

# CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL MONTHLY

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The *Altpreuussische Union*

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## BRIEF STUDIES

### AN AGREED STATEMENT ON THE CHURCH AND THE MINISTRY

EDITORIAL NOTE: The following statement was adopted by the Joint Theological Commission of the Church of South India and of the Federation of Evangelical Lutheran Churches in India.

(1) The nature of the church and of the ministry within the church can only be understood rightly within the context of God's revelation of Himself, His eternal saving purpose, His saving act in Jesus Christ His Son and the continuing saving work of the risen and ascended Christ through the Holy Spirit. The church exists by the grace of God and those who belong to it are members of the church by the grace of God.

(2) The church exists and men are called into the fellowship of the church in order that through it God may carry out His eternal purpose in Christ (Eph. 3:9-11). It is a fellowship of men with God and with one another, in Christ. It is the fellowship of the Holy Spirit. At its heart is this fellowship with God; it is at its deepest a reality in the Spirit. We believe that it is God's will that men become members of the church through faith in the gospel and baptism into Christ (Eph. 2:8-10; John 3:5; Matt. 28:19,20). To be outside the church by unbelief or to be cut off from the church's fellowship because of unrepented sin is a serious matter. Yet, in the present state of disunity, no body of Christians can rightly claim to be in an exclusive sense the church or look upon its judgments as necessarily inspired by the Spirit.

(3) It is God's purpose that the church should be the place where He and His saving work in Christ are manifest. It is His will that the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church be seen in actual communities of human beings, baptized into Christ, to which He can make known His will and through which He can fulfill it (John 17:21). Because of the continuing fact of human sin, even in the redeemed, the church is not in any of its manifestations wholly obedient to the will of God. But the church of God in every place is called continually to turn to God, so that through its life Christ may be set forth.

(4) We not only speak of the church in the sense of the totality of all Christ's people, throughout all ages and all lands, who are one in Him; and of the church as the local fellowship of believers who gather in one place. We also use the word "church" of the Christians in a region and of those Christians who belong to a par-

ticular denomination. Where such usage carries with it the implication that other Christians are not members of the church universal, it is not in accordance with the New Testament. We do well to recognize that the fundamental unity is God's gift in Christ and does in a real sense appear even where, owing to history, race or tradition, there are such wide divergencies in belief and practice among those calling themselves Christians that we cannot yet see any way towards visible unity consistent with loyalty to Christ and His truth. We should seek to discover and to develop this unity in our one Lord and to express it wherever we can in acts of obedience together. There is under the conditions of the world today need for Christians to discover and obey the will of God in and through a continuing fellowship which covers a wider area than any one local congregation. Where this fellowship, united in the word and the sacraments, is a manifestation of the presence of the Holy Spirit and an instrument of God's working, it may be called the church.

(5) The church is apostolic in its essential nature, in the sense that it shares in the mission of the Son by the Father and is empowered by the Holy Spirit (John 20:21-23). For the accomplishment of this total ministry to the world there is given by the Holy Spirit to every member of the church some form of ministering (1 Cor. 12). Every Christian, man and woman, has a charisma, a spiritual gift. It is an error to think that some members of the church are called to be active and others to be passive. Every member is meant both to give and to receive. The inter-related activity of the whole body of Christ is the revelation of the inter-related activity of the Triune God in His saving work for the universe. In relation to the world, out of which God has called His church, the whole church is a royal priesthood, in and through which Christ brings God to the world and the world to God. To be the church is to be a ministering community, because it is the body of Christ, who came "not to be ministered unto but to minister" (Mark 10:45).

(6) In order that through His church Christ may be made manifest to the world which He died to save, the quality of the relationship between every member of the church and Christ and of every member of the church one with another in Christ is vital. Therefore Christ has given to His church a ministry, in the special sense of persons set apart to perform certain functions within the fellowship, which are needed so that the church may worship God in thankful remembrance of His saving act in Christ and may witness for Him to the world (Eph. 4:11,12). This pastoral office was given to the apostles at the first. There is a "watching over" the sheep and a "serving"

of the sheep, *episkope* and *diakonia*. Both are found in Christ and both He entrusts to men (1 Peter 5:1-4). We believe that the continuance of such a ministry is necessary to the full well-being and activity of the church everywhere and in all ages. We believe that by Christ's will it rests upon the church to determine, in dependence upon the Holy Spirit, how from time to time these functions of watching and serving shall be carried out. We see no reason to believe that any one pattern of the Christian ministry has an exclusive claim to divine ordering and approval at all times and under all conditions. If we discern God at work within any body of Christians through a ministry of the word and the sacraments, we are bound to take this fact into account in any discussion about Christian unity.

(7) This ministry is within the church and is not to be thought of as possessing any independent relation to Christ or any authority which is not given by Christ in the church and for the life and work of the church. It is not the creation of the church and it is given to the church not to please the church but to do the will of Christ its Lord. It is the duty of the church to be alert to recognize that God has called this or that man to this special ministry, in whatever form, and to set him apart by prayer and, according to ancient custom, laying on of hands, to the office. At the heart of the work of the ministry must always be the preaching of the gospel and the administration of the sacraments, for it is in and through them that Christ constitutes and keeps alive His church.

(8) The essential continuity of the church is in the continued presence and activity of the Lord with the faithful. But, because the church's obedience is imperfect, the church has not continued perfectly "in love." The fellowship has been broken. Because of disunity among Christians, changes in the form, manner of ordination and functions of the ministry have been made without the approval of the whole church on earth at the time. It appeared to those responsible then, and appears to many today, that such action was inevitable unless they were to be false to the gospel. Yet, although we may agree that such changes may at times rightly be made, we must insist that they can only be justified if done prayerfully and with the widest possible approval of Christians, subject always to the absolute duty of loyalty to Christ and the gospel. God is a God of order, and we may not lightly change what we have inherited. Yet order itself may be made into an idolatry that turns men away from the living God. All remain under obligation to seek God's way for the restoration of unity in the Spirit.

(9) Every church makes rules for the selection and setting apart of men for the ministry and keeps a list of those whom it accepts as ministers within its fellowship. In the sense of obedience to its rules, validity is an essential concept of any society. The error comes when we identify the rules of our church with the absolute will of God, and deny, implicitly or explicitly, that God accepts and uses some other form of the ministry equally with the form to which we are accustomed. It is not for us to determine how and where God can work.

(10) It is true that the personal exercise of oversight (*episkope*) was early entrusted by the church to one bishop in each area. This ordering was for many centuries universal, and is still the accepted form among the majority of Christians. We do not hold that it is essential for the existence of the church, or for the ministry and the sacraments; or that God has bound Himself to grant through it greater blessing, authority or grace than through other forms of the church's ministry. It has been and can be grievously misused, as can every gift of God. But we see value in it as expressing through a person the oversight which is a vital part of the pastoral ministry within the church. The presence or absence of episcopacy, however, ought not by itself to determine the relationship of one church with another.