kinds of pastors agree exceedingly well. They can, namely, very easily agree concerning the concept of office. They are both agreed that it is directly from God; for the one sees in it a support for his temporal advantage, the other sees in it a help for his spiritual work. They are both agreed that the will of the pastor ought, as far as possible, to be law in the congregation; for thereby they could both most easily advance their plans. They are both agreed that all spiritual activity which they cannot control is exceedingly dangerous, each for his own reasons. And thus there are woven, by these two kinds of pastors, certain remarkable ropes and bands with which they would bind the congregation. But in truth it is only when they have cut off the congregation's true relation to God that they both attain their goal. Like a Samson with his head shorn, the giant is then easily led into bondage.

The Free Church is thus in the very greatest danger of being tyrannized both by worldly priests and by one-sided, though earnest, men. And the doctrine that the relation between pastor and congregation is as that of the husband to the wife is indeed in many respects appealing enough, but it lacks foundation in the Word of God and therefore leads to bondage.

But the Free Church also has another danger, which is expressed in the saying: the pastor is the servant of the congregation. The saying is indeed correct, if it is rightly understood—that is, if it is taken as an expression of the simple truth of God's Word, that all the pastor's work is a ministry of reconciliation, to draw souls to God; a service in the congregation and for the congregation; a service in His footsteps who came to serve all. But there is another understanding of this saying, according to which it simply means that the pastor shall do whatever the congregation commands, whether it be one thing or another; and in this sense the saying becomes purely and simply a denial that the pastor is the servant of the Lord and can do only what God has commanded, for the service of the congregation.

This understanding—that the pastor in every respect stands in the same relation to the congregation as a hired servant to the one who has hired him—necessarily produces hirelings

who willingly bend truth and justice for a morsel of bread. And yet there may be more congregations of this sort, who gladly hire a hireling, than anyone could suppose. This is a dreadful danger for the Free Church; for where the congregation not only governs its own affairs, but also masters the Word of God and induces the pastor to assist it in carrying through things that are unchristian in their inmost root, there the whole congregation becomes without salt, and soon an utterly rotten tree, which must fall under the rapid development that free conditions bring with them. When the wolf comes, the hireling flees, and the sheep are scattered and torn. It is scarcely possible to deny that there are in the Free Church several things which may soon entice congregations into such a view of pastor and office. Once a worldly spirit and tone gain dominion in a congregation, and the pastor does not all the more firmly maintain his office as a service of God, then now one consideration and now another may soon make him a slave instead of a servant, and congregation and pastor alike are soon equally far from the Lord's right way—to their own destruction and to the offense of the congregation of God.

There is nothing so heart-rending as these distorted caricatures of the order of God's congregation within the Free Church, for there is nothing so lovely and delightful, both before God and before all the people, as a truly Christian congregation, where the fellowship of brethren flourishes, where the Word of God has its proper place, where the Spirit of the Lord governs both shepherd and flock, so that together they go out and come in and find pasture. Would that there were spirit and grace to paint such a picture, that it might melt all cold hearts, both among pastors and congregations, so that they might no longer stand against the Lord, who so willingly desires to form a true congregation among us! But if the picture is not to stand on paper alone, but become a living reality around us and within us, then pastors must cease standing in the way of the congregation's spiritual freedom, and congregations must cease standing in the way of the proper administration of the Office. Alas, we must lament both things among our beloved people.

The Office is God's service. It is God himself who sends the true pastors in the ministry of reconciliation. He sends them with the gifts of the Spirit; he makes them fit to bear witness to the way of life and death, to cry aloud with full voice concerning sin, and to lift up and call sinners to the Savior. The Word of God is not to come to men only in a printed book, but according to the Lord's ordinance it is also to be borne forth by witnesses who themselves have experienced that the doctrine is of God. God himself lays the work upon the hearts and shoulders of his servants; and by his power even the least of his witnesses shall speak. To him the pastor is accountable, and in him also is the pastor's strength. And the man and the congregation who do not first and foremost acknowledge this—that the Office is the proclamation of God's Word, and that God himself is the one who will demand an account of how the pastor carries out his work—that man is no pastor, and that congregation no Christian congregation.

Therefore this is the question which is the most important of all for every pastor and every congregation: Is that which is spoken and preached the Word of God in its crushing severity and life-giving power? If this is so, then bow yourself, you sinner, and be raised up, you who are broken, for it is the Lord who speaks to you through the mouth of his servant! But if it is not so, then let it become so; the grace of the Lord stands ready, and he is willing to send

it to you again, if only you will open your heart to him.

The ministry is the congregation's service in this Word of God. Here is the other side of the matter. The congregation has the right to demand that the pastor truly, in spirit and in truth, shall "minister" to it with the Word of the Lord. The body of Christ is to grow by the same Word through which the life of God has been awakened. Not for his own advantage or his own honor is the pastor to preach, but for the edification of the congregation. As independent of all fear of men and favor of men as the pastor must be in the administration of the office, so humble and willing to serve must he be when it comes to preaching the Word in season and out of season. Always willing to admonish the rebellious, to instruct the erring, to comfort the afflicted, and to bear with the weak, he must not shrink back from becoming the least of all.

It is with the pastoral office in the same way as with a Christian's position in the world: there is a height and power of the Spirit in it, because it is the Spirit of God who sends him to cry out in Christ's stead: "Be ye reconciled to God!" But there is also the humility and poverty of the Spirit, because there is unceasingly to be borne the contradiction of sinners, the sorrow of the erring, and the humiliation of the proud. Yet through it all it is love that gives strength and wisdom, endurance and patience for the work of ministry.

It is therefore necessary to hold fast with unwavering faithfulness, if pastor and congregation are to stand in a right relationship to one another, that the office is God's service in the Word and the congregation's service in the same Word. If the one is misunderstood or the other forgotten, the relationship becomes perverted. Let the pastor stand manfully and undaunted upon God's truth, and let the congregation bow beneath the Word; and let the pastor always be bent to serve all, and the congregation rightly eager to demand his service with the Word which the Lord has entrusted to it—then all stands well in the house of God, which is His congregation. Then shall the Lord's faithful promise, that His Word shall be food for the hungry, a hammer to shatter hearts, a balm to heal the wounded, prove itself as living truth in the congregation; and there shall be a fellowship of love which with irresistible power shall draw more and more into itself and unto God.

If this, then, is the proper relationship of the office to the congregation—that it is the proclamation of the Word which the congregation by its call entrusts to him whom God has sent and sends, and that it is both God's service and the congregation's service in the Word—then the question arises: Is the congregation now bound to be edified only by the pastor, or is it its duty and right also to edify itself? In other words: Is lay activity abolished by the congregation's calling of a pastor, or is it confirmed? We shall in what follows speak somewhat more closely of this matter, which is so exceedingly important in these days.

2.3 The Pastoral Office and the Priesthood of the Laity

The New Testament bears clear witness that the first Christian congregations possessed both a distinct teaching office and a free exercise of the Lord's Word in their midst. To the Ephesians Paul writes: "And He gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers; for the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ" (Eph. 4:11–12). No one can deny that

reference is made here to persons who, by their gifts, were qualified to be the congregation's officers. Christ Himself gave them these gifts, raised them up in the midst of the congregation; the congregation chose them (Acts 6:5; 14:23) under the powerful cooperation of the Spirit of God (Acts 20:28), and laid hands upon them (Acts 13:2).

To the Colossians the same apostle writes: "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom; teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs" (Col. 3:16). And again no one can deny that here the apostle speaks of each and every believer without any regard to congregational election or to any sort of "outward call." All who have the Spirit of Christ are here exhorted to praise the Lord's Name for salvation, in such a manner that it may be unto edification for those who hear.

It is therefore a matter of first importance for the Church of Christ to have an ordered office in its midst, filled through the election of the congregation. It is an equally serious requirement laid upon the congregation, that its members bear witness to their Saviour from believing hearts and from the lived experience.

Here, then, in our Free Congregations—where not ancient custom and usage alone may decide what is right, but where the Word of God must ever anew be the foundation of our congregational order—here it comes above all to lay the most earnest weight upon both these matters. What we must rightly give heed to is this: that the Office does not hinder the free proclamation of the Word, and that the free proclamation does not usurp the work of the Office.

There is a logical chain of reasoning which will always be brought forward against lay activity in the Free Congregation. It runs thus: "The congregation has the right to proclaim the Word and to administer the Sacraments. Since not all can exercise this right, it is entrusted to a single man (the pastor) by the congregation's election. Thereby the one elected becomes the sole possessor of the right, and therefore no other may either preach or administer the Sacraments. Whoever preaches or teaches, apart from the pastor, is therefore a thief and a robber." There is another chain of reasoning, no less logical, which will always be used to annihilate the distinctive position of the Office in the congregation. It is this: "God's people are a people of priests, called to proclaim the virtues of the Lord; since no one can take this calling away from God's people, the election of a pastor is no transfer of proclamation to a single man; but when one is chosen in particular, it is only that he may be ready to preach when necessity does not fall upon any other, and for the sake of order he should perform the 'ministerial acts.' Therefore, if the pastor preaches and teaches in the congregation as one who has the right and duty thereto continually and as a daily calling, then he is one of those who would lord it over the Lord's flock."

Both of these chains of reasoning appear excellent, and yet they both end by coming into conflict with the Word of God. It is against God's Word that a single man alone should wholly possess the right to bear witness and to teach in a congregation; for where then is the exhortation that Christians should "teach and admonish one another"? It is against God's Word that the one who is chosen as teacher in the congregation should not thereby have received a particular calling which the other members of the congregation do not have; for where then is the Word of God that Christ appointed some as apostles, and so forth; and the

commandment “that they which preach the gospel should live by the gospel”?

The error in both of these opposing chains of reasoning lies in this, that they do not sharply distinguish between two different things: the task and duty of the congregation, and the task and duty of the individual Christian. It is the task of the whole congregation to proclaim the manifold wisdom of God (Eph. 3:10); it is the duty of each Christian to proclaim His praises, who hath called them out of darkness into His marvellous light. The individual cannot seize for himself the work of the congregation, and the congregation cannot deprive the individual of his work. If a state owns a common property, then no single man may take it as his own; but conversely, no state has the right to rob the individual of his property. What is common property we may entrust to an office-bearer to administer on our behalf; but what is our private property, that we each administer ourselves.

When, therefore, a congregation chooses a man made fit by the Lord to be its public teacher, he is thereby set apart for a particular calling; he becomes the congregation’s office-bearer, and it shall be his life’s task—and therefore also his means of livelihood—to be a preacher of the Gospel, a steward of the Sacraments, a servant of God, who without hindrance can devote himself to the study of God’s Word and to its dissemination. He shall daily penetrate into the whole counsel of God and become a true scribe, instructed for the kingdom of God, able to bring forth out of his treasure things old and new. He shall be an instrument of God to set forth from God’s Word Jesus, the crucified Saviour, the true constitution of Christ’s Bride, and the true nature of the individual Christian. He shall be the shepherd of the congregation, who leads it upon the right pastures; the watchman of the congregation, who by God’s Word fights against sin within it and deception round about it. He shall, so to speak, be the conscience of the congregation, in that by God’s Word he reproves sin and encourages faith, being an ever-living reminder of what the congregation is and of what a Christian is. Yet it is so far from the case that he should be the only one who lives and works in the congregation, that on the contrary there is great danger that he will not be what he ought to be if he becomes alone in life and labour. As a heart cannot beat the pulse of life in a dead body, so with great difficulty can a pastor be a true pastor, if his activity and labour do not give birth to activity and labour all around him.

It is therefore the congregation’s great common labor with the Word of God, inwardly and outwardly, which is most immediately entrusted to the pastor; yet it is very far from being the case that thereby all the individual members’ Christian duty is laid upon him. The duty of Christians, each in his own place, to bear witness to the Savior in word and deed thus remains resting upon them. There are pastors who would gladly be alone in the activity and life of the congregation, who would gladly have their congregation become a dead mass that neither lives nor works; for that is the easiest thing for the pastor. And there are congregation members enough who would gladly have the pastor both live and work in their stead; for that is the easiest thing for them. But this is in any case nothing other than sheer Catholicism, and it ought not to find spokesmen within the Lutheran Church. Holy Scripture describes the individual Christians to us as both living and working, witnessing and prophesying, and it is altogether inadmissible to let all this be done on one’s behalf by a salaried pastor in the name of the office.

It therefore stands fast that the congregation’s call of a pastor does not abolish the Christians’

activity for the building up of Christ's body, but rather confirms it. The pastoral call places in the midst of the congregation a living center for the work of the congregation, and around the labor of the pastoral office there gathers the individual Christians' work of edification. The office is like the firm trunk of the work, which unceasingly is active in bringing nourishment to the other branches of labor. The work of the office is regular and fixedly prescribed and orderly determined; the work of the individual Christians is more dependent upon occasion and circumstance, upon the Spirit's particular gifts and impulses. It is the concern of the congregation to watch over this: that the work of the office be carried out with zeal, and that the activity of the individual members take place unto edification and not unto disturbance in the assembly of God.

But how far, then, does the individual Christian's duty of witness extend? Can any law or rule be set for it? The Word of God gives this general rule: "Let all things be done unto edification." And the Word testifies that each one shall use his gift for the edification of the congregation in the one and the same Spirit. It is exceedingly dangerous to draw other boundaries. Naturally, it says itself that under extraordinary conditions of distress the duty of the individual may extend so far that he must directly seek to perform the work of the office, although this in free congregations is almost unthinkable, for the reason that the congregation will then intervene and seek to remedy the distress in a regular and orderly manner. But under ordinary circumstances, when the office is carried on in the right spirit and according to the Word of God, there is no other rule to be given than that which is set by the diversity of the gifts and the unity of the Spirit in connection with the various earthly callings. For there arises a necessary and justified limitation upon the individual members' work of edification from this very fact, that each has his own daily labor with earthly things, whereby he must and shall seek his daily bread and the necessary means to maintain the office and the congregation among them.

We cannot, however, refrain from mentioning that both congregational meetings for the governance of the congregation and edification meetings for the congregation's growth in faith are so natural and regular a form of the exercise of the gifts that it is exceedingly difficult to conceive of a free congregation without them. That congregational meetings are essentially a work of laypeople admits of little doubt, even though there are many congregations in America where the congregational meetings as well are only a form of the pastor's sole activity. Yet congregational meetings have of themselves become unavoidable everywhere.

Edification meetings, in which laypeople both pray and exhort, on the other hand seem to be the object of bitter hatred on the part of many pastors. And yet it is utterly incomprehensible how anyone can find room for the gifts of the Spirit without such gatherings being held. Whether the pastor is present or not; yes, even if the pastor is opposed to them, it nevertheless appears altogether necessary for a true congregation to seek to employ all its powers in this way as well.

It is at any rate certain that the gatherings of the first Christians were essentially of this character, and it is a known fact that at all times in the history of the Church, whenever there has been any spiritual life, the need for these gatherings has been so strong that neither clerical prohibitions nor police laws have been able to prevent them. From such gatherings the Lord's witnesses have been brought forth before tyrannical judges and have been banished

from the land and cast into prison and slain; and yet again and again the people of God have always found time and place to assemble for the purpose of praying with one another and for one another, and of being strengthened by brotherly exhortation and instruction.

Strange indeed would it be if Christian people, when they assemble, should not be permitted to assemble around God's Word and converse with one another and instruct one another concerning the wondrous works of the Lord! We must therefore rejoice with joy over every congregation where such gatherings are held, and we must grieve and lament over every assembly of people that calls itself a congregation and yet has no gift of the Spirit which it can in this manner employ for its own edification.

It cannot, however, be concealed that just as there are pastors who are not true shepherds in the congregation, so there are also laymen who speak the Word of God from purely fleshly motives. Yet if the ungodliness of certain pastors does not give us the right to abolish the office itself, neither do the failings of certain lay preachers give us the right to forbid the free proclamation of the Word in the congregation by laymen. Let us do what we can to stir up the gifts of grace and to promote their right use; and when we have done what lies within our power for that cause, then by that very fact we have also gained the authority to reprove abuses. But he who does nothing to enable the congregation to build itself up and to labor and work in every direction for the spread of the kingdom of Christ—let him himself rather be silent than attempt to lay a muzzle upon others.

The Norwegian-American congregations are exposed to danger from persons who seek to press their way into the pastoral office without possessing even the most elementary qualifications for it. When such men enter the office, they are exceedingly prone to untimely lust for domination and to a desire to hinder all lay activity. On the other hand, there is danger from such laymen as, out of sloth or pride or for the sake of gain, will travel about and hold edifying meetings instead of working with their own hands. If these first gain some following, they will readily despise all congregational order and seek to awaken suspicion against the pastors wherever they go, perhaps in order to be chosen as pastors in the place of those who waver. Against both of these dangers there is one remedy: the life and freedom of the congregation. Earnest godliness and manly independence in the congregations, and a true, sincere cooperation between pastors and laymen—this is the safeguard against the disorders which bad pastors and bad lay preachers will bring about under our free conditions. It is a matter upon which we ought all to be able to agree in the Free Church, that the authority of the congregation ought to be able to set boundaries wherever it becomes necessary, both against the encroachments of the office and against the errors of the layman. But the rule of the congregation is this: Let all things be done unto edification!

2.4 The Diaconal Office in the Congregation

It is impossible for us to pass from speaking of the individual local congregation in the Free Church to speaking of the association of congregations within a fellowship, without first treating separately of an exceedingly important office in the congregation, namely, the diaconate. It has already so pressed itself into our ecclesiastical consciousness that we can scarcely imagine a free congregation as organized if it does not have its deacons. Yet hitherto

so little has been written concerning this ministry, and so few clarifying accounts have been provided as to how it is exercised in the various congregations and within the different fellowships, that one must generally be content with the brief and dry legal provisions in the congregational constitutions when one seeks to form a conception of the place the deacons truly occupy in our congregations. Certain it is, however, that on the one hand, in many a congregation in America, much faithful diaconal service is rendered in secret and before God, while on the other hand the diaconate in many places only very imperfectly fills the place it ought to have.

