



# THE SPRINGFIELDER

July 1974  
Volume 38, Number 3

## "The Church's One Foundation"

DAVID P. SCAER

THE EVANGELICAL LUTHERANS IN MISSION have adopted as their position paper a document called *The Church's One Foundation*, a name taken from a hymn written by the Anglican bishop Samuel J. Stone in the nineteenth century. It was clear from those proposing and adopting the statement that it was not to be forced on the consciences of others, but that it was to help put the focus on current problems. In one way or another it will enter the confessional history of our time, as it reflects the theological thinking of a large portion of The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod. On that account, an analytical response is not inappropriate at this time. Two basic issues stand out among those which are discussed in *The Church's One Foundation*. The two issues are those relating to authority in the church and the church itself.

### A. AUTHORITY

The framers of the document are aware that a charge of "Gospel reductionism" has been brought against them, and in a certain sense they consider this description valid. The older, more generally accepted, traditional position of Lutheranism sees the Bible as the only source of authority, *sola scriptura*. *The Church's One Foundation* wants to move away from this position. This is not to say that the Bible plays no role in the authority question, but it becomes ancillary to Christ or the "Gospel" for purposes of authority. The basis of authority in the church is the "Gospel" itself. The "Gospel" itself convinces the writers that the "Gospel" itself is the basis of authority in the church. The "Gospel" is "the source and goal of all true doctrine."<sup>1</sup> The document has a particular meaning of the word "Gospel" which we shall not fail to discuss, but it is incumbent upon us to discuss first the "Gospel" as the principle of authority in *The Church's One Foundation*.

In making the "Gospel" the principle of authority, the document eliminates other possibilities. First of all, the Bible is not to be considered the one or basic principle of authority. This is handled in several ways in the document. The clearest expression of this principle occurs when the document says that the question "How do I know the Gospel is true?" may not be answered with "Because the Bible says so." Also, mentioned as unacceptable bases for the "Gospel's" authority are "rational proof, ecclesiastical authority, religious experience, or a doctrine about the Bible."<sup>2</sup> Since Lutheranism has tradi-

---

*Writer's Note:* The Church's One Foundation was printed in Missouri in Perspective, I, 22 (August 26, 1974), pp. 1f. It seems to have been adopted as the Here We Stand, document of Evangelical Lutherans in Mission on August 27, 1974, according to Missouri in Perspective, I, 23 (September 9, 1974), p. 3. I am assuming that *The Church's One Foundation* was adopted as the Here We Stand document without alteration. Any explanation of the change of the name of the document has escaped me, as have any emendations made by the adopting assembly.

tionally spoken of the Bible as the basis of authority, the document singles out this view from among the unacceptable options for special attention. The document merges the concept of the Bible as authority with the concept of "a doctrine about the Bible" in such a way that for the writers these two different concepts become actually only one concept. This confusion, deliberate or accidental, is scarcely helpful. Some time ago I discussed these issues in "The Law-Gospel Debate in the Missouri Synod" and "Theses on the Law and the Gospel,"<sup>3</sup> and I should like to refer the reader back to these essays for a more extensive clarification of these issues. At this time, I should like to repeat that, before an individual accepts salvation in Jesus Christ as his ransom from sin, he has to make a number of prior assumptions. He has to believe that there is a God, that the word condemning him as a sinner is God's word (Law), and, at least implicitly, that the word bringing the news of his salvation is God's word. This word can be the Bible itself, a message contained in the Bible, or a message which is in some way derived from the Bible. Enough said on this matter here, as I should only be repeating myself. *The Church's One Foundation*, however, seems to reject the understanding just outlined when it asserts that "it is false to say that faith in Jesus the Christ depends upon a prior and 'implicit' faith in everything contained in the Bible."<sup>4</sup> (Would the authors of the document accept the rejected statement as true if "everything" were changed to "something"?) Scored as unacceptable are "a prior faith in the Bible" and "an implicit 'faith' in the Bible as the inerrant word of God." The last option is said to verge on "idolatry."<sup>5</sup> *The Church's One Foundation* does, to be sure, have positive words to say about "reason, the Bible, feelings, and the Church's witness." They inform and enrich the understanding of faith, but they are not faith's foundation.

