
The Abiding Word

The
ABIDING
WORD

AN ANTHOLOGY OF DOCTRINAL
ESSAYS FOR THE YEARS
1954-1955

Volume Three

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Publisher's Preface

The essays in this volume were selected by the Literature Board of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod from those presented at the District conventions of 1954 and 1955. They are made available as a continuation of Volume I (1946) and Volume II (1947), issued under the direction of the Centennial Literature Committee and edited by Dr. Theodore Laetsch. Since the original two volumes, published under the title **THE ABIDING WORD**, are still in demand, the publisher is encouraged to make these additional essays available as Volume III of the series.

THE PUBLISHER

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The Abiding Word

The Doctrine of the Church

INTRODUCTION

It is necessary that the discussion of the doctrine of the church begin with a statement on semantics. Much of the confusion that has arisen in connection with the discussion of the church comes from the fact that people use the word "church" in so many different ways. While one writer understands one thing by church, another writer or speaker means something quite different by the same term. If people talk past each other in religious matters, that is especially true in the discussion of a subject like the church.

A glance at *Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary* will reveal that the word "church" is used in no less than seven different meanings. A review of some of these meanings will help to prepare the ground for the material that is to be presented in this paper. First of all, the word "church" is used to refer to "a building for public Christian worship." This use of the word is very common in our everyday conversation. We hear people say as they drive down the street, "Isn't that a beautiful church?" Closely related to the use of the word for a building is the second use of the word "church," which has reference to the divine service of worship which is held in that building. Anyone who has ever lived in a parsonage will recall how frequently the telephone rings on Sunday morning and the question is asked, "What time does church start?" There is a third use of the word, which has to do with "a religious organization," or a legal corporation. When a question arises in connection with a building or real estate, we frequently hear such statements as, "The trustees of Zion Lutheran Church had a meeting to decide the issue." Such a legal use of the term is essential because of the laws of the land. In the fourth place, the word "church" is used to designate "a body of Christian believers of the same creed." When people are becoming acquainted, it doesn't take very long before the question is

asked, "To which church, that is, to which denomination, do you belong?" The answer is: Lutheran, Methodist, Catholic, etc. Another use of the word "church" is that which refers to "organized Christianity." At the present time the Missouri legislature has before it Bill No. 100, which proposes free bus transportation for all children in both public and parochial schools. In the debate to which this bill has given rise, the fifth use of the word "church" may frequently be heard, namely, in the statement, "The constitution guarantees the separation of church and state." When a discussion centers around professional people, the sixth use of the word "church" may be quite common, namely, that which designates the "clerical profession." When clergymen are present at a trial, or a convention, or a social function, the press refers to this by saying, "The church was represented by so-and-so." The last definition of the term "church" in Webster is the one which has a direct bearing on the paper before us. Here the church is described as "Christians collectively; the whole body of Christ's followers" (believers). This is the use of the word which Christians make regularly Sunday after Sunday when they confess in the words of the Apostles' Creed, "I believe in the holy Christian Church."

Because of this diversified use of the word "church" it is important that we explain at the beginning of this discussion how we are using the term "church." When Francis Pieper began his article on the Christian Church, he defined the church as "people."¹ The word "people" was so important to him that he repeated the phrase: "The Christian Church is all the *people* and only the *people* who believe in Christ." The same point needs to be emphasized in this paper, that the word "church" refers to *people*, that the church comprises *people* and only *people*. The church is a gathering of people, a gathering of Christian people, a gathering of Christian people in the name of Christ. (Matt. 18:20)

The following treatment of the doctrine of the church will be divided into six main parts:

- I. The Nature of the Church
- II. The Characteristics of the Church
- III. The Function of the Church

¹ Franz Pieper, *Christliche Dogmatik* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1920), III, 458.