It belongs to the Christian congregation's confession of sin that it both knows and feels with pain that it is imperfect in all its work; but when we must especially emphasize that there is often much lacking in the care with which the work of the diaconate is carried out, we mean thereby more than that imperfection which clings to all the congregation's work on earth. There is, to be sure, often lacking the proper understanding of what the work of the deacons truly is, both among the congregations who elect, and among the men who are elected to this office. Therefore those men are not always chosen to whom the Lord has given the gift to carry out this service; neither can the gifts rightly be developed, trained, and cultivated where there is lacking a clear and thorough insight into the true significance of the ministry. In part this has its cause in the fact that this office is not known from the church of the homeland, nor has it been taken up again through an independent development within Norwegian congregations, but must rather be regarded as transferred from American congregations to ours. It may therefore be of some benefit to attempt to provide certain explanations of what this office is, and how it may best become a blessing to congregational life.

Deacon means a servant, and the name is therefore simple and humbling to our flesh; yet it has a wondrous sweetness and beauty for the Christian, for whom it is a name of honor, since the Son of God voluntarily took it upon himself and came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life as a ransom for many.

It is the greatness of all Christians to become small and the servants of all, in order to win them for the eternal life, if it were possible. Thereby they walk in the footsteps of their Lord; they follow him in humility and suffering; they love with him, labor with him, strive with him, devote themselves with him, that the glorious blessing of reconciliation may, both by word and by deed, be brought near unto as many hearts as possible. It belongs especially to Christians to practice the service of love where need and misery have made the sinful earthly life truly wretched, where sin has brought great distress and suffering, and where suffering has often softened hearts, so that they are receptive to the right remedy against both sin and need and death—the precious Gospel of our Lord and Savior. Just as the Savior himself found no entrance among those who were full and rich and had abundance and lacked nothing, but was all the more welcome among those who suffered and were afflicted, so also have Christ's believers in a special manner become the servants of the suffering and the poor and the outcast, if indeed they have become faithful in the calling wherewith they are called.

The narrative in Acts, chapter 6, shows us clearly how the diaconal office was instituted. And it emerges quite plainly from this account that the deacons were chosen by the congregation to carry out a service which in no way was of a different kind from that which all Christians

are bound to show one another. Yet here we find the same circumstance which we earlier touched upon when we spoke of the priestly office and lay activity. All Christians are to be priests and witnesses, and yet the congregation as a whole must have its priest, who is an executor of the whole congregation's duty of witness; likewise all Christians are to be servants or deacons in the footsteps of Jesus Christ, and yet the congregation as a whole will be able to exercise its duty of service only through particular deacons, chosen thereto. It is also noteworthy that the account in Acts, chapter 6, shows us that this office has its ground in murmuring and dissatisfaction, that it is thus conditioned by imperfection among Christians; from this we may better understand what the Apostle means in Ephesians 4 when he says that the gifts and offices in the congregations are to serve "for the perfecting of the saints." Through its offices and officeholders the congregation exercises self-control, self-cleansing, and self-edification.

That which threatened to bring about a division in the first congregation, and which gave rise to the diaconal office, was a complaint that the Greek-speaking widows were being neglected in the daily distribution. It was thus manifestly a question concerning the proper assistance of those in need. And the service which was to rest upon the deacons is said to be this: to serve at the tables. We recall that the first congregation held its property in common. They ate together, and these common meals were therefore to be overseen, ordered, and provided for by the deacons, who were also to see to it that no one was wronged in any respect. From this there followed, as a matter of immediate necessity, that if any member of the congregation could not come to the common meal because sickness or distress hindered him, then the deacons were bound to see to it that such persons also were fed and helped. Thus we find that later in the history of the Church, when the common meals ceased, the direct care of the poor and the sick became the official ministry of the deacons.

It is, however, self-evident that just as far as the pastoral office does not exclude the activity of the laity, so far neither does the diaconal office exclude private charity. We must here remember that in those times the world was full of poor people, and that especially the great cities were, to an extraordinary degree, crowded with the needy and the helpless.

The apostles prescribe in Acts 6:3 that the congregation is to choose men who have a good testimony, who are full of the Holy Ghost and of wisdom. And we find that the effect of this new order in the congregation, which brought the complaint to an end and gave the apostles occasion to devote themselves exclusively to the ministry of the Word, was great and blessed. "And the word of God increased; and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem; and a great multitude of the priests were obedient to the faith." We also find that some of the deacons took a vibrant part in the proclamation of the Word. From this we may conclude that the apostles regarded this office as an exceedingly essential and important link in the development of the congregation. It is evident that they desired the best men of the congregation, and that in those who were chosen they found a great support in their work, and that the congregation reaped a great fruit from thus having the right men in their right place.

Later, when the Church consisted of many congregations, and the other congregations imitated the congregation in Jerusalem in its organization, we find in 1 Timothy 3:8–13 a description of what a true deacon ought to be. Paul writes concerning this as follows: "Likewise must

the ministers of the congregation (deacons) be grave, not doubletongued, not given to much wine, not greedy of filthy lucre; holding the mystery of the faith in a pure conscience. And let these also first be proved; then let them use the office of a deacon, being found blameless. Even so must their wives be grave, not slanderers, vigilant, faithful in all things. Let the ministers of the congregation be the husband of one wife, ruling their children and their own houses well; for they that have used the office well purchase to themselves a good degree, and great boldness in the faith which is in Christ Jesus.” These words, which ought to be read and pondered again and again in our congregations, which each year choose deacons, give the most excellent guidance for choosing the right men; and we all know that in the free congregation it is not a matter of many offices and lofty titles, but of the right men in the right place.

If we now consider our own circumstances and our congregations, it is striking to see how in many ways we find the experience of the apostles confirmed, that not many rich, not many mighty, not many wise after the flesh are called. Among us also there is, in part, poverty and need within the congregations. And yet there is a vast difference, inasmuch as we in this land can form no true conception of the utter helplessness in which thousands of the poor in the apostles’ time were placed. What poverty we see here is as nothing compared with the misery and wretchedness which the great cities of the Roman Empire hid within their walls. A natural consequence of this is that our deacons have comparatively little work with the direct care of the poor, but are instead especially directed to think upon the sick, the dying, and the afflicted as that field of labor to which the Word of God points them.

We must also take note that in the apostolic congregations there was commonly a chosen presbyterium alongside the deacons. We do not choose several pastors, but only one pastor; and from this it will follow quite naturally that our deacons, who often together with the pastor form the congregational council, also come to deal with various matters which in the earliest time belonged more properly to the presbyters. In this there is nothing improper. For those who are fit for the office of deacon are also fit for the office of presbyter; and where the care of the poor recedes so far into the background as it does in our congregations, it would not be necessary to have a separate congregational office devoted exclusively to that matter.

Most of the regulations governing the activity of deacons in our congregations are directed toward this end: that the deacons are to be the pastor’s assistants in the spiritual care of the congregation; that they are to visit the poor, the sick, and the afflicted; that they are thus to be the congregation’s chosen and commissioned servants, appointed to carry out, on behalf of the congregation and with responsibility to it, a work which in private also rests upon every individual Christian. But since the charity and help of the individual in every kind of distress always has something accidental about it and cannot be relied upon to reach everywhere, and may even lack the proper wisdom and insight, the congregation also, as a public body, must strive to have this ministry rightly performed through chosen men.

If, then, great care was required in the apostolic congregations in the choice of deacons, this is surely no less the case in our own day. Or have our congregations advanced further in faith in Christ and in fitness to serve one another? We must rather lament that sin and unfaithfulness in the work have increased within the congregations. It entails a great responsibility to possess the freedom and right of election of the apostolic congregations; for if we do not

choose with insight and with the guidance of the Holy Spirit, we hinder the kingdom of God from coming to us, in that we obstruct the proper application of the gifts to labor in the congregation. But if we rightly esteem the Lord's manifold gifts and the workings of the Spirit in the various persons, then we know that small means can accomplish wondrous things in the kingdom of God, provided they are used in the right place and in the Lord's service.

It is a serious matter in the free congregation to elect all its office-bearers, and it is a very burdensome task to be an office-bearer in the free congregation. This applies especially to the pastor and the deacons. What should in particular be the deacon's striving is the imitation of Jesus as helper and comforter in the manifold distresses which congregational life presents. Even if poverty is not precisely in these days the greatest outward distress within our congregations, it is nevertheless far from the case that life has thereby been freed from misery. In a thousand forms the misery of sin confronts us also among ourselves. There is sickness; there is drunkenness; there is family discord; there is unbelief and despair; there are temptations of every kind. Who can count all the forms of sorrow and distress, who can count the tears that are shed, often where no one suspects it? But to enter into the house of sorrow and the dwelling of need, and to receive grace to wipe away a tear, to comfort a heart, to guide one who has gone astray, to admonish one who is disorderly—this is the lovely work which the congregation lays upon its deacons. May the Lord grant that there be many who are fit for this work, many who are faithful in its often heavy exercise.

For the pastoral ministry the diaconate is an indispensable support in our congregations. They can give notice of sickness and spiritual distress here and there; they can be with the sick when the pastor cannot. They can assist in edifying services; they can conduct worship when the pastor is hindered. They can pray with him and give counsel and help where a solitary man may often be both at a loss and helpless. It is immediately evident that it is precisely the same now as in apostolic times: if the pastor is to be the holder of all offices and perform all works in the congregation, then his chief work is neglected; he receives so many tasks that one hinders the other. Such a condition is equally unhealthy for congregation and for pastor; regrettably, congregations in many places would gladly have it so, and in still more places pastors themselves would gladly have it so. Yet many there are also among us who are faithful and discerning pastors, who recognize that the freedom and life of the congregation, and the heavy responsibility proper to the pastoral office, require a division of labor. May they become more and more among us; then they would also, through steady labor for this cause, experience that the congregations even in our day do not lack the gifts of the Spirit for their own edification. But where nothing is done to test the congregation's strength, one may be certain that the strength and the gifts will hide themselves; yet the congregation will incur guilt, because it buried its talent in the earth.

2.5 The Fellowship of the Congregations

Of all the tasks which the free Church in America has to resolve, there is perhaps none so difficult as that of finding the right form for the mutual connection of the congregations. It is something concerning which all are agreed, that the individual congregations must unite with one another in fellowship. This rests in part upon the fact that they have one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God, one Spirit; and this inward bond impels them also to form outward

fellowships. In part it arises from this as well, that there are certain ecclesiastical affairs which can scarcely—indeed, we may readily say, cannot—be advanced without the united strength of several congregations. But on the other hand, throughout the whole of church history it has shown itself that the “Church”—by which we then understand the outward society of many congregations—has almost constantly been such an enemy of the congregation and of its freedom, that this must counsel us to the utmost caution in our manner of proceeding in this matter, lest we once again fall under the old yoke of bondage. To this must be added that in this respect we are far from having the same clear and definite guidance in the Word of God as when the question concerns the nature and right of the individual congregation.

We have already pointed out that the word “Church” is unknown in the New Testament. It would be incorrect if anyone were to draw from this the conclusion that there was therefore no Church in the days of the apostles, and that for this reason we ought to have no Church either. The New Testament uses, as we have already shown, the word “congregation” both of the individual Christian local congregation, which was formed everywhere the Word of God was preached, and of the whole great multitude of Christians, regardless of where they might be found. In such passages as, for example, Matthew 16:18: “Upon this rock I will build my congregation,” the word congregation therefore becomes approximately the same as the Church, which in our Lutheran Confession is described thus: “The Church is the congregation of saints, in which the Gospel is rightly taught and the Sacraments are rightly administered” (Augsburg Confession, Article VII). In this sense there has naturally always been—and perhaps especially in the days of the apostles—a holy, catholic, Christian Church. In the apostolic age, when the congregation stood in the glow of its first love, all congregations were inwardly bound together by a living love both toward one another and toward the Head, Christ, so that they were more than at any later time one people with “one heart and one soul.” There has scarcely ever been greater and more intimate fellowship among all Christians than precisely then.

If, on the other hand, by “the Church” one understands an outward organization of several congregations under a common external constitution, then it must be frankly and openly admitted that we find no such thing in apostolic times. There is no pope, no presiding chairman, no synods or annual assemblies. There is no confession, no constitution; in short, there is absolutely no organized church body existing outside of or above the congregation. The congregation is the only organization that exists.

When, in very recent times, a high-church periodical in Norway has begun to speak of a “common governing body” in Jerusalem, which was said to possess power and authority over all the first Christian congregations, this is so utterly unprovable a claim that it would be an insult to our readers were we to begin demonstrating that no such governing body ever existed. Anyone who has read his New Testament knows how matters stood. The apostles traveled about and preached and founded congregations, and these congregations ordered themselves in approximately the same manner everywhere, with their presbyters and deacons. And the apostle who was their founder bore them upon his heart; and if he saw any danger drawing near to the newborn ones, he was immediately among them, either with speech or with letter, in order to guard the Word of the Lord and preserve the souls from deception. But there is no sign that anything other than the pure and free impulse of love moved him to

speak, or the congregation to listen.

The apostolic office confers no power or authority beyond that which lies in the truth-power of God's Word itself. That power Paul has; that power Peter has; that power every—even the least—believing witness upon earth has, and as stewards of God's gifts they are to be esteemed. But no constitution or form of government has given them that power, nor can any human law take it from them. No other power or honor or right or freedom did the apostles ever demand or ever possess. Where the power of the Spirit and of the Word is great and living, as it was in the apostles, there it is both superfluous and wrong to add anything to it or take anything from it by means of human arrangements and constitutions.

The apostolic Church, then, is the congregations scattered throughout the Roman Empire, bound together not by an outward constitution, but by the unity of the Word and of faith, of the sacraments and of the Spirit. From this the definite conclusion may be drawn that the Church is not an order higher than the congregation, that it is not an authority set over the congregation, that it is not a society of a higher kind than the congregation; for if it were so, it would have had to exist from the very beginning. Later church history cannot add anything new of a higher kind than what already existed; it can only develop and unfold, gather together and unite, what was already present from the beginning. The church body can only be the fellowship of congregations; Church and congregation are of the same kind, and the difference is only this, that by the Church we understand a union of several congregations.

On the other hand, it would be quite wrong if anyone were to suppose that, since the apostolic congregations did not form any outward society united by definite societal laws, it is therefore a superfluous—and therefore a harmful—thing for congregations to unite with one another in such an outward manner.

We find, already before the apostolic congregations, clear signs that a connection between the congregations was both desirable and necessary, and that it therefore had to come forth, in its own time, as a mature fruit of development. We shall here mention only a couple of examples, so as not to become overly prolix.

The first remarkable feature is the deputation sent from the congregation in Antioch to the apostles and the elders in Jerusalem, of which we read in Acts, chapter 15. It was the very great question of the relation of the Gentile Christians to the Mosaic Law that was at stake at that time. The congregation in Antioch was divided and of differing mind in this important matter, and it found that it would gain greater certainty if it could hear the counsel of others. Above all, it desired to hear from Jerusalem how one there, in the very center of the old covenant, thought concerning the ceremonies of the old covenant. A congregational meeting was held in Jerusalem, and after much disputation some of the apostles took the floor, and their judgment became the prevailing one and was adopted by the congregation; wherefore the congregation also sent men with word of this decision to the sister congregation in Antioch.

Another example of how the congregations were in need of one another's support and help we have in the collection of money which, under the leadership of Paul, was undertaken in the congregations for the relief of the brethren in Judea. We find it mentioned in 1 Corinthians 16 and 2 Corinthians 8–9. From these two examples, which are the most prominent and best known, we see that already in apostolic times there was within the congregations a need for

mutual assistance, both in spiritual and in temporal matters. The apostles themselves had, in this period, to serve as a bond between the individual congregations and to knit them together.

If it did not immediately come to an outward and formal union, this was because there were so many both inward and outward reasons which made such a constitutional association impossible. For in the first place each congregation had so exceedingly much work with its own affairs that time would not suffice for much more; and in the second place we must remember that communication between the various parts of the world was not nearly so easy in that time as it is now. For a congregation in Jerusalem to get word to a congregation in Rome would, in the most favorable case, take as much time as it would take for word to go from here to Norway, not to mention that persecution could hinder it altogether; and such circumstances must naturally have contributed greatly to the fact that it neither went easily nor quickly to establish a lasting connection between the congregations among themselves.

We therefore believe that we may dare to assert with full certainty that it is altogether unwarranted to claim that the congregations ought not to form outward associations, since we do not find any such thing in the apostolic age. On the other hand, we emphasize with equal assurance that it is altogether unwarranted to make “the Church,” or the outward union of congregations, into a society of a higher kind, of another nature, than the congregation itself. And we shall briefly show how the notion that the Church is different from and above the congregation has been a pernicious falsehood in the Church of God, which has corrupted both the Church and the congregation wherever it has become dominant in the constitution of the Church.

For it was not long after the days of the apostles before outward persecutions and inward distresses drove the Christians to seek a closer union among themselves; and chiefly on account of doctrinal controversies one began to hold church councils, which were intended to bring clarity and peace to the disputed points. But in the persecutions, in the doctrinal conflicts, and at the church councils, it was the bishops—who at that time were approximately the same as what we call pastors—who especially came to the fore. The persecutors preferred to kill the bishops in order to strike the shepherd and scatter the flock; the bishops took part most prominently in the doctrinal disputes; the bishops could more easily than anyone else attend the church assemblies. Thus it became a natural consequence that all eyes were directed toward them, and they attained a prominent position not only within their own congregation but also round about in all the congregations. They became the representatives of the Church in a manner that no one else was. They became the “leading men” in the Church and the spokesmen of Christianity over against heathendom. They often possessed great learning and had often undergone a long period of study, and thereby they gained that influence which always accompanies insight and clarity.

All this was indeed perfectly in order, and a necessary matter for the outward and inward welfare of the Church. But there soon arose the thought that the bishops were not merely the representatives of the Church, but that they were in fact the Church itself. Under the many difficult and intricate conditions in which the congregations found themselves through doctrinal controversies and other offenses, there arose a continual question: who shall decide the dispute, who shall judge the matter, who can speak with authority, so that peace and

rest may again be established, and the truth may have free course against falsehood? And it lay near at hand to answer: “the Church”; and if one then asked where the Church was, the answer was given: it is the bishops, or the assembly of bishops. And thus the notion soon made its way that the Church was an authority over the congregation; and if one would find this Church, it must be found in the clergy. The Church thus became a new society above the congregation, and it naturally came to consist of the learned and initiated, in contrast to the unenlightened and the unlearned. This is the beginning of the system which ended in the Papacy.