In several places and in different ways, the point is made clear that the "Gospel" is the basic principle of authority. Two questions must be put forth: How is this "Gospel" defined? How does the Gospel's authority convince me? Since adherence to the principle of "Gospel reductionism" is acknowledged and since the document explicitly gives the "Gospel" the position of the standard or final norm, these are really the important questions. Two synonyms seem to be used in the document for the term "Gospel"; "the word of God for the world" and "the Gospel of the Kingdom."<sup>6</sup> There might be a slight shade of difference in the use of these phrases, but such a distinction cannot be determined on the basis of this document alone. They will be handled as one concept under the designation of "Gospel." "Gospel" involves "word and action, preaching and service, judgment and healing."<sup>7</sup> For its target is not only the church, but it "encompasses the whole of life, social and individual, religious and secular."<sup>8</sup> The comment might be in order here that this assertion seems to reflect "the theology of hope" which effectually abolishes the lines between what Luther called the kingdoms of the left and right hands, the secular and spiritual realms. "The Church witnesses to the presence and coming of the Kingdom."<sup>9</sup> This statement also seems to be a description of "Gospel." The chief sign of this "King-

dom's coming" is the "Lord's cross and resurrection victory over sin and death."<sup>10</sup> One is at a loss to understand why the concept of "Gospel" which is basic to the document, is defined in such minimal terms, unless of course the "Gospel" is minimal in content. To be sure, the authority of the "Gospel" and the function of the "Gospel" receive more attention. But what the Gospel is in itself is most inadequately presented. These few conclusions can be drawn from what the document present: (1) The "Gospel" involves oral proclamation. (2) The "Gospel" involves service in the sense of rendering some type of physical aid, i.e., "healing." (3) The "Gospel" signals the coming of the Kingdom, but the concept of "Kingdom" is barely defined. (4) The signs of this coming Kingdom are the cross and resurrection victory, but there seems to be latitude for other signs. (More must be said about the "signs" concept later.) In short, the "Gospel" seems to be the church's proclamation in word and deed of its own continuing life. Jesus is a part of this life. I should welcome any assistance in arriving at a more precise definition of "Gospel" as used in *The Church's One Foundation*. What is startling is what is not included. The Gospel has been traditionally defined as the news that Jesus Christ, God's Son, has offered a full and perfect atonement for all sins, or something of the same character. No such concept appears in *The Church's One Foundation*.

The second question which must be asked, as I have noted, is how does the "Gospel's" authority convince me. The Bible, reason, feelings, and ecclesiastical authority have already been mentioned as answers which are found unacceptable. The answer which the document gives to his question is very simple: faith. "*Faith is the gift bestowed by the working of the Holy Spirit through the Gospel proclaimed and celebrated in the means of Grace. Any answer beyond this or other than this betrays the chief treasure of Lutheranism.*" (Emphases are in the original document.)<sup>11</sup> This same principle is also stated in a negative way: "To 'prove' the Gospel by something other than the Gospel is to deny the Gospel."<sup>12</sup> Much could be said about this concept. (1) It seems to be a variation on the position that the Bible is true because it claims to be true. Now it is applied to the "Gospel" principle. (2) It moves the *sola fide* into the position previously occupied by the *sola scriptura* in Lutheran theology. In Lutheran theology, faith alone was the posture of the believer who trusted in God alone for salvation because of the merits of Jesus Christ. *Sola fide* was not the principle whereby the believer determined what was true either for himself or anyone else. (3) The question of authority is merged and submerged into the question of soteriology. The basis of theology dissolves into the goal. The idea seems to be: "I know that the Gospel is true because I am saved." Salvation precedes truth. (But if salvation precedes truth, is damnation even a possibility?) (4) The concept that the "Gospel" is true simply because it is true, presents a number of problems. (a) This is an assertion without any type of verification. It could be used of any axiom. (b) If the "Gospel" is the source of its own truth, then what about the Law? If the "Gospel" is the source of all religious truth, then the Law is not true. Or the Law is true only after one comes to an

awareness of the truth of the "Gospel." Or is the Law simply subsumed into "Gospel"? (d) This kind of "Gospel" suspended in midair reflects a Barthianism which sees the "Word" as non-historical and incapable of human verification. It is just plain fideism: "I simply believe because I believe." (e) It is reasoning in a circle, a criticism that can be leveled against many theologies and philosophies.