IV. The Church in the Applied Sense

V. The Church and Error

VI. The Church as Others See It

Because of the general scope of this paper it will not be possible to treat all these areas in the detail which they deserve. That will be true especially of the last three portions: The Church in the Applied Sense, The Church and Error, and The Church as Others See It. Should someone feel at the close of the paper that not enough attention was given, e. g., to the ecumenical movement or to the questions of church fellowship or to the matter of voting privileges in the church, then the reason is that the large area which the paper tried to cover made it impossible to deal in detail with all these subjects.

I

THE NATURE OF THE CHURCH

The Holy Scriptures speak not only of an individual Christian but also of a group of Christians. The Holy Spirit, who brings one man to faith in Christ, also brings many Christians together into a group. The Holy Ghost has not only called me by the Gospel, but He has also called and gathered the whole Christian Church on earth. Such a uniting activity of the Spirit of God through the Word and the sacraments is referred to in the Sacred Record.² Paul speaks of the Christians as being many people, and yet one bread and one body (1 Cor. 10:17). He speaks about the Christians coming *together* to celebrate the Lord's Supper (1 Cor. 11:18, 20). When people receive the Sacrament of Baptism, they are not merely baptized individually; they are also baptized into the one body of Christ, i. e., the group of believers (1 Cor. 12:13). When a person is called into the kingdom of Christ, he is not merely called as an individual; he is called in one hope together with all other Christians; with them he is part of that one body which has one Lord, one faith, one Baptism, one God and one Father of all. (Eph. 4:4-6)

The Christians who are brought to faith and gathered into a group by the Holy Spirit are called in the New Testament an *ecclesia*.

² See the unpubl. diss. (Thiensville, Wis.: Lutheran Seminary, n. d.) by John P. Meyer, "The Church," I, 1.

This word originally meant a public gathering of a secular nature that was summoned by a herald or an announcer.³ That it is also used of a religious gathering is indicated by the fact that the Septuagint translation of the Old Testament used this word *ecclesia* as a Greek equivalent of the Hebrew term *qahal*. The Hebrew word *qahal* was the technical term in the Old Testament for a gathering of worshipers. While the term *ecclesia* is occasionally applied in the New Testament to the people of Israel, it is used over a hundred times to refer to the Christian Church.⁴ Thus it is proper to say that *ecclesia* is the technical term in the New Testament for the church.

The simplest and most accurate definition of the church is that which is contained in the opening statement of the Third Article of the Apostles' Creed: "I believe in the holy Christian Church, the communion of saints." The phrase "communion of saints" is not merely an apposition of the church; it is actually an explanation, an amplification of the term "church." The church is the gathering of believing people. In some non-Lutheran churches the phrase "communion of saints" is understood in quite a different way.⁵ The word "saints" is not construed as referring to people, that is, to Christians, but rather to things; and the word "communion" is interpreted as a *participation in* or a *sharing in* rather than as a group or gathering. That makes the phrase "communion of saints" mean simply a participation in the sacred things that belong to the church. Luther showed his disagreement with this interpretation by translating the phrase simply: "congregation of holy people."

In the New Testament the word *ecclesia*, church, is used twice by our Lord to refer to the congregation of believers.⁶ The first passage is one of the earliest references to the church in the New Testament, namely, Matt. 16:15-19, in which Christ refers to the

³ *Ibid.*, p. 2, a.

⁴ L. W. Spitz, "The Holy Christian Church," in *The Abiding Word* (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1946), I, 267.

⁵ F. E. Mayer, "The Proper Distinction Between Law and Gospel and the Terminology Visible and Invisible Church," *Concordia Theological Monthly*, XXV (March 1954), 187.