Yet it remained only a thought so long as there was still some real Christian congregation. For life was still strong enough to hinder the corrupting consequences of such views. But then came the time when the Roman Empire had to bow before the Cross, and Constantine passed over to Christianity. The bitter fruit which the Church reaped from this was that the congregation was destroyed. In one great, unceasing stream the pagan masses poured in over the Church; and when one came to look at what had been bound together, the whole field of the Church lay strewn with gravel and sand and great stones, and only here and there did a little blade of grass sprout, dry and withering, between the stones. But instead of the living, little plantings of the Lord, which Christianity had created round about in the Roman Empire, instead of the living congregations built of living stones, there arose great, proud church buildings of dead stones, wherein the great pagan masses could gather together to be “influenced” by the Word which the clergy spoke. The congregation had vanished, and over its grave splendid monuments had been raised; that which from henceforth was called by the congregation’s holy name was, in its great majority, a dead mass, within which the clergy carried on their mission. What the congregation had formerly been in relation to the pagan world, that the clergy now became in relation to the “dead congregations.”

From this time onward the corruption is unceasing. From now on it is an established fact and a manifest reality that the “Church” is one thing, and the Congregation something altogether different. The Church is the clergy; the Congregation is nothing at all. One soon ceases even to speak of it. It is dead and buried. The clergy have inherited all its power, all its right, all its glory, all its divine truth and force. “The people”—they have become “the laity.” It is superfluous to recall how matters proceeded further along this slippery path, until clergy and laity alike, by this false relation, stood equally far removed from Christianity and its power. Only this must always be remembered: that the heaviest responsibility here, as always, rests upon the blind guides of the blind.

The Lutheran Reformation also brought clarity to this question concerning the Church and the Congregation. And for Luther it became a settled certainty that the Church was nothing other than the Congregation. And had it not been for the grace of the Lord, which once more set the light of the Word upon the candlestick, we should even now not have known the name of the Congregation, but would still be clinging to the old Catholic confusion concerning “clergy” and “laity,” which to this day still haunts the minds and hearts of so many.

But as clear and definite as the fundamental thoughts of the Reformation were on this point, and as directly and firmly as they are expressed in the Confessional Writings themselves, so little did the Lutheran Church succeed in carrying the confessed truth through into life. It is of little use here to ask: why? There are many things that speak in mitigation of the

weakness of which the Lutheran Church made itself guilty, and perhaps none of us would have shown greater courage; but the naked truth is this: that the Lutheran Church fastened itself in the arms of the princes, and the princes gladly received the increase of power which they thereby obtained; and what was not given them willingly, that they later took in spite of the Church's protest.

In this way it came to pass that, after a brief kindling of the thought of the Congregation's freedom and of the true nature of the Church, the consciousness of the Congregation again sank down into the depths of sleep and forgetfulness, and once more the old notion of "the Church" arose as an authority over the Congregation — with this sole difference, that it was now the king and the royal officials who were the Church and exercised its power, whereas before it was the pope and the bishops who were the Church and had robbed the Congregation of its power.

We therefore have little ground for boasting in this respect over against the Catholics. For if wrong there must be, there is nevertheless more ecclesiastical thought in having a pope chosen by the men of the Church to govern the Church, than in having a king who often has no greater interest in the Church than a thirst to occupy such a place. It is another matter that kings perhaps have not always mishandled the congregation as much as the popes; this does not arise from the fact that royal dominion is more justified within the Church than papal dominion, but from the fact that in the Protestant lands it does not go over so well to treat the people in the same manner as there where Catholicism has made them into an ignorant mass, and the Lutheran doctrine has within itself a counterweight against excessive abuses. But otherwise the royal power has even fairly frequently treated the congregation in a manner which by no means yields the papal power any notable advantage. In the midst of our enthusiasm for the Lutheran Church's clear assertion of God's truth, we must cast our eyes to the ground with shame when we consider how matters stand with the freedom and right of the congregation in the Lutheran lands. In Norway we have a fairly striking example thereof in the treatment that was meted out to Hauge. If since that time things have become better in our fatherland, this is due not to the king but to the people.

The notion that "the Church" stands over the congregation, and that it may command the congregation according to its own arbitrary will, is to this day the prevailing one among most Norwegian theologians; and it will no doubt take a good deal of time before it becomes a fully settled matter, no longer open to dispute, that the Church is the communion of saints, in which the Gospel is rightly preached and the Sacraments rightly administered, or that the Church is the congregation, and that therefore the congregations' union into what we call a church body always is and remains a fellowship of congregations. No higher fellowship comes into being thereby when the congregations unite, such that the congregations should thus be led into bondage; rather, by forming a fellowship the congregations should unite their powers in order thereby to advance their interests, preserve their freedom, and guard their right.

The misfortune, however, is this: that the history both of the Papal Church and of the State Church stands before us as mighty terrors whenever the question is raised of forming a society; nor is the history of the Norwegian Synod a less frightening example for the formation of societies within the free Church. For although the Norwegian Synod is small and its history short in comparison with the two aforementioned forms of church, it is for that very reason so

much nearer to us, and it furnishes the striking proof that a free Church (that is, independent of the State) and free congregations do not always go hand in hand. No wonder, therefore, if the long history which shows us "the Church," whether Papal or State Church, as the oppressor of the congregation, still works with a paralyzing effect upon the development of a free church society. Yet on the other hand we must rejoice deeply that we have this history to look back upon, and are therefore exceedingly cautious and willingly somewhat slow in our development; for the dearly bought lesson that lies therein shall, by the grace of God, become for us a strong guidance in our future work.

We may gather the result of our consideration into these two propositions: that the Christian congregations, by their very nature, must form societies and therefore always have formed societies; but that, on the other hand, the society of congregations, or the Church, is not a new authority over the congregation, but the voluntary union of congregations for mutual help and strengthening.

It is a thing known to us all, that union gives strength; and there is surely no one who does not perceive that if the Church of God on earth can attain greater strength through the union of congregations, then it is not only their right, but also their duty, to form a society.

But the question is how this increased strength may accrue to the congregation and to no other; how the union may become such that it truly works toward the same goal which is the congregation's own, namely, the edification of the congregation upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, and the spreading of the Kingdom of God over the whole earth; for upon these two things all congregational labor turns, and if the society does not serve this end, then it has no significance for the congregation.

Yet we add at once, that the strength which is strong enough to do good is always also mighty enough to do harm. If therefore the society is to be of benefit, then precisely the same thing is required in the society as in the individual congregation: the Word of the Lord and the Spirit of the Lord must be leading and reigning in all things; otherwise all becomes harm instead of benefit. But when congregations now form the fellowship, then it must first and foremost be grounded in unity of faith and confession, and thereafter there must be certain ecclesial aims which are sought through the union. Without a common ground upon which to stand, no church fellowship can be built, and without common aims it can have no permanence.

The common ground which is to unite us as Lutheran congregations is the Lutheran Confession; the common goal toward which we must strive is the congregation's own edification and the spread of the Word unto the end of the world. These two tasks alone are those which God's Word sets before the congregation, and the fellowship cannot aim at anything else; otherwise there will continually arise a misdirected labor, a false goal, and a false and destructive striving.

Yet one principal question must still be pointed out before we proceed further, namely this question: Who shall form such a fellowship? It is so deeply ingrained and firmly rooted a prejudice among many Northerners, that it is only the pastors who are workers in the Lord's vineyard, and that the "laity" are but a dead mass, that to many it seems altogether natural that, just as the pastors are to carry out all other labor in the congregation, so it is also they who are to form the fellowship, they who are to constitute the church body. If this

superstition is to be removed, then one must begin at the root; it must be preached again and again that every Christian is a priest, that every Christian is called to be a worker, that no one is a Christian unless he takes the most living part in the work of edifying the congregation, according as God grants him the gift of the Spirit and the measure of faith. If it were first to be rightly and vividly acknowledged, by the light of God's Spirit, that every member of the congregation is called to perform a service for the Lord, that every member of the congregation individually ought to be a living stone in the Lord's temple, that every single Christian is a witness of the Lord upon the earth, then it would soon also be acknowledged that it is the congregations which are to form the fellowship, if the fellowship is to be an evangelical fellowship, and not a catholic dominion of priests.

Only there where the congregations truly awaken and form fellowship—only there will there arise a true church body; only there will there be the right goal, only there the right labor; only there will there be that breadth and weight in the work which God's Word itself describes; only there can there, in the long run, be question of striving unceasingly toward this goal: the coming of God's kingdom in us and around us. Therefore it is also only there, where the congregations truly form fellowship, that there will be the right permanence and firmness in the fellowship.

The fact of the matter is this: however much an association of pastors may, for a time, be wholly and entirely devoted to its calling, however much it may uplift a community to have none but Spirit-driven men as pastors, yet it is a sorrowful experience that such times are both few and short, and that therefore there soon come times when the lust for dominion, for gain, and for honor becomes a stronger driving force than the Spirit of God and the call of Christ—now in fewer, now in more. At times the community is then torn asunder by strife and factions; at times the whole is swept away in an unceasing stream of corruption. There is a church body that has attempted this; it is the Roman Catholic Church. It soon made the experience that the priesthood degenerated; then it resorted to associations of laymen in monastic orders; but these too degenerated in the same manner. There is only one association that has the promise of standing forever, when it is built upon the Rock; it is the congregation of God. And if the church body is not formed from the congregations, then it will never stand amid the storms of time and against the devil's cunning assaults.

Short as Norwegian-American church history is, it may nevertheless already offer to the attentive observer many proofs of the corrupting nature of the fact that the formation of church bodies in almost all cases has been almost exclusively a matter of the clergy. In part the church bodies are drawn, consciously or unconsciously, toward the old church road; in part they hover in an unbroken danger of being torn apart and split asunder by personal passions and clerical quarrels. There is presumably no need of any further demonstration of either the one or the other; let each church body lay its hand upon its own breast and see whether it is not true.

It is therefore certain that if we Norwegian Lutherans in America, few as we are, are truly to be able to form a free church body, then it must more and more come to this, that it is the congregations which form the church body. Toward this end there must be labor, early and late, by pastors and by members of the congregations, by laymen and by the learned, in a true brotherhood and in full confidence. And we are more than sufficiently many, if we truly

serve this goal as a calling from the Lord, and go to the work with that strength which the Lord willingly gives to those who follow His call and stake their lives upon it.

We have already mentioned both the foundation upon which such a fellowship must be built and the goal toward which it strives. It is proper at once to say that when it is declared of such a fellowship that it rests upon the ground of the Lutheran Confession, this is because the congregation builds upon God's Word, and upon that alone; and it thus already stands, through the Word and the Sacraments, in fellowship with the whole Christian Church throughout the entire world, which is built upon the same foundation. But when Lutheran congregations are to form fellowship with one another, then the common bond which unites precisely this fellowship is the Lutheran Confession.

All Christian congregations are agreed upon the great common foundation of the whole Church, God's Word and His Sacraments; the Lutheran congregations which unite themselves into a fellowship are also agreed in the truth that the Lutheran Church has attained the deepest and fullest understanding of the content of God's Word in its Confession. As long as Christ's Church has been upon the earth, it has always had to contend with falsehood and error; and just as it lies in the very nature and character of faith that it must bring forth testimony and confession, so it also belongs necessarily to true and genuine faith that it not only bears witness to the truth, but also bears witness against error, against falsehood. Thus it is also the case that the Lutheran Church, through its Confession, bears witness both for the truth which it has recognized, and against the error which it has seen within Christendom; and it is this Confession which is the bond of union of the Lutheran Church fellowship.

It is therefore a necessary requirement of Lutheran congregations which wish to form fellowship that they truly, and with full conviction, adhere to the simple Lutheran Confession. When, in the Norwegian Synod, one has wished to go beyond this and to demand agreement also in doctrinal propositions which go far beyond, and in part far away from, the Lutheran Confession, this is a deviation which doubtless arises from the fact that the entire fellowship is so essentially a clerical fellowship that it forgets that the congregation cannot make its own confession, and cannot adopt doctrines, which a handful of pastors agree upon at an annual meeting or a pastors' conference. That which is to bind the congregations together must be the old truth, well tested in the living experience of the Church, which through catechetical instruction has also become the personal experience and spiritual possession of each individual Christian. To attempt to bind any other bond upon the congregation and the congregations—this becomes bondage and inward untruth, however much one may paint upon the chains: "This is the pure doctrine." The whole matter is and remains a complete misunderstanding, both of the significance of the Confession and of the nature of the congregation and of the fellowship.

If there is, then, to be an outward church fellowship, there must be a definite and recognizable Confession which binds the fellowship together; and if a congregation cannot give its assent to this, then it cannot belong to the fellowship either. For there is then lacking that inward unity which is necessary if an outward unity is to endure.

If it is now granted that we must be in agreement concerning the Lutheran Confession,

or—which is precisely the same—our Lutheran Catechism, then it is thereby also said that the free church fellowship has no right to exclude from itself any congregation that holds seriously and firmly to this Confession, even though such a congregation should be unwilling to acknowledge opinions and doctrinal views which either an individual man or a plurality within the fellowship embraced and regarded as matters of controversy. There must, in a fellowship which would avoid becoming a party, be a renunciation of all coercion, and there must be full freedom and equal right for every Christian, and for every Christian congregation, to expound and interpret the Word of God according to the measure of its faith and the gift of the Spirit; for the opinion of a single man, or of an accidental majority, concerning a point of doctrine always becomes a straitjacket whenever it is made binding upon all by the bonds of fellowship.

It is necessary, if the fellowship is to be preserved in the truth, that there be room for personal conviction, room for personal experience, room—in a word—for life; and therefore it must be borne with, even though it is an imperfection belonging to the conditions of the Church in its state of conflict, that within a fellowship there are differing opinions in many matters, and that there is open access to the exchange of views, without one party at once beginning with judgments of heresy against the other and expulsion from the fellowship. This relation also can be attained only through a genuine congregational fellowship; for clerical societies have always shown themselves wholly unfit to preserve that balance which the congregation possesses by the fact that it ever rests with calmness and faithfulness in the Word and the Sacraments, and asks first and foremost for life in the simplicity of the Catechism, not for lofty and grand doctrine. Therefore it tolerates no departure from the Catechism or the Confession; but in return it is not so narrow as to pronounce judgments of heresy like one who, filled with an imagination of his own wisdom, scents heresy in everyone who is not of his opinion in every matter.

Just as important as it is to be fully clear concerning the foundation of the ecclesial fellowship, so that it is made neither too broad nor too narrow, so equally urgent is it to be fully clear concerning the goal that is set before us; for only thereby can we be preserved from corrupting directions and from the most painful experiences. And only when we have the right goal can we also, with clarity, choose the right means. That goal for which we labor together must likewise determine what is to be a matter of the society and what is to be a matter of the congregation.

We have said that the goal is the congregation's own edification and the spread of the kingdom of God over the whole earth. We cannot adopt any lesser or any narrower goal.

It is evident that all societies will claim that they pursue this goal; and if they truly did so, then all churchly conflict would rest either upon mere misunderstandings or upon disagreement over trifles and useless questions. But alas, we often find even of ecclesial bodies that "they say it well, but do it not." It therefore becomes necessary more closely to explain what we mean when we say that the goal is the edification of the congregation into a living temple for the Lord, or the growth of the congregation upward unto its Head, Christ.

It is not our meaning that the edification of the congregation into God's temple consists in an outward constitution, whereby the Church is transformed into a well-ordered assembly of

people who bow to certain outward church laws, and by a determined external order set each one in his place from the highest to the lowest. For with all such outward order one may indeed set a splendid building in place; but it lacks—everything; for it lacks life. God does not dwell therein. It is then not the Spirit of God who joins the whole together, but outward commands and ordinances.

Nor does the edification of the congregation consist in this, that it establishes higher and higher dignities in its midst, beginning with priests who constitute a higher kind of people than “the laity,” then setting bishops over the priests, archbishops over the bishops, and finally a pope over the whole. This too is an “edification,” indeed a sheer “piling up,” until it becomes “a tower whose top reaches unto heaven”; but it would be quite peculiar to call this “the edification of the congregation.” It is indeed growth upward, but not unto Christ; it is self-exaltation.

Neither does the edification of the Congregation consist in this, that the Congregation puts on a uniform, so that the congregations become like small troops in an army. If this uniform becomes nothing more than an outward garment, which otherwise has nothing to do with the man himself, then it may indeed serve to produce a well-ordered party that presents a fair appearance before men; but when the Lord comes to muster the army, there may perhaps be none whom He knows; for His mark is not the outward, but the inward, the holy seal upon God’s Congregation: “The Lord knoweth them that are his.” It is precisely the same whether the uniform is a particular form of doctrine or a particular form of life; whether it consists in a lesson that is learned by rote, or in a habit that is practiced. All such “edifications” of the Church and the Congregation we ought rather to combat.

The edification and growth of the Congregation is the work of the Word and of the Spirit; it therefore cannot be promoted, but is hindered, by all human thought and all human work that does not have its ground in the Word and is not driven by the Spirit.

The edification of the Congregation into God’s temple, and its growth up unto the Head, is first and foremost wrought by God’s Word and His Sacraments, and by nothing else. Therefore it must be the highest striving of the Congregation and of the fellowship to preserve these pure and unadulterated. Faith is the proper fruit of the means of grace, and it is that wondrous power which separates the Congregation from the world and binds it to God. Through it Christ becomes ours, and the image of God is renewed within the heart. Christ takes up His dwelling in us, and the Congregation becomes the new race of God’s children, which indeed walks despised and smitten, yet also liberated and saved through a world held in bondage. This, then, is what we mean by the edification of the Congregation: its renewal through faith and its holy union with Christ, its growth in purity and virtues, its increase in freedom and life.