## B. THE CHURCH

The other major topic discussed at some length is the doctrine of the church and the related issue of fellowship. As I previously mentioned, the church's life is included as part of the Gospel proclamation. Church unity is "a sign of the future offered in promise to the whole of mankind."<sup>13</sup> Since visible unity is a means of "evangelizing," this unity must be made manifest. Divisions in the church, presumably denominational ones, must be obliterated so that the church can carry out this function in regard to the world. How do the authors of the document face up to the phenomenon of the Reformation which clearly resulted in what could be called "scandalous divisions," to use the document's own terms? The formation of the "Lutheran church" (small 'c') was necessary "to sustain the confessional movement to preserve the 'Gospel' in the face of human traditions," i.e., presumably the papacy. The same rationale is seen in the formation of the Missouri Synod in the nineteenth century. The same reason offered for the formation of the Lutheran Church in the sixteenth century and the Missouri Synod in the nineteenth is offered for the possibly necessary division now envisioned by the framers of *The Church's One Foundation*: "We cannot and we will not compromise the Gospel in order to preserve the human institution that is The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod."<sup>14</sup> There is a remarkable consistency in how the sixteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth century problems are viewed. Where the "Gospel" is not permitted to be the only source of authority by the human ecclesiastical institution (i.e., Rome in the sixteenth century, other Lutheran denominations in the nineteenth century, and the Missouri Synod in the twentieth century), there the formation of and separation into a "confessional movement" is not only permissible, but required. Certainly some scholars, if not most, will question this document's understanding of the sixteenth and nineteenth century problems. Here might be an example of how church history can be adjusted philosophically or theologically. Nevertheless, the document applies its principle consistently. On the other hand, fellowship is not only permissible but demanded by the document where the Gospel principle is tolerated.

Every school of theological thought has its heresy, i.e., a doctrine or position that it cannot tolerate if its own system is to survive. For *The Church's One Foundation*, the heresy is any attitude intolerant of making the Gospel the only basis of religious authority. Where this principle is affirmed, fellowship is possible and demanded. Where it is denied, fellowship can no longer exist. For the document the heresy may be designated as "legalism," "institutional glory," and "self-satisfied isolationism," in brief, "sectarian."<sup>15</sup>

*The Church's One Foundation* views "the Church" as all Chris-

tian denominations. Together they are called "the whole Body of Christ."<sup>16</sup> It is recognizable by baptism<sup>17</sup> and by the confession of "Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior." "Lutheranism" is not to be viewed so much as a separate denomination, but as a movement marked by loyalty to the catholic creeds and the Lutheran symbols. Denominational barriers are to be transcended so that Lutherans may share their unique gifts with others. The only possible barrier to fellowship is an attitude that forbids the exercise of the "Gospel" principle. *The Church's One Foundation* claims that it has a doctrinal position. It does, the maintenance of the "Gospel" principle as authority. "The Gospel is our very life, and the only ground and hope for true unity. We cannot permit it to be compromised."<sup>18</sup>

### C. OTHER ISSUES

Because of the nature of *The Church's One Foundation*, it cannot handle all issues raised adequately; it is simply too short to do so. "Gospel" and "the Church" receive the lion's share of attention. Every theological movement has certain issues which distinguish it from other positions. "Gospel" and "the Church" seem to share the limelight in *The Church's One Foundation*. Other issues, however, are alluded to and a few comments might be in order here.

1. *Salvation and damnation.* The failure to distinguish the believing and saved church from the unbelieving and damned world can be noted. This is central to the Gospel of John, where the world does not receive Jesus as the Savior and must suffer damnation by God as a just consequence. This position is assumed by the present writer to be basic to Christianity and not to be debated here. Reflecting the thinking of "the theology of hope," however, salvation, for *The Church's One Foundation*, seems to envelop the whole world. "God intends that the Church's unity be manifest to the world, so that the world may see in that beloved community a sign of the future offered in promise to the whole of humankind."<sup>19</sup> The lack of a specific article on damnation, moreover, tends to confirm one's suspicions of the presence of universalism in the document. This same concept seems to lie behind the statement, "Jesus is Lord of all or he is not Lord at all."<sup>20</sup> "Lord" is used here in the sense of Savior and not in the sense absolute divine sovereignty. For although the day is coming that all in heaven and hell will acknowledge the Lordship of Jesus (Philippians 2), hell will scarcely hail Him as Redeemer, Savior, and Atoner.