⁶ Meyer, II, 1.

church that He will build on the rock. This is the passage on which the Roman Church bases its view that Simon Peter was the rock on which Jesus was to build His church, and that Peter was the first in a long succession of papal rulers. The background of this text, however, reveals that the Lord did not intend to build His church on the person of the apostle Peter, but rather on the faith which Peter confessed. The Lord had asked His disciples: "Who do men say that I, the Son of Man, am?" He had received a variety of answers, namely, John the Baptist, Elijah, Jeremiah, one of the prophets. When He asked the disciples who they said that Jesus was, it was Simon Peter who answered and said: "Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God." It was the faith which Peter demonstrated in those words which constrained the Lord Jesus to call him "blessed." It was ~~that faith so nobly confessed~~ which had not been given to Peter by flesh and blood, but solely through the work of the Father in heaven. It was that faith of Peter which the Lord had in mind when He referred to the rock on which He would build His church. It was to Peter the believer and the confessor to whom Jesus conferred the keys of the kingdom of heaven and the authority to bind and loose sinners. Thus this early reference to the church stressed faith courageously confessed as the essential element in the concept of the church.

It is interesting to note that in a recent lecture at St. Louis, Oscar Cullmann of the University of Basel, Switzerland, advanced the proposition that the rock on which the Lord was going to build His church was not so much Peter's confession of faith; rather the rock was Peter the eyewitness. Because Peter the apostle had seen all things that transpired in the life and death of our Lord and in His resurrection, therefore Peter was qualified to be the rock on which the church was to be built. The church is actually built on that rock today, according to Cullmann, because Peter's testimony as an eyewitness of our Lord's suffering and glory is recorded indelibly on the sacred pages of the Gospels. Among other things, Cullmann thinks it is possible that Peter may have been in Rome, but he questions the fact that Peter ever functioned as a bishop in Rome. Furthermore, Cullmann insists that there was no evidence under the crypt of St. Peter to indicate that the apostle actually was buried there.

The second passage in which our Lord refers to the *ecclesia* is one in which He speaks not so much of the nature of the church as of its activity or function. This passage is Matt. 18:15-17, which speaks of the erring brother. The emphasis here is not so much on bringing the brother to faith as on keeping him in the faith. The erring brother is in danger of losing his faith, therefore the church in the loving spirit of her Lord should do all that she can to gain the brother, to help preserve his faith. Great patience and careful consideration are to be used in calling on such a brother again and again in order to preserve the faith which has been planted in his heart. Only after repeated attempts have failed to make any impression on the brother, is the matter to be told to the church. And finally, if the brother refuses to respond to the church, the church with great reluctance declares that he is a heathen man and a publican according to the Savior's words. Faith in Christ, which makes a person a member of the church and which is essential to his remaining a member of the church, is the central emphasis in both of these passages from the Gospels.

That the church is essentially the congregation of believers is also indicated in some of the honorable titles which the Holy Scriptures ascribe to the church.⁷ Paul frequently referred to the Christian Church as the body of Christ. Though the Christians are many in number, yet they are one body in Christ (Rom. 12:5; 1 Cor. 10:17). As the church is the body, so the Lord Jesus Christ is the Head of the church (Eph. 1:22; 5:23; Col. 1:18). The link which unites the church with its Head is faith. The apostle desires that Christ may dwell in the hearts of the Ephesian Christians through faith (Eph. 3:17). He tells the Corinthians that no one is able to say that Jesus is the Lord except by the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 12:3). To be severed from Christ means to have fallen away from grace, that is, to have broken the connection between Christ the Head and His body the church (Gal. 5:4). Faith not only binds the Head of the church together with the body, but it also unites various members of the church with one another. The members of the body will not act independently, as if each one existed for itself; but each member will remember that it is

⁷ Adolf Hoenecke, *Evangelisch-Lutherische Dogmatik* (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1912), IV, 146.

bound to all the other members by faith in Jesus Christ, the Head. (Eph. 4:15, 16)

In one of the last articles which he published in the *Concordia Theological Monthly* the sainted Prof. Fred Mayer pointed out how much the church as the living body of Christ meant to Martin Luther.⁸ On the one hand, Christ as the Head is the one who puts energy and strength and power into His church so that the church may be able to preach and testify and work for the building of the Kingdom. On the other hand, there is a glorious sharing on the part of all the members of the body of Christ, not merely a sharing of spiritual blessings and joys, but especially also a sharing of the misery and sorrow and suffering which each member of the body endures. As members of the body of Christ we share in the suffering of our fellow congregation members here at home, we share in the hardships and privations of our missionaries throughout the world, we share in the persecution and martyrdom of the great believers who have gone before us.