In this growth there takes place, through the power of the Word and of faith, both a continual purification and a continual sanctification. The Congregation is cleansed from sin, and indeed also separates from itself those who once clung to the Congregation, but more and more closed their hearts to the Lord’s Word. The Congregation is sanctified, in that it is ever more deeply immersed in the Word and penetrates into its depths, is permeated by the life of God, united ever more inwardly with Christ, and more and more presents itself as the race of

God's children, where there is the freedom of the Spirit and the love of the Spirit poured forth.

To this inward edification the outward answers. Thus the congregation becomes the dwelling of God in the Spirit, the city of God, which is perfectly fair, perfectly ordered, where there is no disturbance. God's house is the home of order, where each knows his place; God's city is the fortress of peace, where all things have their proper rule; God's people are a host of warriors, where each hero stands at his post and on his watch. Yet the chief matter is always this: that the inward edification in Spirit and faith of God's people must be the first, and the outward form must follow therefrom.

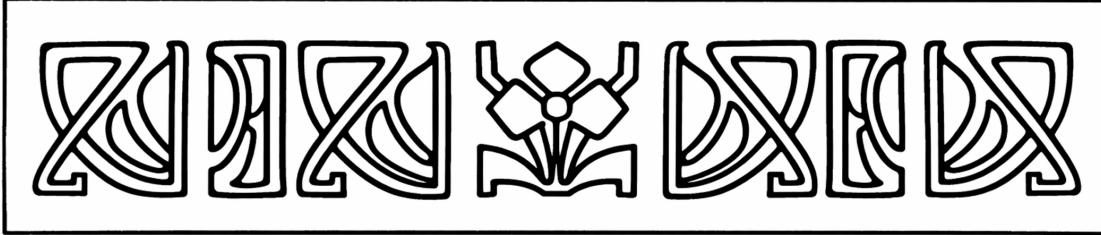
Ah yes, you will say, but this goal we never attain in the land of corruption. Yes, that is true; it is heavy. Yet herein also lie the power and the victory, that we have a calling, a goal, a crown that is lifted high above corruption and grave and death. Herein lies the strength of the Church and of the fellowship, that it boldly lays hold of its anchor within the veil. There first is the harbor, there is the rest, there is the crown. If the goal be not so high, it is not fit for God's Church. She must lift her gaze so far and so high that it reaches beyond all the greatness of the earth and all the falsehood of the world. If she takes to herself a lower goal, then she perishes with the world, then she is lost with the world, then she falls with the goal which she pursues here below. The Church strives toward the goal of becoming God's people; but John says that this goal is reached only then, when the new Jerusalem descends from heaven as a bride adorned for her bridegroom; then shall the tabernacle of God be among the children of men, and he shall be our God, and we shall be his people.

If the Church has set the right goal for her own edification, then thereby she has also the right goal for her work outward. If we cannot rest until we reach the heavenly Jerusalem, and only then deem the Church's task here fulfilled, when God dwells in his people in everlasting glory, then neither can we halt until the gospel of the kingdom has been preached to all nations. Further and further onward, farther and farther out must the message of salvation press, until the testimony of the crucified fills the earth, until it sounds from sea to sea, from pole to pole.

God's Kingdom overthrows all the kingdoms of the world; it fills the whole earth. Every Christian community must bear within itself this nature of God's Kingdom, otherwise it is of no use in the Lord's household. One often calls the work "a great community," and it is right to call such work great, if it is not a spiritual work, a work in the spirit of the world and with the world's means. Yet it also belongs to God's calling in the lands to labor in the inward love of Christ for the salvation of all men. That community which settles down in the thought that we are many enough; that which, in particularity and pride, will have no others with it than those whom it can mark with its own mark and stamp as its own; that community which will have only those with it who possess a certain stature and a certain experience and a certain learning, which it itself has taken as the measure and standard of Christianity; that community which will not cast its net as wide as the sea and draw the net, even though there should be rotten fish in the catch—that community does not have the true love of God and the perfect mind of Christ. Toward the crown and out to the ends of the world the Christian community, like the Christian congregation, casts its gaze; and even though it knows that death lies between us and the crown, and that heathendom and the

coldness of the world lie between us and the goal of victory, yet it is calm and unafraid—in faith.

He who sets himself a small goal becomes small; he who takes a great goal becomes great by his goal; but he who dares to stake everything upon the eternal goal, who dares to give up all earthly goals in order to attain the heavenly, he becomes greater than all. The Prince of our salvation has, through the suffering of death, bound to himself a name above every name; and he is also the one who leads his children into the same glory, if they dare all, surrender all, sacrifice all in order to win him.



3 Do You Want a Congregation?

*Source: Editorial articles in *Folkebladet* for September 29, 1897; March 16, 23, and 30, 1898. — Ed.*

This section appears on pages 182–191 of the original volume. — Present Ed.

3.1 Is It Pride?

In “Lutheraneren,” J. R. S. writes: “Yes, I understand that it is a lawfully great portion of tempting pride and censorious judgment when the ‘Free Church’ now makes it its watchword: ‘Do you want a congregation?’—as though there had been no congregation among us before, but one first had to be brought to us by the emissaries of the ‘Free Church.’”⁵

J. R. S. maintains that it is pride and censorious judgment to ask: Do you want a congregation? because such a question would only then be reasonable if there had previously been no congregation among us.

By this, J. R. S. can of course not mean that in one out of a hundred—or in ten out of a hundred—places there exists a congregation. For what existed in some places could not, after all, help the other places where it did not exist.

Or if we were to ask a sick man: Wilt thou be made whole?—could the sick man then put on an offended countenance and answer: Thou speakest as though there were no healthy people among us?

J. R. S. must, if indeed he means anything other than to be coarse, mean this: that the question, Will ye have congregation? is superfluous everywhere, because everywhere there is congregation among us. There is no need for change, for everywhere among the majority of the people the congregation is truly congregation; it answers to its name; it is mere “pride and censoriousness” if anyone thinks that the congregations are not at all—perhaps never—everything they ought to be and could be.

⁵“Lutheraneren” of September 8, 1897. The quotation is found in an article entitled “Compulsion or Vitality,” which forms a reply to an editorial article in *Folkebladet* of September 1, 1897 bearing the same title. The question, “Do you want a congregation?” was raised during the discussion of the topic “Congregation and Congregational Life” at the annual meeting of the Augsburg Synod in Fargo, N. Dak., in 1896, and in a certain way became “a charged phrase.” — Ed.

Then it must surely also be “pride and censoriousness,” what stands written in our catechism concerning “the Christians”:

“The name indeed they all have, but the Spirit and manner of the anointing most of them lack.”

The world has always fended off the demand for true and living Christianity precisely with this word of the majority: We have all this already in order; it is only pride and censoriousness that make some think that we are not all good Christians together.

This is the false prophecy of the worldly church, at all times and in all places like unto itself. Here is peace and no danger. Our Christianity is good, our doctrine is pure, our Christians are good Christians, and our congregations are good congregations. Dear people, sleep in peace, sleep in peace!

But what says the true prophet? From the Lord he says with piercing earnestness: Ye heal the hurt of the daughter of my people lightly, saying, Peace, peace; when there is no peace. And of himself the true prophet says: Oh that my head were waters, and mine eyes a fountain of tears, that I might weep day and night for the slain of the daughter of my people.

Let us look a little at the meaning of that for which the Free Church labors; then perhaps it will show itself that the question after congregation is not unjustified in our midst, and that there is more pride in boasting that all is in order than in acknowledging that we are sorely lacking in being what we ought to be.

Perhaps, if J. R. S. were allowed to see what congregation is, he would no longer come with foolish jests about “the Free Church’s emissaries” being supposed to bring it along with them. He knows well that there is no one who believes anything of the sort; but we do indeed believe that the Gospel brings it with it, wherever it is permitted to do its work in full.

The Church is the Body of Christ, filled with His Spirit and His Life, so that it both represents Christ’s own foundation and performs His work. “Now ye are the body of Christ, and members in particular.”

We will mention no more than this one thing in this connection. It is this, namely, which cannot exist without “by the Holy Ghost.” It is the Spirit of God who works this miracle, that in the darkness of the world the Church is light; in the corruption of the world it is salt. It is the Spirit of God who makes the Church a gathering of laborers in the Lord’s great harvest, where each and every one is active in the great work of love: to gather in from the world’s perdition unto the Savior and His Kingdom.

Do you want Congregation? Does this question signify something evil? Or is there anyone who can answer: We have enough of that already? Ah no. We have not had enough of this yet. Nor can we here on earth ever have enough of it, or even too much. For the question plainly means this: Do you who in name and in form are a Church also desire the Church’s true Spirit and Life and Work, so that you are no longer merely paying members of an association which maintains church, pastor, and graveyard, but truly are spiritual members of the Body of Christ, active in His work of love upon the earth?

If anyone would answer: We already have this sufficiently, does that not mean that he is satisfied with the form without the life, and content with the letter without the Spirit?

For he who has begun to look into the truth of the divine rebuke: "I know thy works, that thou hast a name that thou livest, and art dead," will surely acknowledge that it is most necessary to ask after the Church in spirit and in truth among us.

And when we think of how many there are among our churches and church-members who take firm comfort precisely from this cradle-song: All is in order, sleep in peace—then we are almost tempted to beg *Lutheraneren* and the Majority and J. R. S. at last to put an end to it.

The matter is this, that we stand in our ecclesiastical development directly before a great crisis, in which this is the question that must be answered: Is the old state-church order truly answering to the demand and need of our time and our land and our circumstances, or not? It may be all the same whether one holds the old church order to be sufficient or not in the old lands and the old times. We ask: Can the Lutheran Church solve her task here among us by continuing in the old tracks?

We say no. It is necessary that we awaken and recognize that there is need of a congregation. It is necessary that there be the participation of all in the work; that there be earnest renunciation of the world, living love, burning zeal for the salvation of souls—not merely among the ministers, but among all the members of the congregation.

Spiritual interest must be awakened, nourished, and developed in all. It must not be so that, for example, the heathen mission is a minister's affair, which the minister presses upon the congregation as a demand for sacrifice once a year or twice; but that it becomes dear and precious to each individual member of the congregation, from the child to the grey-haired elder, so that they all love the cause, live for it, pray for it, suffer for it, read about it, save for it, and offer for it. All, all at work for the cause of Jesus Christ, so that the minister's task becomes that of encouraging, urging, guiding, and instructing. Then the congregation has its true character; then the work is congregational.

Oh, how much greater power there would be if we became a congregation!

Has J. R. S. heard of Hermannsburg, where Harms was made an instrument to bring forth a congregation? Is it everywhere thus among us? If not, why not?

When we have then seen a very little grain of what the New Testament means by congregation, do we not then have the right to speak and testify concerning this matter? Is it pride to ask the people whether they do not desire to have it as the New Testament presents the Christian community on earth?

Surely it cannot be more prideful than to ask people whether they will be Christians. That does not mean that we can make them Christians; but it means that God can. So also with the congregation.

By the force of the old church order it has here among our Norwegian people been asked again and again: Will you have a minister? Will you have your children baptized? Will you

have the Supper administered? Will you have the Word of God preached? Will you have the dead laid in the earth?

This was not pride, nor judgmentalism; it did not even touch the conscience directly. But when all this is taken together into a single question, and we do not merely ask whether something ought to be done for the people, but whether the people themselves will join in and do something for the power and forward movement of the Kingdom of God—then it is to be called pride and judgmentalism. Was it not the two-edged sword that touched the sleeping mind and the dead heart? Or why this bitterness?

What in politics is called popular liberty is in the Church called congregation. It signifies the participation of all in the work and the development, and in the sorrows and joys that follow therefrom. Is it truly wrong to agitate for that cause, even in the form of a question?

3.2 Will ye have congregation?

It has been called an irritating question; we would rather call it an uplifting question.

It is a good that is offered, and a gift which none can take except the one who receives it.

But every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and cometh down from the Father of lights, with whom is no variableness, neither shadow of turning.

Therefore congregation also is a gift of God, a good and perfect gift, which God gives to those who have room for it.

For the congregation was not, before the Holy Spirit was poured out. The day the Spirit came upon the disciples in the upper room, those disciples became congregation.

If anyone says that they have congregation, but they do not have the Spirit, what profit is there in that? Is it God's congregation?

If there is to be congregation among us, then we must receive the Spirit from God, so that we may become one body and one Spirit, a dwelling of God in the Spirit; so that if the Spirit is God's gift, then the congregation is likewise.

Is it necessary for us to receive the Spirit? Or is it ever possible for anyone here on earth to have the Spirit in such a manner and to such a degree that he has no need to receive Him? All who have ever had the Spirit know this: that we have only so much Spirit as we receive. But God giveth the Holy Spirit to them that ask Him.

Of all gifts this gift is the greatest. Why, then, should it be irritating to ask people whether they will have it?

But those who answer: Yes, we gladly desire Spirit and congregation, ought to consider what this entails. For the Spirit of God brings with Him all good—righteousness, peace, joy, and all blessed fruits; but the Spirit of God also brings with Him conflict with the flesh, enmity with the world, the raging wrath of the devil and of hell. The Spirit of God is a Spirit who drives to the following of Christ upon the path of suffering and of the cross, and who constrains, by the power of God's love, to seek after that which is lost and to labor for the salvation of souls.

Therefore the congregation is no fellowship of sloth and ease. It is the living, contending, and suffering fellowship of love.

As the Head, so the body; as the body, so the members. If Christ has loved, labored, sacrificed, and suffered, then His body and bride must be prepared for the same. To love Him, to labor with Him, to sacrifice oneself for Him, to suffer with Him—this is the congregation’s condition and calling.

Is it then so foolish to ask: Will you have congregation? Or is it so certain that we may content ourselves with the sleep-inducing speech: We have congregation already; there is no need for anyone to come to us and speak of congregation. It has been the custom of the sleeping congregation in all ages to comfort itself with the thought that all is in order. But it has always been a false comfort, and therefore the Scripture says: When they shall say, Peace and safety! then sudden destruction cometh upon them.

Wisely, the question is justified now as at all times. And we dare to add: it is all the more justified, inasmuch as there is all the greater occasion to obtain congregation. The outward hindrances which barred the congregation’s unfolding and manifestation have been swept away; God has set an open door before His people. There is a time of visitation among us, when the Lord is to be found by those who seek Him, and is near to those who call upon Him. It seems to us that never has the question been more timely:

Will you have congregation?

3.3 What is congregation?

It is indeed a delight to be permitted to ask this. For the whole New Testament aims precisely at this: that there should come to be congregation.

God sent the Son, that He might present unto Himself a glorious Church, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but holy and blameless.

God sent the Spirit to create the Church, that Christ’s suffering and resurrection might have their perfect fruit in her.

Christ’s Apostles labored and suffered for this cause, that there should be a Church of Christ in every place where the Gospel made its advance.

Therefore in the New Testament everything concerns the great mystery, which is Christ and the Church. And therefore it might seem that every child in Christendom ought to know what the Church is.

And it is simple enough, as is all God’s Gospel, if only we were not blinded in our unclean hearts and sinful thoughts.

It is the old story: we will not acknowledge our frailty; therefore we simply insist that we already are all that we ought to be, long since. We “have kept the commandments from our youth up”; we were good Christians before and have no need to become so; we are already Church, and require no change in that matter.

But if we are already Church, then it is incomprehensible what the Word of God means by Church. The one does not agree with the other; and since we will not correct ourselves according to God's Word, then God's Word must needs correct itself according to us; and we behave like poor cobblers who, when the shoe does not fit the foot, would make the foot fit the shoe.

How men have twisted and turned and distorted the Scripture and the theological conscience, to make fit together what does not fit!

These are deep matters and a great mystery, it is true; and yet it is "revealed unto babes." The Church is the Body of Christ.

That this is a divine mystery revealed in the Gospel is altogether plain. And yet there is no Christian soul who does not understand that the Body of Christ is there, and only there, where the Spirit and life of Christ are.

This therefore means that the Church is a people of believing men, born of the Spirit of God, in order that the Spirit of God may also dwell in them.

But faith both comes from "hearing" and is sustained by it. The Word of God and the Sacraments are the means for the Church's sustenance of life; therefore they are used in the Church by great and small alike.

From the Spirit of God comes the love of God. Therefore the congregation is a people in the self-sacrifice of love no less than in the devotion and rest of faith.

Therefore there is no congregation without gifts of grace with which to work and to serve; for love could not be, if it were not allowed to act. But where love comes forth in work, there the gift of grace is given.

Much lies in this, that the congregation is a people in faith and love. Herein lies the chief difference between the world and the congregation. All worldly men cleave to the visible things and seek their own. Believing men cleave to the invisible things and seek the glory of God and the good of their neighbor for time and eternity.

And when we consider this and seek to measure reality by it, then we begin to understand what is meant by worldly and world-conformed congregations. For if this is the nature of the world, to strive after earthly things and to seek its own, then indeed there is much worldliness in all our congregations. And if this is the true nature of the congregation, to strive after the invisible and eternal things and to live for the cause of God's kingdom and the salvation of souls, then there is not very much of the congregation's true being in our congregations.

Can it be otherwise? — We will answer with another question: Should it not be otherwise? We know that it can be otherwise, if the unconverted are converted, if the sleeping awake, if the awakened go into the vineyard and labor.

We know that it can be otherwise, if only it becomes otherwise with each one of us.

Therefore it is right to say that there can be no congregation without awakening. If sleeping congregations are to become awakened congregations, then they must be awakened. But this is unpleasant and painful, so that many worldly members of the congregation are deeply

offended. And it often comes to pass that death stands life so hard against in the worldly congregation, that either life is stifled again, or else the awakened are driven out.

Woe unto the world because of offences!

When therefore just now our church people are being shaken in the sieve, and the question is asked in many places: Shall we awake and become a congregation of God? then it behooves each congregation to consider what belongs to its peace; for it goes ill with that congregation which “knoweth not the time of its visitation.”

3.4 The Body of Christ

When the Church is the body of Christ, this shows both how infinitely condescending He is who is Lord of all, and at the same time how infinitely exalted is the calling wherewith the Church is called. It also lays the very greatest responsibility upon all who bear the Church’s holy name.

For what, then, does Christ will with His body? What does the vine will with its branches? What is it that is promised?

