

Professor Georg Sverdrup

Essays and Addresses

On the Congregation

Edited by

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Minneapolis, Minnesota

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Editorial and Project Disclaimer

This volume is an independent scholarly and technical project and is not affiliated with or endorsed by any church body, academic institution, or organization.

The texts presented herein are historical documents.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.

Translations in this volume were produced with the assistance of artificial intelligence-based language tools and were critically reviewed for semantic, theological, and stylistic fidelity to the original Norwegian sources. Responsibility for the translations rests with the editor.

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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.

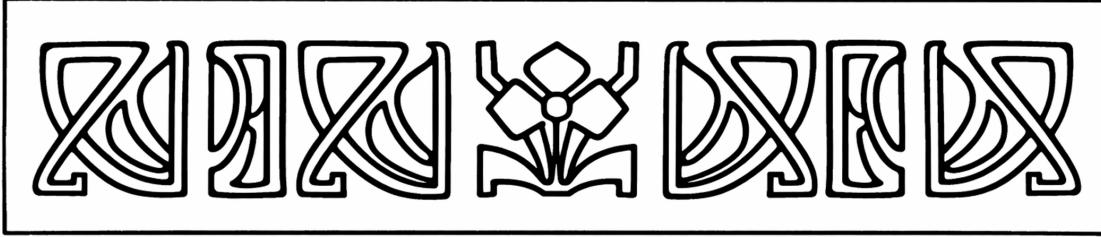
The portrait of the author which accompanies the present volume was taken in 1895 and is considered one of the best from that period.

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.

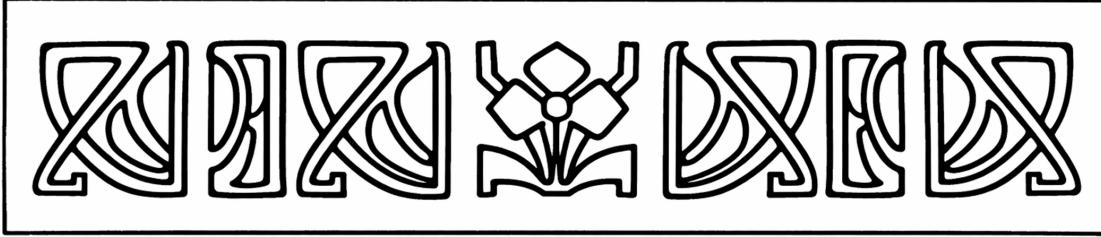
Let it indeed take time to have a congregation built up; but let it also be well understood that it is neither priest nor congregation that shall judge whether those who enter have on the wedding garment.

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.