There are many other honorable titles which the Bible ascribes to the church and which point to the fact that the church is the congregation of believers. The Lord Jesus Christ is the Bridegroom, who is united with His bride, the church, by the bond of faith (John 3:29; 2 Cor. 11:2). This Bridegroom has betrothed the church unto Himself forever in righteousness and in justice and in loving-kindness and in mercy and in faithfulness (Hos. 2:19). The church is compared to a spiritual house, a temple which is built out of many living stones; it is built upon the foundation of the apostles and the prophets, and the Lord Jesus Christ is its chief Cornerstone (1 Peter 2:6; Eph. 2:20). The Lord Jesus also had His church, His congregation of believers, in mind when He spoke about His kingdom. The concept of the kingdom stresses the fact that by faith in Christ every member of the church is a royal priest, who has the right and privilege to approach his divine King at any time. By faith every Christian is entitled to enter the kingdom of God as a place of great joy and blessedness. By faith every Christian comes into possession of the kingdom of God as a priceless treasure which he cherishes and keeps.⁹

⁸ Mayer, pp. 188, 189.

⁹ Meyer, I, 4, b and c.

The fact that the church is the congregation of believers points to another very important truth, namely, the close connection between the doctrine of the church and the doctrine of justification by faith. Prof. J. T. Mueller comments that the Scriptural doctrine of the church is based upon the central doctrine of justification by grace, through faith; with this important doctrine the doctrine of the church either stands or falls.¹⁰ This means that the believers who constitute the church are people who believe that Christ died to save them from their sins. It means that the true nature of the church "lies in the fact that its members are regenerated by the Holy Spirit and are under the rule of Christ." (Caemmerer)

The faith that makes a person a member of the church cannot be just any kind of faith. As Professor Meyer points out, it is not faith which accepts historical facts as truth, which merely believes that God created and preserves the world, that He is the Ruler and Governor of the universe, that He is almighty, that He knows everything, and that He is everywhere present.¹¹ Faith that admits one to the church is not a faith which merely accepts Christ as a great teacher, as an exemplary man, who showed us what principles of ethics we are to live by in our lives. Neither is faith which qualifies for church membership merely the hope that a person will enjoy a long and happy life here on earth, that God will crown his life with many earthly blessings, and that he will be a prosperous and successful man.¹² Such faith may indeed be essential to the life of an honored and respected citizen of this world. But it is not the faith that is requisite for membership in the church.

The faith which made Peter a member of Christ's church was faith in the fact that Jesus was the promised Messiah, that He was the Son of God and the Savior of the world. At his commissioning Paul was told by the Lord to go and open the eyes of the Gentiles, "that they may receive forgiveness of sins and inheritance among them which are sanctified by faith that is in Me" (Acts 26:18). What makes us members of the church today is the fact that we

¹⁰ John Theodore Mueller. *Christian Dogmatics* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1934), p. 544.

¹¹ Meyer, II, 3, a.

¹² *Ibid.*, b and c.

realize that all of us have sinned and come short of the glory of God, and that we believe that we are justified freely by God's grace, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus (Rom. 3:23, 24). To be a church member means to believe that "Christ loved the church and gave Himself for it that He might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the Word" (Eph. 5:25, 26). When we were baptized into Christ, we put on Christ; through faith in Him we became children of God and members of His church. (Gal. 3:26, 27)