It says itself that Christ wills to give His body Spirit and life and blessedness and glory. It says itself that the vine wills to give its branches sap and strength. To be within the Church and not receive Spirit and life from Christ—that is formalism and hypocrisy. If anyone would be a true member of the Church, he must be crucified with Christ in order to live with Him. Dead to the world, living in the power of Christ’s resurrection—such is the right position within the Church.

Yet with this the matter is surely not finished. The soul dwells in the body in order that it may give itself to expression and be active through the body. The invisible and ascended Jesus lives in His Church in order still to be revealed and to work in the world. The branches upon the vine are not only to live; they are also to bear fruit.

From this we gain some insight into the Church’s high calling, and why it is so serious a matter to walk worthy of this calling.

The Church is to reveal Christ in the world, so that souls may see Him, know Him, believe Him, and live by Him. The Church is to do Christ’s works in the world, so that His love and mercy may be felt through the whole course and conduct of His Church. It is not merely a question of being a living branch, but of being a fruitful branch.

A number of people—especially pastors and theologians—so easily absolve themselves from this calling and responsibility. They say: yes, of course the Church reveals Christ in the world; that is why it has a pastor and the preaching of God’s Word and the administration of the sacraments. When the Church has these things, then its calling and task are fulfilled; and this costs so much per year, paid in ready money or in usable goods.

Ah yes, it was simple enough—far too simple, low, fleshly, and heathenish! It is altogether true that without Word and Sacraments the congregation cannot fulfill its calling. But there is a better way for Christians to fulfill their duty of witness than to hire a man to do it

in their stead. The congregation does not have a pastor in order that it itself may escape from its Christian duty and lay it upon the pastor. Rather, the congregation has a pastor so that the pastor may encourage, admonish, and spur the congregation on to true and living Christianity in heart, word, and deed.

Alas, it is perhaps not entirely unheard of that people have a pastor in order that they may sleep securely, sin securely, and die in false peace. And it happens, sadly, that there are pastors who do not see the people's danger and therefore strengthen them in sleep and sin by a dead preaching; but thereby neither the task of the pastor nor that of the congregation is fulfilled.

The whole congregation, and every single member of it, is bound to walk worthily of Christ's Gospel; and the whole congregation, and each of its members, is called to manifest Christ in the world by proclaiming his excellencies, who called them out of darkness into his marvelous light.

If, therefore, there are found among us organizations which call themselves congregations and dare to take God's Word and Sacraments into use, then the responsibility of such organizations is as great and as holy as the name by which they have called themselves. Woe unto them if they have taken the name and do not answer to it. Worst of all, if they not only themselves lay claim to being a congregation, but even forbid others to be a congregation in that place where, under the name of congregation, they also claim the congregation's right.

This has often been attempted among our people.

This, then, is the chief question: Do our congregations, as a general rule, correspond to the calling that lies in the name, the Body of Christ?

Is Christ manifested in the world through the testimony and walk of the congregations?

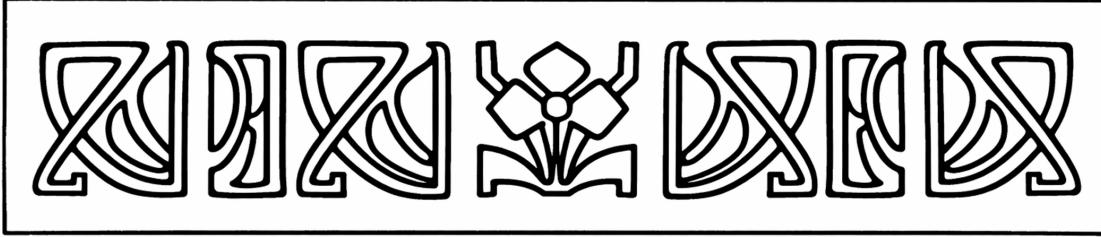
Do they do the works of Christ and nothing other than the works of Christ?

Do they bear all such fruits, and only such fruits, as are well-pleasing to God?

Or is there need of some change?

We indeed hear a great clamor from those who grumble and say: Here all is in order; here no change is needed, neither with us nor with our congregations.

But we also hear a sigh unto the Lord from the breast of those who long for congregation in Spirit and in truth: Pour out the Spirit upon us and upon our congregations, that we might become what we ought to be.



4 Sixth Section

As a conclusion to this volume, there has in this section been included a series of lectures which all—with the exception of the last—were delivered at the annual meetings of the Augsburg Confessors and the Lutheran Free Church. The final lecture—The Unity of Believers—was written for a church gathering in Hatton, North Dakota, in the winter of 1907. As it was not possible for the author to be personally present, the lecture was read aloud by one of the participants in the meeting. It was later published in “Luthersk Tidskrift.” —Ed.

4.1 Congregation and Congregational Life

Source: Report of the Fourth Meeting of the Augsburg Confessors, 1896, pp. 59–70. —Ed.

This section appears on pages 344–353 of the original volume. — Present Ed.

The Congregation

“Who hath heard such a thing? Who hath seen such things? Shall a land be born in one day, or shall a nation be brought forth at once?” Isa. 66:8.

The wondrous work which Isaiah thus proclaims is the birth of the Church through the outpouring of the Spirit on the feast of Pentecost. The Church did not come into being through any human exertion of strength or clever calculation; it came as a gift of grace from God, a glorious fruit of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ; for the ascended Savior fulfilled the promise which He gave the disciples before His death, concerning the Comforter whom He would send, and the Spirit of truth whom He would give them; and when the Spirit came, and when the storm rushed with mighty power, and when tongues as of fire rested upon each one of the disciples, and when the living testimony of the Spirit concerning the great works of God resounded in the many tongues—then the Church stood there, “a whole nation born at once.”

But the Congregation is not without its preparation. This new “dispensation in the fulness of times,” this “mystery of Christ,” was hidden in God from the foundation of the world, and was the object of His eternal counsel, His “good pleasure which He purposed in Himself.”

Therefore it was also proclaimed and promised by the prophets throughout the whole Old Testament age; “for the Lord GOD doeth nothing, but He revealeth His secret unto His servants the prophets” (Amos 3:7). From Moses to Malachi the voice of promise sounds forth

through all the prophets, concerning the day that is to come, when the dwelling of God shall be with men, and He will dwell with them, and they shall be His people, and God Himself shall be with them and be their God.

It is of this day that David sings in his last words: “And he shall be as the light of the morning, when the sun riseth, even a morning without clouds; as the tender grass springing out of the earth by clear shining after rain” (2 Sam. 23:4). And again: “Thy people shall be willing in the day of Thy power; in the beauties of holiness from the womb of the morning: Thou hast the dew of Thy youth” (Psalm 110:3).

Of the congregation of God the prophet Micah speaks, when he says in the fifth chapter: “And the remnant of Jacob shall be in the midst of many people as a dew from the LORD, as the showers upon the grass, that tarrieth not for man, nor waiteth for the sons of men. And the remnant of Jacob shall be among the Gentiles in the midst of many people as a lion among the beasts of the forest, as a young lion among the flocks of sheep: who, if he go through, both treadeth down, and teareth in pieces, and none can deliver.”

— Of the congregation Zephaniah prophesies, when he says in the third chapter: “I will also leave in the midst of thee an afflicted and poor people, and they shall trust in the name of the LORD.” And to this afflicted and poor people it is said: “The LORD is in the midst of thee; thou shalt not see evil any more. The LORD thy God in the midst of thee is mighty; He will save; He will rejoice over thee with joy; He will rest in His love; He will joy over thee with singing.”

Time would fail us, were we to recount all the good words with which the Lord has proclaimed the congregation in the Old Testament; only this word of Zechariah shall we set down here:

“Awake, O sword, against My shepherd, and against the man that is My fellow, saith the LORD of hosts: smite the shepherd, and the sheep shall be scattered: and I will turn Mine hand upon the little ones. And it shall come to pass, that in all the land, saith the LORD, two parts therein shall be cut off and die; but the third shall be left therein. And I will bring the third part through the fire, and will refine them as silver is refined, and will try them as gold is tried: they shall call on My name, and I will hear them: I will say, It is My people: and they shall say, The LORD is my God” (Zech. 13:7–9).

If we then would consider how precious, chosen, and beloved the Church of the Lord is unto Him, it is set before us that the eternal counsel concerning the New Testament dispensation, which is the Church, has been made manifest through the revelation and working of the love of the triune God throughout all generations.

With the purpose of bringing forth the Church in the fulness of the times, God gave the promises, called Abraham, chose Israel, and led His people in wondrous ways; kingdoms arose and kingdoms fell, idol temples were raised and again sank into ruins, the nations exerted their strength in vain attempts to build an everlasting kingdom and to gather imperishable wisdom and power; yet the Lord had His Kingdom and His Church in view in all this, and when the power of the world had been proven to be impotence, and its wisdom folly, and its joy nothing but transience, then the hour of the Lord had come to offer the exhausted and poor world the riches of grace through the Son and the Spirit.

And if even this is great and precious to behold, how the whole governance of the Father over the world points toward the Church and its coming into being and growth, infinitely greater still does the worth of the Church become when we consider that it has been purchased with the blood of the Son. For so God loved the world, that He gave His only-begotten Son over unto death for its salvation, and so has the Son loved, that He came, through a life of suffering and through His death upon the cross, to purchase for Himself the Church with His own blood. The birth, death, and resurrection of the Son have this one purpose, that the Kingdom of God, which is the Church, should come, unto the honor and praise of God, and unto the everlasting blessedness of human souls. For He Himself, the only-begotten Son of God, would be the grain of wheat which falls into the earth and dies, in order that it might spring up and bear much fruit—a fruit which shows itself across the earth in the Church, which is the field of God, whose glorious harvest is the souls that are saved by the love of God and by the grace in Christ Jesus.

For that the Church might come into being, Jesus went unto the Father, that from him he might send the Holy Ghost. The Spirit came, and the Church was born. The word spoken to Nicodemus received its fairest fulfilment: “The wind bloweth where it listeth, and thou hearest the sound thereof; but canst not tell whence it cometh, and whither it goeth: so is every one that is born of the Spirit.”

It is the holy work of the triune God that stands before us when we contemplate the wondrous coming-into-being of the Church. Sin had disturbed God’s work of creation; Death had become lord over the fallen creature; God’s wrath over sin laid loveless suffering upon the human being who was created for blessedness. God’s eternal counsel concerning the dispensation of the fulness of times was a counsel of love and of grace; for it was concerned with restoring all the damage which sin had wrought; it was concerned with abolishing the power of sin and of death and of condemnation over humankind; it was concerned with giving back to death’s bound slaves life and incorruption. Therefore no Church could be born, no fellowship of God’s liberated children be created, without atonement through Christ’s death, life from the dead through Christ’s resurrection, union with God and His Son through the Holy Ghost. God’s free and living people upon earth have as their nearest and indispensable presupposition the death and resurrection of the Son of God, and union with him through the Holy Ghost.

It is for this reason that the Church is Christ’s body; the ascended Saviour dwelleth, through the living faith wrought by the Spirit, in his believers. He was dead, and behold, he is alive for evermore. Thus must it also be said of every one who in spirit and in truth would belong to his body: This one was dead, and behold, he liveth. That life of Christ which pulses through the Church by the Holy Ghost is the life of the risen One; it is life after death, the eternal life which dieth no more. None is partaker thereof save he who himself is dead and raised up with him. The living faith is a death from the world upon Christ’s cross, and a being made alive unto God through Christ’s resurrection.

This is Christ’s mystery and the Church’s holy riddle: dead with Him and raised with Him, God’s Church is not of the world and yet is in the world. And because the Church is thus fellowship with the risen and ascended Savior, therefore this fellowship is independent of earthly circumstances and conditions. The Church is not an earthly people, such that it

depends upon having the right human forefather, or the right color, or the right earthly fatherland, or the right language. Nor is it a particular caste or class or age or school of cultivation. For the Church is not a higher form of worldly life, nor a more or less developed stage of civilization; but it is a new life of God among men, a life which can be found only where a dying away from the world has taken place. Human conditions come into consideration only insofar as it is difficult for those who are something and have something in the world to die away from the worldly and receive the life of God. Therefore not many wise, not many rich, not many noble have been brought into the Church; for it cost them too much to lose all in order to win the Kingdom of God. Therefore also within the Church there is neither rank nor caste, higher or lower strata. There is the essential equality that follows from having the same Father, while there is the necessary difference that follows from one being young and another old, one having one gift for labor, another a different gift. There is the essential unity that belongs to the body of Jesus Christ by virtue of the one Spirit. There is also the difference and manifoldness that arise from this, that the one Spirit distributes His gifts and gives to each individual believer the gifts as He wills.

But if the Church is thus life out of death, or the life of the risen Lord Jesus Christ, then it follows that the Church can die no more. Its true and essential life is the life of Jesus Christ, which has already passed through death and therefore dieth no more. Not only does the Church possess vitality enough to exist so long as the earth stands and the times endure; but through all times and all generations and all eternities God is revealed and praised and honored through the Church, which is His Son's, our Lord Jesus Christ's, living body, which indeed can suffer, be tormented, and be assailed by the world, but which, despite all mistreatment, nevertheless lives the risen One's eternal life in the midst of the world of transitoriness.

Therefore, since the Congregation is the goal of the Father's providence, of the Son's birth, death, and resurrection, of the outpouring of the Spirit; since the Congregation is the chosen race, the royal priesthood, the holy nation, the people of God's own possession, the dwelling of God in the Spirit, the city set upon a hill and the light upon the lampstand—so it is not strange that Paul, who was cast into prison and laid in chains for the sake of this Congregation, writes in the consciousness of this great responsibility to those who were a congregation and called themselves a congregation: "I therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, beseech you that ye walk worthy of the calling wherewith ye are called."

What we here mean by congregational life is nothing other than that manner of walk which corresponds to the high calling of the Congregation. For this calling rests first and foremost upon each individual congregation in every place where Christians gather around the Word of God and Baptism and the Lord's Supper. If an assembly of believing men and women has taken upon itself the holy name of congregation and begun its holy work with Word and Sacrament in a place, then it has thereby also taken upon itself the calling and the responsibility; and God will judge them accordingly, as Paul writes to the Corinthians: "Know ye not that ye are the temple of God, and that the Spirit of God dwelleth in you? If any man destroy the temple of God, him shall God destroy; for the temple of God is holy, which temple ye are."

There are so many who seek to escape the great and dreadful responsibility which rests upon

the Congregation, by thinking of the whole Christian Church instead of the small individual congregation; and by fixing their attention upon this great and far-reaching fellowship, the single congregation becomes so insignificant that it seems as though its life and walk and mutual dealings could not be of such great importance, and thus it might more easily and cheaply escape from its calling and responsibility. But nothing can be more corrupting than such a way of thinking. Just as little as the individual soul can be saved in the crowd and mass of Christians without being Christian itself, just so little can the individual congregation escape its calling and its responsibility in the mass of congregations. Where Christ is, there He is either whole, or He is not there at all. Where Christianity is, there it is whole, or else it is not there at all. And each individual congregation by itself has precisely the same calling and task and responsibility as the whole Christian Church; and so heavy is the responsibility, as though it were the only congregation and the entire gathering of congregations.

Let us, in our consideration of the Congregation, try to hold fast to this, so that no one may have occasion to evade the calling with the false consolation that there are so many involved that it is not so exacting with each one.

How then shall the Church walk worthy of its calling?

The high calling to be the Body of the risen Saviour and the dwelling-place of God's Spirit demands the deepest humility; for only in the consciousness of our own unworthiness and incapacity is there room for God's Spirit and for God's glory.

The all-embracing calling to gather all souls at the cross of Jesus Christ, that they may be cleansed by the blood and reconciled with the Father, demands the greatest love; for only in Christ is salvation, and therefore it is only the love of Christ that can constrain us to seek the salvation of souls.

The one great goal—to gather all into the fellowship of Christ and to present every human being complete in Christ Jesus—demands one Spirit and a diversity of gifts, so that, despite the many ministries and powers, there may yet be no confusion or distraction, but that the many small abilities and gifts may, through the uniting and ordering power of the Holy Spirit, work toward the same goal.

If, then, we attempt to orient ourselves somewhat more closely within this activity of the Church, in order to answer to its name and its calling, it may perhaps be most convenient to divide it into two branches, which nevertheless stand in the most intimate connection with one another:

* The inward growth of the Body of Christ unto its edification in love. * The outward growth of the Body of Christ, to embrace all human beings, the whole fallen race.

For there is room for growth or advance in both directions. In its earthly existence before the return of Christ, the Church is never perfect or complete or finished. It is perfected precisely at the return of Christ; therefore it is not perfect at any earlier point in time. Until that time it is continually in progress and development.

In the inner life of the Church there is always this deficiency in the earthly Church: that not in all who are drawn into the Church and attach themselves to it is there a true transition

from death to life; many dead and sleeping persons follow along into the outward Church, or grow up in its midst. This is an unavoidable calamity, for which the Redeemer Himself has prepared us through His revelation. It therefore constitutes no excuse, either for those who enter the Church with a worldly mind, nor for those who even dare to employ fleshly and worldly means of persuasion in order to move anyone to join the Church.

There is in no one an absolute and complete severance from the world and the flesh. Therefore there is also in no one a full and perfect participation in the life of the Risen One. With believers in all ages it fares as it did with Paul, who says: "So then with the mind I myself serve the law of God; but with the flesh the law of sin."

Therefore at all times there is room for growth in the Church. Ever onward is the watchword of Christians and of the Christian Church, until the coming of Christ.

And in outward regard there is always, both at home within Christendom and beyond its borders, a great multitude of souls who may be gathered into the Church through the Gospel. Along the highways and by the hedges there are many lost and wretched people, many prodigal sons and daughters, who ought to be compelled to come in. And think, think of the millions of heathen who have not heard and do not hear the blessed Gospel of Christ! There is room for growth, room for advance, room for struggle, and room for victory.

But if a body is to grow, then two things in particular are required, namely nourishment and organs.

God has provided for both. The Church has received Word and Sacrament. Through these it receives nourishment and vital strength; power of resistance against the world and sin and death, so that in spite of all the contagion of corruption it may nevertheless keep itself living and sound; strength for labor, so that it need not sink powerless beneath the toil and burden of the mighty work.