2. *The Origin and Function of the Holy Scripture.* Much has already been said of how *The Church's One Foundation* no longer sees the Bible as the basic authority. Something must be said in addition on how it sees the Bible's origin and use. It has been said that "Gospel" is viewed in the document as a proclamation of what the Christian community says and does. It follows quite naturally, then, that the Scriptures are viewed as productions of the Christian community. "As to the Scriptures, we believe that the Old Testament, received from God's first chosen people, and the New Testament, written and collected in the early Christian community, are indeed given by God. They are an unique part of the tradition of God's peo-

ple, written by pen and inspired by the Holy Spirit who, it is promised, will lead us into all truth."<sup>21</sup> The collecting of the Bible by the community is made primary. It is part of the tradition of the church. Inspiration only follows the writing. Viewing the Scriptures as community products finds its origin in Friedrich Schleiermacher's thought, which saw the community as the principle of religious authority. This idea seems fundamental to *The Church's One Foundation*. Suffice it to say here that the promise of the Spirit's leading us into all truth was made only to the apostles, not, as the document suggests, to "us," i.e., the church or the Christian community. The promise applies only partially and indirectly to us—that is, in so far as we listen to and learn from the testimony of the apostles, which we know, on the basis of this promise (John 16), is completely truthful, without error of any kind. That errorless apostolic testimony consists for us today, of course, in the Holy Scriptures of the New Testament.

*The Church's One Foundation* says some things, moreover, about the use of the Bible. It is asserted, for example, that the historical-critical method is to be used to examine our own partial understanding of the Scriptures.<sup>22</sup> There is scarcely enough offered, however, to warrant a comment on this point. The Scriptures are seen in relationship to Jesus Christ. "The purpose of Scriptural study in the Church is to find out what the Bible says about God's gracious purpose in Jesus Christ."<sup>23</sup> This statement is, of course, very true in and of itself, but, as it stands in the context of the document under discussion, we are once again confronted with the problem of how we know about Jesus. For if it is the Bible *per se* which determines our understanding of the Bible, then the Bible becomes the principle or source of authority. Yet, this position has been so frequently condemned in *The Church's One Foundation* (as previously noted in this paper) that nothing more has to be said about it here. We are compelled to deduce, therefore, that the authors of *The Church's One Foundation* distinguish between such parts of the Bible as are determinative for our understanding of God's gracious purpose in Jesus Christ and such parts of the Bible as are not determinative for this understanding. What, then, is the higher authority by which we can distinguish between parts of Scripture in this manner? For the document before us, the answer is evidently "the working of the Holy Spirit through the Gospel," or the product of this action, "faith."<sup>24</sup> And we must remember that this "Gospel," in turn, is an emanation from and expression of the community. Thus, we are left dangling in midair on a frayed thread of a "faith" such as might be woven by Kierkegaardians or Barthians, but scarcely by true Lutherans.

3. *Miracles*. The brief section on miracles is ambivalent. *The Church's One Foundation* states that "the Scriptures record many extraordinary events, including miracles performed by prophets, apostles, and by our Lord himself."<sup>25</sup> But it takes no definite position on whether or not miracles really happened. It simply states that they are recorded. This assertion skirts the whole issue. Miracles are included within the category of "extraordinary events." Extraordinary events, I should say, are not necessarily miraculous. They are simply

events which we do not expect. Just how, then, do "miracles" fit into the category of "extraordinary events"? Jesus chased out the money changers from the temple. This was an extraordinary event in His day. Is the raising of Lazareth cut from the same cloth? This ambivalent handling of miracles is only compounded by the following statement: "The question is not whether God is strong enough to do such extraordinary things; the mystery is that a God of such strength made himself so weak for our salvation."<sup>26</sup> Instead of discussing miracles, we are told to direct our gaze to the weakness of God. Is not the issue of miracles being skirted again in another way? How would the weakness of God, presumably in Jesus, have any meaning if it were not for the demonstration of His might in miracles?