Where such justifying faith is present, it justifies completely, it makes all believers perfectly righteous. The degree of righteousness which a person attains does not depend on the greatness or smallness of his faith. Where there is faith, there is righteousness. According to the inscription on his tombstone the great Copernicus did not expect as much divine grace as was given to the apostles Paul or Peter.¹³ He was satisfied with the forgiveness that was bestowed upon the dying thief who was crucified next to our Lord. The humility of this great scientist, however, was better than his theology; had his theology been thoroughly Biblical, it would have told him that he, too, belonged to that body of Christ which is holy, without spot or wrinkle, which is utterly without blemish in the sight of God. (Eph. 5:27)

Even as the justifying work of Jesus is the basis upon which the doctrine of the church rests, so faith in Christ and His work is engendered by the Spirit of God through the means of grace. As there could be no church without Christ, so there can be no church without the Spirit of God and without the means of grace through which He operates. Paul asks the Romans: "How shall they believe in Him of whom they have not heard? And how shall they hear without a preacher?" (Rom. 10:14)

While faith is essential to church membership, it is not in any sense a meritorious achievement on man's part. Faith is not something which man contributes in order to attain the grace of God. Faith is merely the hand that reaches out to receive the gift that God bestows upon it. Faith is itself a gift of the Holy Spirit. Francis Pieper puts it this way: "The faith whereby a man becomes a member of the Christian Church is *in solidum* a work of

¹³ Mayer, p. 187.

the Holy Spirit.”¹⁴ Not only has the church of the Reformation always recognized this, it has also emphasized the importance of *sola fide*. This means that such *faith alone* is the means whereby man appropriates the grace of God and makes it his own. Justifying faith which brings people into membership in the church needs to have nothing added to it in order to make it effective. In fact, it may not have anything added to it. As soon as a human achievement or accomplishment is added to faith, it loses its justifying effect.

Because it is God alone who justifies the sinner through a Spirit-given faith in the Savior Jesus Christ, therefore the church is indeed the work, the achievement of the Triune God alone.¹⁵ It is He who makes the church, it is He who preserves it. It is He who makes us believe “according to the working of His mighty power” (Eph. 1:19); it is He who keeps us by His power through faith unto salvation (1 Peter 1:5). In this work of making and preserving the church God uses the means of grace as His tools. He uses Christian people merely to operate these divine tools for Him. As such tool-operators they certainly deserve no credit for the building of the church. They are merely the human vessels or vehicles in the hands of the divine Lord, which He uses to carry out His eternal designs.

A number of misconceptions have arisen concerning the true nature of the church. Because the church is defined as the congregation of believers, therefore some have argued that it has only a very vague reality. But this is not true. The church is not a phantom, a ghostlike entity; rather it is a very tangible group of people. As Professor Meyer says: “The church is not a vague thing of hazy outlines, but a very definite quantity. . . . The church is not unnoticeable; it makes its presence felt. Jesus speaks of the church as a discernible body, which may be appealed to, may admonish, may administer the keys.”¹⁶ Other teachers of the church have used the following expressions to describe the realness of the church: “Not an abstraction or idealization” (Caemmerer); “not a mere Platonic idea” (Pieper); “it has real corporate character

¹⁴ Pieper, *Christliche Dogmatik*, III, 470.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 479.

¹⁶ Meyer I, 5; III, 2, a.

that may be perceived" (Graebner).¹⁷ Professor Mayer pointed out the paradox in Luther's doctrine of the church in the following words: "The church is invisible, but manifests itself in a mask, in a veiled form. . . . Luther knows only one church, the congregation of believers. . . . And of this congregation he states that it is both invisible and perceptible."¹⁸