The Church is also equipped with many members, all of which are organs through which the Church receives Spirit and carries out its work. The misunderstanding that the Church has only a single organ, namely the pastor, stands in opposition both to the letter of Scripture and to its spirit. All Christians, men and women, adults and children, are called and appointed and gifted to be workers in the vineyard. There is rest and peace in God's Church; there is also busyness and life and activity. There is nothing but movement and freedom in the Church. Many are fearful of such freedom in the Church; but this is because they do not know the working and power of the Holy Spirit; for God's Spirit is mighty, through God's Word, to give to each member its own work.

Therefore, if the proclamation of the Word becomes truly powerful and Spirit-filled, scriptural and full-orbed, and if hearts are kindled and the members of the congregation become zealous in word and in deed, then the congregation shall grow with the growth of the body, both inwardly and outwardly. Knowledge and understanding shall increase, and love shall become more inward and more comprehensive. And the congregation shall gain greater adherence and draw more to itself, when all its members live for this one thing alone: the salvation of souls and the spreading of the kingdom of God.

The congregation's inward growth will therefore show itself in a stronger separation and

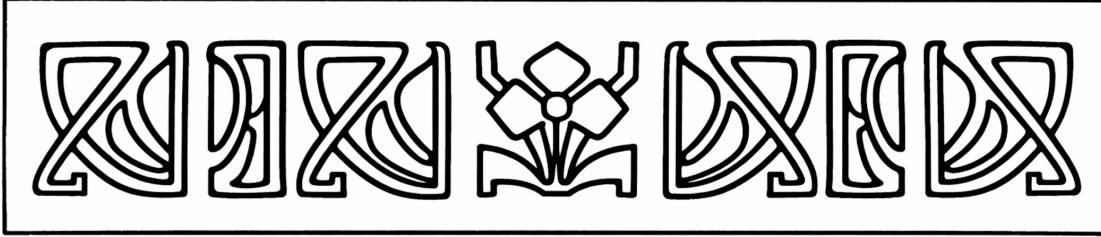
distinction from the world, in greater renunciation and self-denial, and in a more self-sacrificing love for souls, so that on the one hand the light stands out sharply from the darkness, and on the other hand the light draws and lifts those who still walk in the coldness and darkness of the world. Yet this is a work that is first of all exercised within the congregation. There the baptized children are to be reared, instructed, and enlightened, that they may remain upon the narrow way of renunciation and faith; there the seeking are to be borne; there the believing are to be strengthened and guided, encouraged and admonished. And then outward, in the heathen world, there is work enough to be done in order that the Gospel may be proclaimed. And the congregation that does not engage in mission is no congregation except in name; for the Spirit of God is a Spirit who drives to labor for the spreading of the kingdom of God unto the ends of the earth.

When the Christian congregation thus becomes conscious of its calling and begins to live therein, it shall ever more experience that if it lives in love, it lives under hatred. Not only shall the living congregation be repaid with the hatred of the world, because it is an offense to the world to labor for its salvation. But the living congregation will, if possible, be hated even more by the false and dead church, which in the awakened life of the congregation will see its own worldliness judged. Furthermore, all those who have worldly advantage from the congregation's death and ignorance and inactivity will become bitter enemies of the free and living congregation. But those whose delight it is that souls be saved and life be brought forth, they will with joy greet the free and living congregation and rejoice to be allowed, if it be given them, to go before it in its struggle, labor, and tribulations. That is the place of the priests in the free congregation.

There are those who fear that, when the congregations awaken, the space will become too constrained for the pastors. This fear is unfounded, provided the pastors understand their task and their calling. When awakening comes to a congregation, the faithful shepherd and caretaker of souls will find both labor and sympathy, both afflictions and joys. But the worldly-minded pastor will indeed encounter many difficulties where the work of God's Spirit begins in the congregation, and perhaps the room will become too narrow for him.

The Church lives in hope; for the consummation cannot fail to come; the Life of Christ cannot slumber without attaining unto its eternal blossoming in glory. It is the water lily which, from the turbid depths, shoots upward toward the clear sunshine beneath God's heaven. That Life which springs forth from Christ's dark grave in His resurrection from the dead; that Life of God and of His Spirit's eternal love, which is lived amid hatred and persecution, tribulation and contempt—this Life at last reaches unto eternal glory.

Then the Church is consummated, when all her faithful and true members are gathered before the throne of the Lamb, and from the depths of their hearts the song of praise surges forth, mighty and full-toned as the sound of many waters. Then shall the New Jerusalem, the holy city, descend out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her bridegroom; and then shall the tabernacle of God, in eternal perfection, be with men, and He shall dwell with them, and they shall be His people, and God Himself shall be with them and be their God. Amen.



4.2 The Conditions for the Formation of Congregations

Source: Report of the Lutheran Free Church's 9th Annual Meeting, 1905, pp. 86–95. — Ed.

This section appears on pages 354–361 of the original volume. — Present Ed.

The intention in proposing this theme is doubtless to obtain an answer to the question: When is it right, timely, and justifiable to undertake the organization of a congregation in a given place, and which persons ought one to seek to include in the organization?

To a question of this kind, it is self-evident that no answer can be given which lays down a rule applicable to all places and at all times, unless it be given in the form of a general principle, which must then be applied as appropriately as possible in the individual cases. We cannot say that a missionary pastor must always labor for a year with preaching before he seeks to have a congregation organized; neither can we say that he must first of all have a congregation established before he has the right to preach the Word of God to the people.

The question is of such a nature that only general or principal answers can be given.

And if it is this which is to be given here, then it is essential to hold fast that the Free Church, from the very beginning, has maintained that the question concerning the congregation and its nature must be clarified out of the divine revelation itself in the New Testament, because it is what one in the Lutheran Church calls a doctrinal question, in which the Word of God is the sole rule and guiding norm.

And the proper organization of the congregation stands in such a close and intimate connection with the congregation's essence, that one must necessarily return to the question of the congregation itself, if one would gain a handle on how the congregation and congregations are formed.

Now, since the Congregation provides the New Testament with clear and abundant instruction—for indeed the whole revelation that is given in the New Testament after Christ's Ascension speaks of the Congregation and of its nature and its work. The Acts of the Apostles, the Epistles, and the Revelation of John speak continually of the Congregation, or, which is the same thing, of the work of the Holy Spirit; so that those who in our days are opponents of the Congregation and will hear nothing of the necessity of returning to Scripture when the question concerns the Congregation, cannot at any rate appeal to the claim that there is so little in the Bible about the Congregation that one cannot there receive sufficient light upon the matter.

Yet, as the situation actually stands among us, it is in fact distorted in so many and manifold ways that it is altogether reasonable that there should be a constant and continued discussion of the subject, in order, if possible, to gain more light concerning it. And since all our labor is dependent upon a right apprehension of the Congregation, there is nothing more important than to pursue this investigation with all strength and all vigor, so that the clearest results may be attained as soon as possible.

We are Lutherans, brethren, and this means first and foremost that we stand unshakably upon the ground of Scripture; therefore it is altogether right and genuinely Lutheran to seek the true instruction concerning the Congregation in the Holy Scripture itself.

And indeed Luther himself has shown the way also in this matter. There is no man for whom it has succeeded better to gather his thoughts into a brief chief summary than Luther. His Small Catechism is in this respect the greatest masterpiece that exists within the Christian Church. As with a sunbeam it is written there, what stands in the Catechism, that it is “the Holy Spirit who calls, gathers, enlightens, sanctifies the whole Christian Congregation on earth, and preserves it with Jesus Christ in the one true faith.”

This is plain speech, and it is scriptural in the highest sense. It agrees not merely with the letter of Scripture, but in truth with its Spirit; and it is not attested by a single passage here or there, but the whole Scripture bears witness to this, that it is precisely the goal of all God’s work, leading, governing, and revelation for and with fallen mankind to raise up His kingdom upon earth, or, as it is said in Scripture, “to purchase for Himself a Congregation with His own blood,” and that this Congregation is that which the Spirit calls and gathers, enlightens and sanctifies from His day of Pentecost onward, when He came with the power of the storm and the fire of love upon the disciples of Jesus and bound them together into the body of Jesus, “which is the Congregation.”

It is plainly evident from the testimony concerning the Church’s beginning that it is the work of the Spirit in Jesus’ believing disciples. And where the Spirit, through the Word, is permitted to carry out His work, there the Church is formed and founded and constituted “that very day,” so that there is no long waiting. There arise Baptism and the Supper and brotherly fellowship and common prayer as the marks that set forth the Church as visible before all eyes, so that it may be perceived and sensed both as a distinct society and as a living and drawing power, which continually gathers more of those who desire to belong.

Who then became members of the Church, and who decided whether they should be included or not?

Scripture says: “They that gladly received Peter’s word were baptized,” and thus they were added to the Church. But Scripture also says: “And the Lord added to the Church daily such as should be saved.”

Behold here two testimonies concerning the same matter; these we must hold together, and the more we unite them in a spiritual manner, the more clearly will they also agree in that which Luther says: It is the work of the Holy Spirit to call, gather, enlighten, and sanctify the Church; for how else could this be fitting, that those who received the Word were added, and that the Lord added them, except precisely in this way—that the Lord worked through

the Word, and the Spirit drew them by the calling Word and the regenerating Baptism into the Church, “which is the Body of Christ.”

This is the natural, and therefore the only right, way of forming the Church. And as it began in this manner, so it also continued in the apostolic age. When “Samaria received the Word of God” through the preaching of the scattered Christians, there too the Church came into being. Likewise in Galilee, yes, even as far as Antioch in Syria, where Christians from among the Jews and Christians from among the Gentiles were for the first time united in one Church and in one Body of Christ, in that “the middle wall” was broken down; and where therefore the new society received its own new name, in that the disciples there and then were called “Christians.”

And from this Antioch there also went forth the missionaries to the Gentiles; for from this time onward the occasion for the formation of congregations became as wide and spacious as the whole world; and indeed congregations were formed through Paul’s preaching, in an astonishingly short time, in a multitude of cities both in Asia and in Europe.

Always in the same manner: the preaching of the Gospel itself created the necessary presuppositions; for the congregations were formed of those who “became believers,” who “received the Holy Spirit,” who “were baptized into Christ’s death.” Always through the Spirit and through faith, which, when viewed from the outward side, manifests itself as complete and full willingness.

Willingness

One might indeed gladly call it self-determination, provided that it is understood that thereby no opposition is intended to the Christian truth that this self-determination is, in its innermost ground, a divine determination; for those who “gladly received the word” are those whom the Lord has called and chosen and given the obedience of faith, so that their willingness is not of themselves, but of the Holy Spirit.

Here, then, the apostolic principle for the formation of congregations is clearly expressed: it is willingness—the willingness of the Spirit and of faith. It presents itself exactly as it is written in the Book of Revelation: “And the Spirit and the Bride say, Come. And let him that heareth say, Come. And let him that is athirst come. And whosoever will, let him take the water of life freely.”

As already said, it is impossible to express the apostolic rule for the formation of congregations better than in Luther’s words: “The Holy Spirit calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies the Christian congregation.”

With this willingness there is thus laid upon those who come to the congregation—called and drawn by the Spirit—the whole responsibility for the Kingdom of God, that is, the responsibility for the life and flourishing of the congregation, for its labor and its honor. For they are those who entered into the congregation not because other people judged them to be Christians, but because they judged themselves, and because they confessed the faith in the Redeemer⁶, who was preached to them. To join oneself to the congregation and to be

⁶The original text reads den forstaaede (“the understood”), likely a typographical or OCR error for

baptized was the same as to confess Jesus Christ as one's Savior from sin, death, and the kingdom of Satan; and with this it followed of itself that he who knew the Savior in Christ was also willing to "pay unto the Lord his vows" and to be a witness of Him "who hath called us out of darkness into His marvelous light."

It lies in the very nature of the matter that, as the congregations grew older and increased in number and esteem, and as many different reasons arose which might move a person to attach himself to the congregation, the latter was bound to seek to guard itself against the danger that lies in the reception of such members as are not drawn to the congregation by the Spirit of God, but by fleshly motives. All that lives and grows bears within itself the impulse of self-preservation, and seeks to keep at a distance and to remove what is called "foreign matter." It is therefore also self-evident that the highest and most indispensable of all organisms, the Body of Christ or the Church, was careful both with regard to admission into and exclusion from the congregation. And partly through its officers, and partly through the meetings of the congregation, the Church exercised that oversight which it recognized as its holy duty toward the Lord and His Body. Yet this did not conflict with the principle of freedom; it merely imposed a necessary and justified testing of the nature of that freedom, whether it was the work of the Spirit or of the flesh.

It is these spiritual truths concerning the formation of the congregation which the Free Church seeks to revive in the footsteps of Luther. And there is great need of this; for although Luther knew full well and continually affirmed that the Church is the work of the Holy Spirit and therefore a matter of freedom, yet we all know that the Lutheran Reformation was robbed of so very much of its spiritual character by being fastened in the arms of princes and politicians. And quite particularly there was left no room for freedom or for the work of the Spirit in the formation of the congregation. The Church became merely a part of the state administration, and the congregation only one aspect of national life. And as coercion always rules in the state, it naturally came to rule also in the state church.

The consequence of this was a grievous confusion of concepts, the sum of which, in the sphere of the question of the congregation, may be described thus: that Christianity came to be regarded as a "national religion,"⁷ like the pagan religions among the pagan peoples; and bonds harder than those of such as religion are scarcely to be found, especially among a people such as our own.

Now when these children of the State Church feel Christianity upon them as compulsion and bonds, this brings with it, for many, a bitter hatred of Christianity. It appears to them to lie obstructively in the way, partly of the satisfaction of their lusts, partly of the free development of thought. Especially when, through a spiritual awakening, the demands of Christianity press heavily upon the consciences, there is awakened also this human defiance

Forsoneren ("the Redeemer"). The latter is more consistent with the surrounding context of confessing faith in Jesus Christ as Savior. — Present Ed.

⁷The word Folkefit in the original text is an evident OCR or printing error. Based on the comparison to "pagan religions" and the critique of the state church, the intended word was likely Folkereligion ("folk religion") or Folkeskik ("national custom"). The translation "national religion" reflects the author's argument that Christianity had been reduced from a spiritual choice to a mere cultural or ethnic inheritance. — Present Ed.

and craving for freedom, which says: "Let us break their bands asunder, and cast away their cords from us."

And not a few there are who, upon the crossing to America, tear asunder both the bonds of the National Church and the rope of the imposed Christianity, and they walk in the destructive opposite of the state-church system: fleshly freedom.

But then, on the other hand, there is a very great multitude of people who here in America cling all the more zealously to the state-churchly custom, as they feel that there is danger in the severing from the law of the State Church. And it can hardly be denied that many Norwegian congregations in America are formed upon the foundation of the Norwegian National Church, with some admixture of American township politics.

But amid all confusion and mismanagement there still stands the Lord's firm foundation, and it bears the same old inscription: The Lord knoweth them that are his; and, Let every one that nameth the name of Christ depart from iniquity.

Therefore it is not hopeless to labor for the restoration of the congregation and, little by little, to set forth a free-church practice which returns to Luther and the New Testament, and brings clarity into the confused notions of the nature and organization of the Church.

The task is to come away from compulsion and politics in the formation of congregations and onward to true, spiritual voluntariness. But when we loosen ourselves from the coercion of the State Church and flee from its distorted image of the Church, it is necessary to be on our guard lest we also depart from Lutheranism and from the truth.

We must unreservedly go back to the principle of voluntariness, which is this, that "the Holy Ghost calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies the congregation," and at the same time be watchful that we do not put ourselves, or one or several persons, in the place of the Holy Ghost, so that we imagine we can call and gather, build up and form a congregation, provided only that everything proceeds according to our own head.

Therefore let the invitation have its voice; let the Gospel ring freely and fully, calling men to come in through this one true Door, that the house of the Lord may be filled.

This is the responsibility of the missionary pastor or the evangelist; this is his calling and his work. Lay then the responsibility upon those who hear the call and the invitation. They are accountable before God both to follow the invitation and to follow it rightly, that is, in the same spirit in which it is issued. Let it be said to them that they must come, and that they must put on the wedding garment when they come; let it also be said to them that in this matter they bear responsibility before the Lord and not before men. Let it be borne witness loudly and clearly that he who is part of God's congregation thereby lays claim to being a true Christian, a child of God, and that both the congregation and the world have the right to expect of him that he conduct himself as a Christian, to the honor and praise of God's name among men.

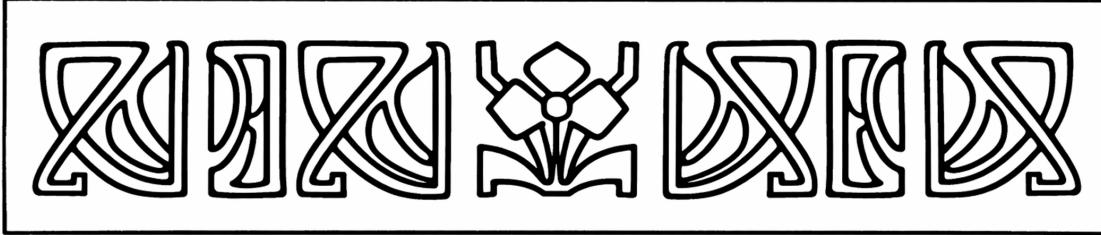
It avails nothing to suppose that we can set our judgment concerning a man in the place of the Lord's judgment. He himself has the keys and opens and shuts in the one perfect manner; but upon us rests the responsibility for the unwearied labor of preaching the Word

and bearing witness to the truth in season and out of season, and thus in time it will dawn upon the consciousness that the congregation and its outward ordering are a holy matter, that it is a temple of God which no one may dare to corrupt.

Under such fear of God and under the sense of this mighty responsibility must all organization of the congregation be undertaken; and it must be clearly testified that free as the congregation is, it is also obedient to God's will and Word. And whoever feels within himself that this becomes an unbearable constraint, let him hasten to seek the Lord while he may be found, that from the Lord himself he may receive the freedom of the Spirit, which consists in that love which is poured out in our hearts through the forgiveness of sins and the blessed deliverance.