We are faced next with an apparently blatant contradiction. We have previously been told, "By God's grace we are called to manifest, celebrate and proclaim the signs of the Kingdom's coming. The chief such sign is our Lord's cross and resurrection victory over sin and death."<sup>27</sup> Now we are told, "The community that God gathers and sustains around baptismal font, pulpit, and communion table does not approach the Bible seeking to be amazed by signs and wonders" (i.e., "extraordinary events, including miracles").<sup>28</sup> Is not the resurrection a sign in the sense of a miracle? When we gather together, are we not amazed by the sign of the resurrection in at least some way? Which is it, a religion with the sign of the resurrection or one without the sign of the resurrection?

There are, in fact, two other symptoms of confusion, in the sentence, "The chief such sign is our Lord's cross and resurrection victory over sin and death."<sup>29</sup> In the first place, cross and resurrection are not one sign, but two! There is, moreover, a confusion of the signs with the theological truth which such historical signs signify. For our Lord's victory over sin and death is not a sign but the thing signed. Our Lord's victory is the theological truth. The historical events of the crucifixion and the resurrection serve as signs of this victory. Let not the reader think these criticisms picayunish. We must remember that, for Tillich, cross and resurrection become one. In fact, for Tillich the cross of Jesus is His resurrection victory. Others are willing to assert a resurrection victory for Jesus and leave unanswered the questions of the signs, namely, whether there were an empty tomb and a resuscitation of His dead body, i.e., an actual physical resurrection. Without judging the intentions of the writers of *The Church's One Foundation*, such opinions are tolerated and, yes, even suggested by the wording of the document, "resurrection victory." Because of the theological climate, especially in New Testament studies in the Western world today, no ambivalence can be tolerated in any contemporary, public confessional document.

4. *Sundry Matters.* *The Church's One Foundation* needs much further revision if the authors wish to make a clear confession of their faith. The person of Jesus, for one thing, receives a treatment less than lucid. For example, the phrase, "God reveals himself in history and through history,"<sup>30</sup> fails to point out the distinction between world history in general and the special history associated with Israel and Jesus by and in which God worked redemption. Here one gets a



reflection again of "theology of hope," which also fails to make this distinction, working with a concept of history which is universally revelatory. The concept of "the incarnation by which God bound himself to our history in Jesus of Nazareth"<sup>31</sup> would be acceptable to an adoptionist.

*The Church's One Foundation* has been produced at a significant juncture in the history of The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod and has received acceptance by a prominent portion of this synod's members. We would be amiss in our obligations if we did not give that careful scrutiny to this document which it calls for and deserves. The framers of the document would be amiss also if they failed to provide us with the many clarifications which their assertions demand.

### FOOTNOTES

The numbers in the notes correspond to the paragraphs in *The Church's One Foundation* as it was printed in *Missouri in Perspective*, unless otherwise indicated.

1. 19.
2. 14.
3. *The Springfielder*, XXXVI, 3 (December 1972), pp. 156-171; XXXVII, 1 (June 1973), pp. 53-63.
4. 14.
5. 16.
6. 4.
7. 4.
8. 4.
9. 5.
10. 5.
11. 15.
12. 16.
13. 2.
14. 21.
15. 7.
16. 7.
17. 8. One aside: Why should baptism be so important to the scheme, except for the fact that it has been honored by hoary tradition in the ancient and Lutheran churches? Why not elevate Holy Communion or something else to the status of a necessary prerequisite to membership in "the church"? To make baptism a necessary component part of the Christian community seems to negate the principle that the "Gospel" is the unifying principle, unless Baptism is defined as a necessary sign of the "Gospel." But why?
18. 9.
19. 2.
20. 4.
21. 12.
22. 13.
23. 17.
24. 15.
25. 17.
26. 17.
27. In addition, one obtains the definite impression from the context that the "signs" from Jesus' life are understood in the same sense as the "signs" discussed in Augustana XIII which are marks of the Christian community. If this is so, some intolerable leaps of logic have been miraculously accomplished.
28. 17.
29. 5.
30. 13.
31. 13.