Another misconception of the nature of the church consists of this, that the church is actually identified with the Gospel or with the means of grace. This misconception is closely related to the error that there are two sides of the church, namely, an invisible and a visible side. If the invisible church consists of believers, it is argued, then the visible church consists of the means of grace. It is quite possible that this misconception is based on a wrong interpretation of Article VII of the Augsburg Confession. The article states: "The church is the congregation of saints, in which the Gospel is rightly taught and the sacraments are rightly administered."¹⁹ If this article is understood correctly, then only the first part refers to the essence of the church and says that it is the congregation of believers. The teaching of the Gospel that is referred to in the second part is simply the means whereby people are brought to faith and thus are included in membership in the Christian Church. The means of grace are not the church, they are merely the marks or signs of the church. When Prof. Theodore Graebner stated in one of his last articles that "the church is the Gospel," he did not intend to associate himself with the error referred to above.²⁰ This statement, understood in its context, merely means that the church is closely associated with the teaching, believing, confessing, and disseminating of the Gospel. As a matter of fact, this statement in Graebner's article is actually a quotation from Paul Althaus' *Christliche Wahrheit*, II, 287. An apparent omission of quotation marks on the part of the publisher is therefore responsible for attributing this statement to Professor Graebner.

¹⁷ Theodore Graebner, "Kirche und die Kirchen," in *World Lutheranism of Today: A Tribute to Anders Nygren* (Stockholm: SKDB, 1950), p. 119.

¹⁸ Mayer, p. 193.

¹⁹ *Concordia Triglotta* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1921), p. 47.

²⁰ Graebner, p. 131.

In the context Althaus had stressed the fact that Luther distinguished between the congregation and the mission of preaching the Word. If the statement "the church is the Gospel" is understood in the light of its background, it does not sound quite so discordant.

A number of factors also need to be noted which obviously do not make a person a member of the church. The outward step of establishing membership in the organization of the church does not constitute joining the Christian Church.²¹ Taking part in the solemn rite of confirmation does not in itself make one a member of the congregation of believers. Neither does the signing of a church constitution nor the assent of an assembly of voters establish membership in the congregation of believers. A person may make outward use of the means of grace, he may attend church regularly, he may receive Holy Communion frequently, he may confess his faith in the most ardent terms, and yet he may not be a member of the real church of Christ. On the other hand, it may happen that by a process of excommunication a person is excluded from outward membership in the church of Christ, and yet such a person may actually continue to be a member of the communion of saints, if such a process of excommunication has been carried out in an unjust way.²² Finally, it must be noted that neither an abundant measure of Biblical knowledge nor an outwardly well-ordered life can be regarded as evidence that a person is a member of the church. Only the faith that Christ died on the cross to redeem me from sin and to make me a member of His kingdom, only that faith makes me a true member of the Christian Church.

II

THE CHARACTERISTICS OF THE CHURCH

Of all the characteristics of the church there are four to which special attention will be given: (1) the church's oneness; (2) its holiness; (3) its universality; (4) its sovereignty. What is meant by the oneness of the church becomes clear when the church is viewed as the body of Christ: If there is but one Head of the

²¹ Meyer, II, 4, b and c.

²² Pieper, p. 461.

church, namely, Christ, then the body that is attached to that Head certainly is one. Paul told the Ephesians: "There is one body and one Spirit, even as ye are called in one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one Baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in you all" (Eph. 4:4-6). Although the Christians as the members of the body of Christ are many, yet they "are one body in Christ, and every one members one of another" (Rom. 12:5). The Galatians also received the assurance from the apostle that they were *all one* in Christ Jesus (Gal. 3:28). The oneness of the church is reflected in our Lord's picture of the shepherd and the fold: "And other sheep I have, which are not of this fold; them also I must bring, and they shall hear My voice; and there shall be one fold and one shepherd" (John 10:16). The church is one not only because it has one Head and one Shepherd, but also because there is but one name whereby the members of that church are saved, namely, Jesus: "Neither is there salvation in any other; for there is none other name under heaven given among men whereby we must be saved." (Acts 4:12)

The fact that the church is one implies that it is undivided and that there is no other church besides it.²³ None of the schisms which have torn the outward group of Christendom apart have destroyed the true unity of the church. We know that in the eleventh century the church was divided into an eastern and a western group, the eastern group having its headquarters at Constantinople and the western group its headquarters at Rome. We are aware of the great division that came in the sixteenth century when the Church of the Reformation separated from the Church of Rome. We lament the fact that the Christian Church here in America is divided into many scores of outward church bodies. And yet on the basis of Scripture we are confident that in the midst of all these divisions the Lord has preserved the unity of the real Christian Church, namely, of those who believe in Christ as their divine Savior from sin.