If then the question is asked: Shall we wait long before we organize a congregation, or shall we wait until we are certain who are believers, so that we may take them into the congregation and leave the others outside?—then the answer has already been given: Follow the Lord's Word, and do not delay forming a congregation of those who are baptized into Christ and confess faith in him, whether they be many or few, and wait upon the Lord, who shall give the increase as it is pleasing to him.

It is not the number that matters; it is the Spirit. It is not our judgment that matters; it is the Lord's. And he who comes bears himself the responsibility for his sincerity, when the invitation has sounded to him in undiminished fullness: Come to rest, come to labor; come to the Supper, come to the wedding; come to the vineyard, come to the harvest work; come to the Cross and come to the Crown!



4.3 The Significance of Mission for the Church

Source: Account of the 100th Anniversary Assembly of the Lutheran Church, 1906, pp. 91–102. — Ed.

This section appears on pages 362–370 of the original volume. — Present Ed.

“I am come to cast fire upon the earth; and how gladly would I that it were already kindled!” Luke 12:49.

This sigh of longing from the heart of Jesus has been fulfilled. His life was not spent in vain, and His death was not without purpose. The fire was cast upon the earth when the Spirit was sent and the Church was founded upon the unshakable foundation of Christ’s death and resurrection.

For the Church is not simply an association formed by the first Christians after Jesus had ascended into heaven. It is God’s work and His deed, an essential part of God’s revelation among men, and therefore an object of that faith which does not arise from human understanding, but from the Spirit of God. The tongues of fire which descended upon those who were gathered in the upper room in Jerusalem, when the Spirit from God came upon them, did not spring from the hearts of the disciples and were not the expression of a human fervor within them; the flames were kindled from heaven and were the expression of the Spirit’s light and warmth, which henceforth were to dwell with the believers.

For the Spirit was not given in order that He should again depart from the disciples. He was the new Advocate whom Jesus had promised to His own, the Spirit of truth and of love, who was to abide with them forever. Therefore the Church is not only the work and creation of the Spirit, but it is also the Spirit’s dwelling upon earth, according to the testimony which Paul bears to the Church: “Know ye not that ye are the temple of God, and that the Spirit of God dwelleth in you?”

But the Spirit of God is not idle where He dwells. He is the power of the living God, which ever drives those in whom He is found unto all good and God-pleasing works. As Samson was seized by the Spirit and driven by the Spirit to mighty deeds of power, so also that little flock in the upper room in Jerusalem was seized by the Spirit to carry out the great work of love among men: to gather them in unto the Father in heaven, and to unite them into one body with Jesus Christ Himself as Head and Lord.

For the Spirit is He by whom the love of God is poured out into the hearts of those who believe on Jesus the crucified. And since the love of God is world-embracing, Christ’s death

is also for all, and an atonement for the sins of the whole world. Therefore it also comes to pass with those who believe on the crucified Saviour that the love of Christ constrains them to seek to win men, inasmuch as they judge this, that if One died for all, then were all dead; and that He died for all, that they which live should no longer live unto themselves, but unto Him who died and rose again for them.

Since, then, the Church has been brought forth by the Spirit of God upon the foundation of Christ's death for all, therefore the Church, from its spiritual birth, bears within itself this inward impulse, that it must "seek to win men" by spreading among them the testimony of God's world-embracing love and the salvation which He has prepared for all peoples. Therefore missionary zeal is not merely a virtue among other Christian virtues, more or less necessary for the believer; but it is an essential and peculiar manifestation of life of the Spirit of God in and through the Church.

Or can we forget the effect which the love of Christ had upon those disciples of the Baptist, who, when they had found the Messiah, must also find their brethren and friends and lead them to Him? There can be none who has the Spirit of truth and does not burn with zeal to bear witness to the truth; there can be none who has the joy in Christ and does not desire to share it with others; there can be none who has the love of God poured out in his heart and does not feel the inward compulsion to labour for the salvation and blessedness of all.

Here it is that the bond between the Congregation and the Mission, or the Kingdom of God upon earth, comes into view. For it is the divine appointment of the Gospel to spread the rays of salvation's light over the whole earth, and to send them into the dark recesses and hidden depths of human life and of the human heart. And this Gospel has been entrusted to the Congregation, not that it should keep it to itself and bury it in the earth, that it might be the more safely preserved as a dead treasure, but precisely that the Congregation should let it shine both at home and abroad for the salvation of the human race. Thus it is in this, first and foremost, that the Kingdom of God consists. It bears within itself righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost, and advances, not by oppressing and despoiling the nations, but by setting them free and giving them the heavenly gift which, in the fullness of humanity's time, has been sent through the Son and the Spirit.

The Kingdom of God is a victorious kingdom of conquest, yet it wins its victories without the clash of swords and without shedding of blood. Indeed, wars and judgments from God often pass over peoples and kingdoms before the Gospel's peaceful and gentle advance in the world; yet it may rightly be said that this is as the earthquake and the fire which upon Mount Sinai went before the still small voice that caused the prophet to cover his face with his mantle. For therein was God's true revelation. Yet a conquest it is nonetheless—the most perfect conquest and the most complete victory, which makes of enemies friends, and of assailants the most zealous defenders. So it went with the snorting, wrathful Saul, who became the fervent laborer and Apostle Paul: he who before his conversion desired only to do evil against Jesus and His disciples, but who after his conversion was willing to suffer anything, if only the name of Jesus might be glorified, if only human souls might be saved through faith in the Crucified One.

No earthly kingdom can bar the door against the Gospel when the Lord's hour to enter has

come. No persecution can annihilate the Kingdom of God among men once it has found its way into a people. Though it may appear as though it is overcome and disappears, it is yet only as when the grain of wheat disappears into the earth in order to grow all the more richly thereby.

But this holy conquest—peaceful though it be—is nevertheless against the world. It disturbs the power of heathendom and bursts its bonds asunder. It makes souls free from the dominion of the world and of the flesh. It overthrows the tyranny of sin and disturbs the sleep of death. And the world awakens to bitter resistance and mortal hatred. Therefore the Mission, or the advance of the Kingdom of God upon earth, is also accompanied by great sufferings for the little flock which, in faith in Jesus and in His following, strives for the truth and for the peace of the heart. No one can take part in disturbing Satan's strongholds and the world's evil dreams without receiving blows and wounds in return. It would not be reasonable to expect otherwise; nor is there any other course. Yet he who prevails shall not regret that he was in the battle, for the crown is found where the wounds are.

If, after this glance at the biblical presentation of Mission and its connection with the Congregation and the Kingdom of God, we now look to the actual condition within Christendom, then we find—with horror, I should hope—that there are many Christians, at least in name, who do not appear to take any part in this warfare; they do not suffer its hardships, neither do they feel themselves thrilled with blessed joy at its victories. And worse still—comparatively few are the congregations which wholly and fully take part in the world-conquest of the Kingdom of God, and which make it a chief concern, a principal aim of their existence, to carry on missionary work at home and abroad.

It is therefore in the highest degree necessary to ask: What significance has Mission for the Congregation? Or does it perhaps make no difference whether the Congregation takes part in missionary labor or not?

And here it is not meant whether the Congregation contributes an offering or two to Mission during the year; rather, it is meant whether it is a chief matter for the Congregation to press the Kingdom of God further onward and the Gospel of God further out, so that it truly exerts itself in prayer and labor to that end. For I would note that it is a war against the powers of darkness of which we here speak; it is a struggle to save souls from death and to deliver them from the dominion of Satan. And this cannot be done without costing both exertion and sacrifice.

But does the Congregation, and the individual Christian, then gain anything by taking part therein?

To this question the answer would soon be given, if we could take the standpoint of Catholicism. For to it Mission is also a means of extending the power of the Church and increasing her glory; and naturally it is of great importance for every faithful son or daughter of the Church to be engaged in the work whereby the arm of the Church may reach unto the farthest regions of the earth.

Not so among us; the evangelical mission to the heathen and the home mission are not carried on in order that the Church might become world-ruling, but in order that the Kingdom of

God might be spread over all the earth, and that saved souls might be gathered from all peoples under heaven.

And thereby mission does not receive less significance for the Church, but rather greater. For in the evangelical Church it is not a question of winning power, but far more of preserving life and bearing the fruit of life.

God's Church has been made a partaker of God's life, and it is this which is at issue—to preserve it and to bear fruit from it. And to this end it is also necessary to take part in mission; for it is indeed God's eternal counsel of salvation and His revealed will that all men should be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth. And this eternal will is carried out through the Church's work of mission; and the Church is only then truly permeated by the Father's eternal counsel and heart, when it is filled with zeal for the raising up of the human race from the Fall and for its return to the Father's blessed communion. It is a matter of life for the Church to drink from this fountain of eternal love, and, strengthened thereby, to do the work of God.

And the Father's will has first and foremost been realized in the world through the Son. His life and work, His suffering and death, His resurrection and ascension, all have this one purpose: to seek and to save that which was lost. And this which was lost is the whole sinful human race, and each individual sinner within it. And not only is it Jesus' purpose to save the fallen race; it is also His command to all His disciples that they are to take part in this work. Being themselves saved, they are to labor for the salvation of others through the Gospel of Jesus Christ. And for the Church it is therefore a question of life or death when it comes to the question of being obedient to the command or not. He who died for all, that all should live, He wills that His body, which is the Church, should work toward the attainment of His purpose and the realization of His will. He who himself lives upon the ground of Christ's death can preserve this life in strength and freshness only by bringing the Gospel of Christ's cross out to those who sit in the darkness of death; for the love of Christ is preserved only in love toward those for whom He died.

And the congregation does not merely need to obey Christ's command concerning mission; in this matter it must also follow the drive of the Holy Spirit. It is dangerous to resist the Holy Spirit. We know well that the Jewish people made themselves guilty of this trespass. They would not themselves believe in Christ; neither would they permit the Gentiles to believe in Him. In every way they sought to hinder salvation from reaching the hearts of men. We see their judgment and punishment before our eyes; shall we walk in their path? No—when God's Spirit urges us to seek salvation for ourselves and to labor for the salvation of others, then let us follow the call, and God's will and His work shall not be bondage to us but freedom.

It is not difficult in this way to recognize that the congregation does not attain full power in its life, nor complete devotion to its calling, until in the work for the spread of God's Kingdom it comes into harmony with the saving counsel of the Triune God and its execution in the history of the human race.

And if we consider the very nature of the Kingdom and the manner in which it grows, we shall soon see that just as the congregation has great significance for mission, so also mission

has great significance for the congregation.

Jesus has compared the Kingdom of God to leaven, which a woman took and hid in three measures of meal, until the whole was leavened. If it now appears that the meal is not leavened, it is unavoidable to ask whether the leaven has been sound. And if it appears that the evangelization of the heathen world proceeds slowly, it becomes a natural question whether there is the proper power in the congregation. In other words, where mission is weak, there responsibility inevitably returns to the congregation.

The Kingdom of God is, as we have seen above, a kingdom of conquest. If it does not advance in victory, the question is raised whether the army is awake and active. Necessarily, a vigorous missionary work must contribute to keeping the congregation watchful and militant. And each individual congregation is a troop within the great army as a whole, and we all know that the welfare and progress of the whole depend upon the strength and endurance of each small part. The congregations are therefore responsible first and foremost to God, but thereafter also to one another in this connection. If Christ's work is to be carried out and victory won along the entire line, then the faithfulness of each individual soldier and each individual troop in battle and labor is decisive. Nothing sharpens the sense of responsibility more than lively participation in the great common work of all Christendom. And nothing can be more beneficial for the congregation than precisely this sharpened sense of responsibility.

It is a great and weighty cause that follows from this position of the congregation as a link in that conquering host which wages the Lord's war in the world. Missionary labor is an essential part of the spiritual struggle for freedom that is waged against the tyrannical dominance of paganism and worldliness over the natural mind. If the congregation enters this struggle for the Spirit's freedom in earnest, it will therein also find a mighty help in the work of its own liberation. And this is of surpassing significance precisely in our time and in the position we have, taken as a whole, been given within it.

If we rightly discern the signs of the times, there is more life than freedom. It is possible to live, in a certain sense, almost without freedom. But it is a wretched condition for the spirit to be held in the bonds of a legalism, half suffocated between the demands of the world and the compulsion of the Law. And yet there are not so few congregations that endure a miserable existence in precisely this manner. It is not possible here to enter into a more detailed explanation of this tangled and desperate condition. We can only say that there is an exceedingly great need for deliverance and, comparatively, little labor undertaken to relieve this need.

But here a vigorous missionary endeavor comes to the congregation's strong aid. For if the congregation truly means in earnest the Christian conquest of the world by the Gospel, it will also of necessity come to the recognition that it is treason against Christ and the kingdom of God to nurture worldliness and pagan superstition in its own midst, while it fights to overcome these same enemies elsewhere. And nothing contributes more to the congregation's liberation than that it loosens the bonds of materialism and at the same time gains greater room for love in heart and in deed.

These matters now mentioned are perhaps the most essential in this connection. Yet there is, besides, a multitude of things that are "added" for those who throw themselves with all their

might into missionary labor.

It may be worth mentioning a few of them.

There is the fellowship between Christian persons and congregations without regard to the boundaries of confessions and church bodies, as they are set face to face with the immeasurable task of making all nations disciples of Jesus, and face to face with the nameless misery which paganism brings upon humanity. Mission continually brings us into fellowship with unnoticed Christian men and women of various confessions, with whom brotherly cooperation is often practiced under such conditions that it may be called unavoidable. For who, out in the dreadful darkness of paganism, would not rejoice in brotherly communion with the children of light?

There is another matter which stands in close connection with this; where Christianity and heathenism meet in a struggle of life and death, or where it is a question of rescuing souls from death, the Christian fundamental truths concerning atonement, forgiveness of sins, faith, spiritual life, and the hope of glory become so overwhelmingly important that the differences which exist among evangelical Christians are necessarily pushed back into a more subordinate position; and this prepares the way for a simpler understanding within the congregation and a corresponding greater concord among Christians with one another. And the more this inner, spiritual unity is fostered and advanced, the less significance do the outward separations and associations assume, so that we move ever nearer toward the goal which the Lord has set for His own upon earth: that they, gathered into congregations each in its own place, yet together constitute but one flock under one Shepherd.

Furthermore, the work of missions will place the congregation in its right relation to the question of nationality and race, and will set it free from the bonds by which it is bound in this respect. The truth which the Word of God sets forth—"Here there is neither Greek nor Jew, circumcision nor uncircumcision, barbarian, Scythian, bond nor free, but Christ is all, and in all"—has indeed been so grievously thrust back in the consciousness of the congregation. But mission will once more bring it forward and make it living for us through the fellowship in Baptism, the Gospel, and the Lord's Supper.

Through the living and spiritual participation in the work and conflict of the Kingdom of God, the congregation will be delivered from the bonds of the nationalities with their partiality, injustice, and hatred. And freed from these wretched pettinesses, the congregation will feel the liberation which lies in the world-embracing brotherhood of the Kingdom of God. We shall learn—though but little by little and late—to stammer forth that glorious confession: Here there is neither black nor white, Norwegian nor Swedish, German nor Danish, Englishman nor American; but here is the eternal fellowship of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ: "You are all brother."

Perhaps some may think that we have had chiefly the outward mission in mind when we have here spoken of mission and its significance for the congregation. This, however, is not the case. We have here in our circumstances both home mission and heathen mission. For the goal of mission is the founding of a congregation, whether it be carried on at home or abroad. Mission has reached its goal where the congregation independently takes up Christian work of edification. What in Europe is called inner mission is another branch of the congregation's

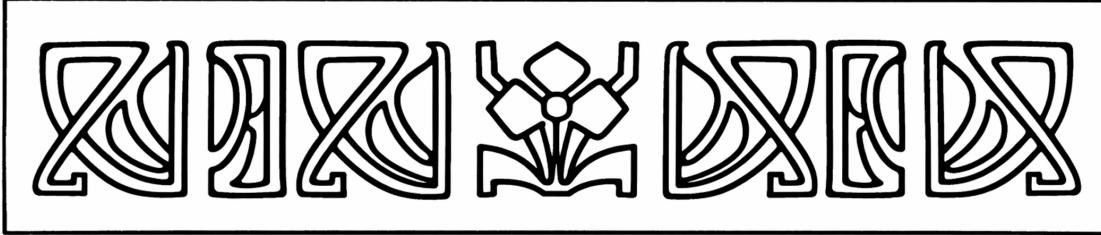
activity, which one has in part with greater justice called rescue work. Both home mission and heathen mission spring from the same root, are driven by the same Spirit, are equally necessary for the congregation, and have at least in part the same value and significance for its spiritual insight and life.

For our own people and for all peoples alike we have the one and the same command from the Lord: Go ye therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost, and teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you. There is no difference. And no one can value too highly the significance of obedience to the Lord and to His command.

And therefore it may at last be said as a solemn admonition to us all: heartfelt and vigorous participation in the work of mission at home and abroad is an essential mark of the living and free congregation. The dead congregation bears the mark of self-interest; it labors for its own outward welfare, for it knows no inward; it labors for itself and its party, its outward greatness and power. The living congregation works in the self-sacrificing service of love for the salvation of souls, for the spreading of the kingdom of God, for the glory of God and the advance of His Gospel. Even though small and insignificant, it exalts its Savior through self-surrender; and in the unshakable certainty that when it gives up its life in the service of God, then it wins it; and when it becomes a grain of wheat that is laid in the earth, then it springs forth into imperishable harvest for the Lord.

May it be granted to us, brethren, even in great frailty, to set forth God's living and free congregation among men, and to set forth ourselves in and through it as a living, holy, and God-pleasing sacrifice.

So be it, so be it, for Jesus' sake! Bloodied and torn does the sacrificial bread appear upon the altar; yet if it be thus received by the Lord, the suffering and bleeding heart shall indeed find courage for every lack and healing for every pain with Him who Himself is the Man of Sorrows and of love, Jesus, our forever highly praised Savior. Amen.



4.4 The Unity of the Believers

Source: "Luthersk Tidsskrift," 1907, pp. 65–74. See the note above, p. 344. — Ed.

