

Professor Georg Sverdrup

Essays and Addresses

On the Congregation

Edited by

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Minneapolis, Minnesota

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The texts presented herein are historical documents.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.

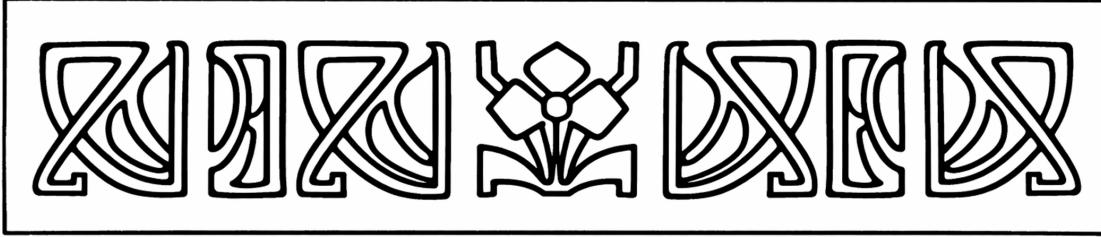
The portrait of the author which accompanies the present volume was taken in 1895 and is considered one of the best from that period.

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 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 54–64 of the original volume. — Present Ed.

1.1 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 world¹ 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 Society² 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

¹Universal Justification — Present Ed.

²The 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.

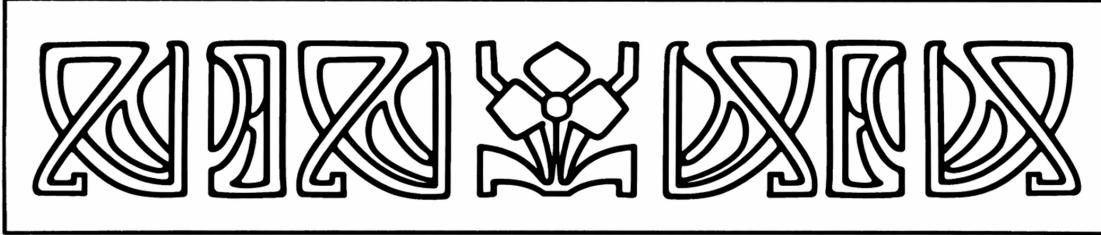
Let it indeed take time to have a congregation built up; but let it also be well understood that it is neither priest nor congregation that shall judge whether those who enter have on the wedding garment.

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 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.

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.’”*³

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.

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

³“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.

"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 Church? 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?

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?

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.”

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?

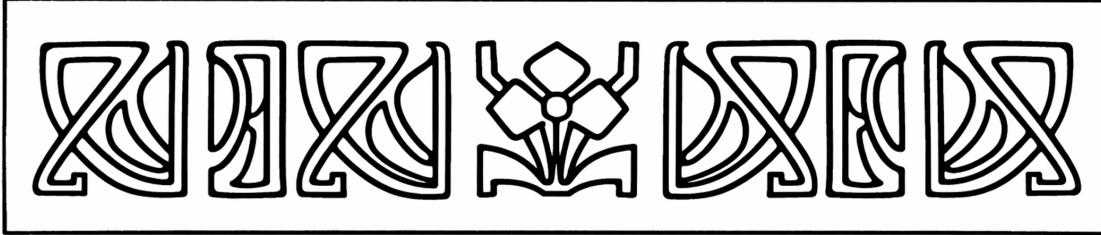
Do they do the works of Christ and nothing other than the works of Christ?

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.



3 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 Redeemer⁴, who was preached to them. To join oneself to the congregation and to be

⁴The 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,"⁵ 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.

⁵The 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.

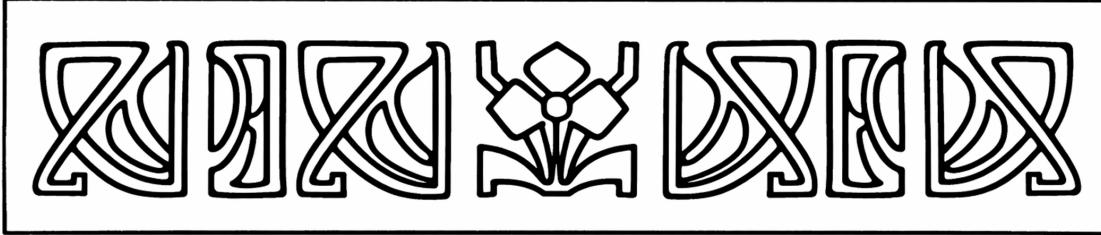
It avails nothing to suppose that we can set our judgment concerning a man in the place of the Lord's judgment. He himself has the keys and opens and shuts in the one perfect manner; but upon us rests the responsibility for the unwearied labor of preaching the Word

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 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

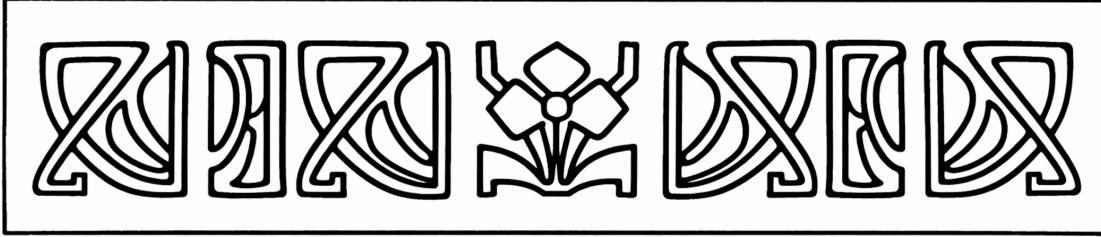
of edification. What in Europe is called inner mission is another branch of the congregation's activity, which one has in part with greater justice called rescue work. Both home mission and heathen mission spring from the same root, are driven by the same Spirit, are equally necessary for the congregation, 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.



5 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.