This section appears on pages 371–381 of the original volume. — Present Ed.

"Ye are all the children of God by faith in Christ Jesus." Gal. 3:26.

"Ye are all one in Christ Jesus." Gal. 3:28.

When we, with our human understanding, look out over the divided and torn Christendom, it appears senseless and hopeless to speak of the unity of the believers. It does not seem to be present; nor is there any prospect of ever attaining it here upon earth. It would be a superfluous waste of time here to enumerate the manifold proofs for this opinion of human reason and unbelief concerning the matter. We have heard them so often already, and they lie openly before our natural perception.

But thereby the matter is not settled; for here there is no question of a carnal matter, which can be judged by a fleshly mind. Here spiritual perception is required, which discerns spiritual things. And this is certain: that if the believers come to a clear spiritual recognition of this chief matter in Christianity, much will thereby be accomplished toward removing the stumbling blocks which disagreement and division within Christendom occasion for many.

The unity of the believers is not brought about by the believers' assembling at some place or other and resolving to be in agreement, or to organize an outward society, or by any other outward endeavor.

The unity of the believers is brought forth by faith itself. Before meetings and agreements, before constitutions and resolutions, the unity of the believers is already present in and through their faith. Just as the human race is one by the "bonds of blood," so the believers are bound together into a unity by nobler and finer, and therefore also more intimate and stronger, bonds.

It goes without saying that this analogy is justified; for it is God who "hath made of one blood all the race of mankind to dwell upon the whole compass of the earth." And it is the same God who has made it so that the believers have one Spirit and one life everywhere they are found. The new race is the raising up of the old race from the Fall, and its salvation from sin and from its inherent corruption.

When, therefore, for our edification, we would contemplate the unity of the new race, there meets us first and foremost this established fact: that all who belong to the new race have

one Father.

The same Father

There cannot be too much weight laid upon this matter. If it stands at all times a living reality before the consciousness of believers that they are “born of God,” then they become both firmer in faith and stronger in love; their fellowship with God and their love toward the brethren grow more intimate, the more clearly it stands before them that God is their Father.

It is the chief distinguishing mark of the “elect race” that it is a race born of God. This separates it from the world; this binds it together in the Spirit. It is precisely this which is the right and true glory of election, that it reveals itself in the relation to God and in kinship with Him.

There is a brief narrative in the First Book of Samuel which perhaps has not received from all the attention it ought to have. It stands in chapter 10, verses 10–12:

“And when they came thither to Gibeah, behold, a company of prophets met him; and the Spirit of God came upon him, and he prophesied among them. And it came to pass, when all that knew him beforetime saw that, behold, he prophesied among the prophets, then the people said one to another, What is this that is come unto the son of Kish? Is Saul also among the prophets? And one of the same place answered and said, And who, then, is their father? Therefore it became a proverb, Is Saul also among the prophets?”

Could it be said in a more arresting way that for a prophet it does not depend on whether he has Kish for his father? What matters is to have God for one’s Father. He who is born of God speaks by the Spirit of God; and at all times and in all places it is a miracle of God when “even a Saul is among the prophets,” that is, when one who according to his natural birth is nothing but a corrupted child of sin, by being born of God has become a child of grace, who is driven by the Spirit of God, his Father, in word and in deed.

“We have not all one Father? Hath not one God created us?” says the prophet Malachi. And he does not speak of the first creation, according to which we are all children of Adam; but he speaks of the new creation, by which God creates new men, the true children of Abraham through faith.

This new race of God’s children are the true men. For the filial status with God does not lift believers up into a new superhuman dignity, so that they may look down upon other men with contempt; no, it lifts them precisely into true human dignity, so that they again become what men were created to be—the image of God. Far from making them proud and arrogant, insensitive and egoistic, the Spirit of adoption fills them with the love of God; and as they themselves have begun to understand how great a thing it is to be true men, it becomes their highest delight and the longing of their hearts to lead others forward into the same joy and glory which they themselves have experienced.

Only see what is written of this in Acts 10:25–26: “And as Peter was coming in, Cornelius met him, and fell down at his feet, and worshipped him. But Peter took him up, saying, Stand up; I myself also am a man.” It is not a matter of crushing down, but of raising up, that concerns Peter. So far from boasting that he was more than Cornelius because he was a

Jew and a believer, he precisely lays aside the Jewish boast, because in Christ he was a true man, a child of the heavenly Father.

This new race of God's children thus bears within its very adoption this calling and this impulse, that it must seek to raise up all fallen men and gather them into that fellowship and kinship of God into which it itself has entered. Love, compassion, mercy are therefore the words that designate its relation to men, because they are all created by the same God and all by nature are the same Father's lost sons and daughters, whom it concerns us to call back to the Father's house.

In this, that they are children of one Father, the new race is nevertheless far—far in advance of the old. For in the old race the mutual kinship does indeed become more and more distant as time goes on and the number of generations increases. True as it is that we are bound together by "the ties of blood," we nevertheless know both from the history of the family and from daily experience that it is only the very nearest relatives who have any awareness of this bond; and it is not long before even those who belong to the same people stand as strangers over against one another.

But it is not so with the children of God. At all times they are, in the strictest sense, one another's brethren. Here neither family nor people, tribe nor race, land nor continent makes any difference. If we meet a Christian man or woman from Europe or Asia, Africa or Australia, at once the Christian brotherhood is there; for we have indeed one and the same Father, Him who is in the heavens. The believers' register of descent is so short: it is only child and Father—and then no more. For Jesus says: Call no man your father upon the earth; for one is your Father, He who is in the heavens.

Thus neither time nor place can abolish this unity of the believers, that they have one Father. Not even the circumstance that they have been led home to the Father in heaven by different instruments ought to make any breach in this honor and joy of the believers. It is perhaps here most often that something intrudes which would disturb the unity. But whether we are Lutherans or Wesleyans or Zwinglians or Calvinists, we nevertheless have only one Father, He who is in the heavens—if indeed we truly are God's children. Not that it is right to despise the instruments which God has used for our salvation; but neither is it right to set these instruments in the way of our fellowship with God and God's children. They help us on the way; they do not hinder us from arriving, if only the journey proceeds rightly. And if we arrive at the Father's heart by the one Mediator Jesus Christ, and by the one Spirit become the one and the same Father's children, then the difference which exists between the various divisions of the Church will not be able to make the children strangers to one another.

It is therefore not said that the difference is without significance; but of that we shall not speak here. Only this must here be emphasized with the utmost strength: that all true believers are bound together into a living unity, since they all are of one Father.

But we cannot stop there in our contemplation. The Word of God and Christian experience show us that the unity of believers is not only in the Father, but also in His Son, inasmuch as they have only one Savior, Jesus Christ.

The same Savior

Here is the center of Christianity; its true essence may in the briefest manner be designated as faith in Christ. It is precisely for this reason that our religion is called Christianity: that it revolves around Him who came into the world to make sinners saved. Therefore this also is the answer to the question of the soul's anguish: What shall I do to be saved? "Believe on the Lord Jesus, and thou shalt be saved." For faith in Christ is not a cold philosophy that leaves a man in his misery; it is a way of salvation—yes, a salvation—that makes the dead alive, and that consists precisely in this one thing: to believe on the Lord Jesus Christ. Without Jesus there is for us no access to the Father; without Jesus there is for us no work of the Spirit. In the matter of our salvation everything rests upon Him who went forth from the Father and came into the world, who left the world again and went to the Father.

It therefore cannot be otherwise than that the unity of believers, in its innermost essence, is also unity in the faith of God's Son—indeed, in God's Son Himself, Jesus Christ. So intimate is the union of believers in Christ that it is not only said of them in John 17:20–23 that they shall be one in the Father and the Son, but in Galatians 3:28 it is said even more strongly: Ye are all one in Christ Jesus. Not merely one essence or one nature with the Father and the Son, but only one personhood, inasmuch as Jesus is the Head of His body, which is the Church.

For Jesus is our Mediator and Reconciler, and faith in this crucified Savior is such a surrender to Him that we let go of everything of our own—our will and cognition, our thought and feeling, our own sin and our own death—and lay hold of Him, Him alone, with all that He is and has, so that He becomes ours and we His for time and eternity. The believers' union with Jesus is as intimate as Jesus' union with the Father, as He Himself says: "that they all may be one; as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee."

And this means so much for the unity of the believers, namely, that it does not come into being by their joining together, loving one another, praying with one another, and laboring together; but rather their unity goes before all these things and forms the foundation and presupposition for them. For the believers' fellowship, association, mutual love, and cooperation all rest upon this, that through faith they are united with Jesus Christ as the members with the Head unto one life and one body.

Let us therefore not go astray, friends, so that we imagine we can bring about or fabricate the unity of the believers by outward, church-political undertakings. It comes only through faith in Jesus, and by no other means. Herein lies, in truth, the deepest root of the great and destructive Catholic error, in that the Catholic Church places connection with the Church or the Pope in place of connection with Jesus Christ, when the question is how the unity of the believers is to be produced. In this way one departs from the necessity of personal conversion and personal faith; one merely unites oneself with the congregation or the Church, and then the Church provides for the union with Christ through the priests and bishops and the Pope.

Oh, how tempting for the carnal mind and the natural man is this Catholic conception! It steals in so unnoticed even among the most earnest Christians, if they do not continually stand on guard against it. And wherever it gains entrance, there it weakens faith, arrests prayer, extinguishes the Spirit, and transforms the congregation into an outward society of men with an outward use of the means of grace, without Spirit and life.

Therefore stand watch, and keep yourself always near to Jesus himself in simple faith, in constant and inward fellowship in prayer, so that you are first and foremost one with him; then through him you come into connection—yes, into union—with the believers, not through the believers into connection with Jesus.

But it is not to be wondered at that there are so few who are willing to walk this simple, biblical, and spiritual way. It costs so much less for our flesh when we may walk the way of Catholicism. Human nature shrinks from the way of faith, because it is the way of the Cross.

The direct encounter with the Savior is hard for flesh and blood, when we are made to stand at the foot of the Cross as poor sinners, who with tears of repentance must confess our sin and receive forgiveness of unmerited grace. And then thereafter to live and walk in faith, so that we hold fast to the Invisible as though we saw Him—this often falls so hard upon us. To surrender oneself and one's own honor and rest solely upon Jesus and His merit; to renounce one's own will and follow Jesus in the bloody footsteps; to lose the pleasant feeling that we are benefactors of the congregation by joining ourselves to it and supporting it, and in return must feel that we are poor beggars at the door of grace—yes, this is indeed heavy for the great, proud, vain old Adam. Yes, it truly is so; yet the death of the flesh is the life of the Spirit, and to be cut off from the old, sin-defiled race and grafted into the pure, holy Jesus, and to have one's life from Him and in Him, this is in truth a greater honor than all the glory of the world. To cast off the old, unclean, defiled garment and put on the Lord Jesus—what would not an earnest soul give for such an exchange! Mortal indeed it is to be rid of the false sheen and the useless self-deception, and to come to the genuine, unadulterated being that accompanies living faith in Jesus—what is it not worth!

Let us therefore walk this direct way! It is not only the foremost; it is the only one; no other leads to the goal, which is the blessed life of the soul in time and in eternity. If we go in faith to Jesus and lay hold of Him as He is, then we have in Him the Reconciler, the Teacher, and the King. We are reconciled with the Father and filled with His love; we learn to walk the narrow way of life and to conduct ourselves in love; we receive a Head and a Lord who leads us with the tenderest love and grants us the most honorable calling that can be bestowed upon a human being—to wage the battle of light against darkness and to labor for the restoration of a fallen race to the glory of God. And in this way, and in this way only, do we attain a unity among believers that is not dependent upon outward things, nor broken by faults and frailties, offenses and scandals among the faithful. So long as they yet cling to Jesus, the unity is there; and only the one who falls away from the Lord comes out of that chain which binds the friends of Jesus together.

Therefore the matter concerns faith and the inward vitality of faith; for where the connection with the Head, Jesus, abides, there the mutual union and coherence of the members also abides. And in order that this connection with Jesus may be secure and independent of human strength and will, there has been given to the children of God, as the third strong bond of unity, the one Spirit, God's own Holy Spirit, the Spirit of faith and of love, that their unity might be the work of the triune God.

The same Spirit

The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit unite all believers, so that they constitute the one

true fellowship upon earth, a fellowship that is not dissolved throughout all eternity.

There could be no fellowship with the Father and the Son except through the Spirit. There is no faith, no love, no hope, except through the Spirit. All that Christians gather together under the word “spiritual life” must and can be wrought only by God’s own Spirit.

Sin took the Spirit away from mankind. “In his corruption man is flesh,” says the Scripture in Genesis 6:3. Therefore the Spirit of God can be given only on the ground of the atonement of our sins through the death of Jesus Christ. The atonement is the condition for the outpouring of the Spirit; and it is the Jesus who was lifted up upon the cross and at the cross, who sends forth the Spirit in order to draw all unto himself. And all who do not resist the Spirit’s calling voice, the blessed invitation through the Gospel, come to the cross of Christ and believe in the crucified One; and the Spirit who called them and drew them takes up his dwelling in the broken and opened hearts, and fills them with the love and mind of the crucified Savior. There the “middle wall” is broken down, there the “enmity” is slain, there all believers are gathered and united into one body through the one Spirit.

The Spirit manifests himself in individual believers as the principle of life and the impulse to labor. He works as a unifying power that binds Head and members together; he is felt as the gift of willingness, which places all Christ’s disciples in his willing host, ready to serve him, because he “has loosed their bonds” (Psalm 116:16).

The Holy Spirit is the principle of election, which separates the chosen race from the world. Therefore resistance to the Spirit is so dangerous, and blasphemy against the Spirit unforgivable; for where the heart is closed to the Spirit, no salvation is possible.

Where, on the other hand, the broken heart opens itself to the Spirit of God and the love of Christ, there a dwelling of God comes into being, a member of Christ, which is led and governed by His will and therefore accomplishes what He wills to have done.

And all these individual souls together become a spiritual house and a holy body of Jesus Christ.

Therefore it is said that all the children of God are one — that is, one person in Jesus Christ; for just as the head rules the whole body and uses it to express and carry out its will, so Jesus, by the Spirit, is mighty and active in all His believers, to lead them and to work through them.

Naturally, the unity of believers is not a matter that lies under their dominion and control, so that they may deal with it as they please. It belongs to their life and being, and is a power of God that prevails in them so long as their faith is living. Another matter it is that they can quench the Spirit, fall away from the faith, and thus also come out of the unity.

Yet the Spirit of God in the redeemed soul is nonetheless freedom, not bondage. Therefore Scripture calls the fellowship of believers not only the body of Christ, but also the bride of Jesus. And this latter image emphasizes no less than the former the unity of believers with Jesus and with one another; but at the same time it also highlights the freedom which the Spirit of love gives. There is always a selfhood in believers which makes their life in Christ a life of freedom, a life that is lived only by those who continually surrender themselves to Him

in the obedience of the Spirit. They can break the bond — and lose the life.

The unity of believers, since it is such an effect of the triune God, will show itself in a powerful and recognizable manner. The chosen race has its marks and its tasks, and it is undoubtedly justified to include them here, even if they can be mentioned only in the greatest brevity.

It comes from faith; but faith is a matter of the heart; from this it follows that it is said in Acts 4:32: "And the multitude of them that believed were of one heart and of one soul." Precisely because they all believed in the same Savior, therefore they were so heartily bound together among themselves. For one faith brings with it one understanding, one will, and one feeling in them all. And if there arises in any one of them a disturbance or confusion in their spiritual life, it is felt throughout the whole fellowship, and there immediately begins an activity on the part of the others to remedy such a need.

The smallest wound is perceptible in a body so finely sensitive, and at once there arises an effort to have the wound healed. It therefore cannot be otherwise than that errors and missteps which threaten the truth or the purity are sought corrected as soon as may be. To have Cain's evil mind, which would not be his brother's keeper, is impossible to unite with the unity of the believers or with the Spirit of God. In a good and true sense every believer is his brother's keeper; for he who preserves his brother from error and fall preserves him in the life of fellowship with Jesus, and he who turns a brother from the error of his way saves a soul from death and hides a multitude of sins.

Therefore the unity of the believers is marked by their inward and heartfelt care for one another in all things. Great or small makes no difference; the living interest they have in one another is of divine origin, and the measure of their concern is not reckoned by a human standard.

And no different is it with the tasks of the kingdom of God, which have been entrusted to His congregation to fulfill. The kingdom of the Son of Man has within itself a divine necessity and impulse to embrace all peoples and to make them all partakers of the blessing which was promised to Abraham and to his seed. The unity of the believers shows itself herein, that they all share this nature, that they seek the salvation of the lost, whether the unredeemed are near at hand or far away. At home and abroad the unity of the believers is visible and recognizable by this zeal for the salvation of souls, this struggle for the kingdom of light and of life upon the earth. With one heart and with one tongue the fellowship of believers praises God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—for salvation, and confesses faith in the Triune God. With one heart and with one strength they labor for the same great cause of the kingdom: the proclamation of the Gospel to all nations.

Yet by this it is not said that they are not also many and do not rejoice heartily in becoming more. It has rightly been said that God is the God of diversity and takes delight in diversity. His creation is manifold, and yet the same mighty life pulses through the whole of it. His believers are manifold and endowed with manifold gifts; yet they are all permeated by the same Spirit and the same spiritual life. Let us therefore beware of becoming narrow in our hearts and in our judgments, so that we condemn as dead those whom the Lord nevertheless acknowledges, because they do not appear exactly as we think they ought. We remember the Apostle's exhortation in 1 Corinthians 12:15–17, and this exhortation is not superfluous in

our own day. Enlarged hearts are needed among God's children, that they may be so much the more like Him with the great Father-heart, who has spared nothing and spares nothing in order to draw all into the embrace of love.

Therefore, brothers and sisters in the Lord, let us give the Spirit room in our hearts—ever greater room—so that the Father and the Son may come in to us and dwell and abide with us, so that, united with the Triune God and with one another, we may become a harmonious power in the world of sin and death, to practice the work of faith and love, and thus prepare the way for the kingdom that is coming, that all flesh shall see the salvation of God.