That is not to say, however, that because the true Christian Church is united, therefore we as Christians are exempt from the responsibility of working also for the unity of the outward body

²³ Hoenecke, p. 153.

of Christendom. Whether the Lord in His sacerdotal prayer in John 17 has in mind the *una sancta* or the outward body of Christendom, certainly Christian people can never be satisfied that the outward divisions of Christendom are well-pleasing to the Lord. Therefore we are to do everything that we can on the basis of Scripture to effect also an outward unity among Christians.

As there are no divisions in the one Christian Church, so there is no other church besides that one church. It is at this point, as we discuss the oneness of the church, that we should emphasize its exclusive character. Many outward bodies of Christendom make the claim that there is no other church besides their outward communion. Such a claim, however, is presumptuous, it is a claim that can be made only of the congregation of believers, besides which there can be no other church. For this reason Part II of the *Common Confession* makes it quite clear that "the oneness of the church is not a goal to be achieved nor a task to be completed. . . . Either the church is the one church, or it is not the church."²⁴

Even as the oneness of the church is not disrupted by the schisms and divisions of outward Christendom, so its unity is not jeopardized when we speak of it as the Church Militant and the Church Triumphant. These terms do not indicate two separate churches, rather they stand for "two stages in the development of the church."²⁵ The Church Militant is the church as it is still in conflict with Satan, the world, and the flesh; the Church Triumphant, on the other hand, is the church which has already received the crown of eternal life. The Church Militant is called the fighting church, not because it is engaged in a fight within itself, but rather because it wages constant warfare against the three enemies who seek to destroy it: the devil, the world, and the flesh.²⁶ It is the Church Militant which is exhorted by the apostle to "be strong in the Lord and in the power of His might," to "put on the whole armour of God, that ye may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil" (Eph. 6:10, 11). It is the church in conflict which is advised to be sober and watchful, because its adversary, the devil, prowls about like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour, who is therefore to be resisted firmly in

²⁴ The *Common Confession*, Parts I and II, 22, 23.

²⁵ Meyer, III, 5, c (2).

²⁶ Hoenecke, p. 152.

the faith (1 Peter 5:8, 9). While the church that is born of God is still in the world, it must overcome the world; therefore it is told by the apostle: "This is the victory that overcometh the world, even our faith" (1 John 5:4). Paul identifies himself with the Church Militant when he observes that he is carnal, sold under sin; when he laments the fact that he does not do what he wants to do, but does the very thing that he hates (Rom. 7:14, 15). He knows that in him, that is, in his flesh, no good thing dwells. For to will is present with him, but how to do that which is good he finds not (Rom. 7:18). The apostle can speak from experience when he says to the Galatians: "The desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh; for these are opposed to each other, to prevent you from doing what you would" (Gal. 5:17 RSV). Thus the church, as long as it is in the world, is confronted with constant conflict.

But that same church has the glorious promise that it will triumph at last. It is given the assurance that if it remains faithful unto death, it will receive the crown of life (Rev. 2:10). The soldiers and fighters and martyrs will be transformed into glorious victors with white garments, and with golden crowns upon their heads (Rev. 4:4). They will have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. They will stand before the throne of God and serve Him day and night and live in eternal communion with Him (Rev. 7:14, 15). Thus the vast throngs will come from the earthly Zion, from the church in this world to the city of the living God, to the heavenly Jerusalem, where the saints above and the saints below will be united (Heb. 12:22, 23). How confidently, then, the warriors of the cross can join with the poet and sing:

The golden evening brightens in the west;
Soon, soon, to faithful warriors cometh rest.
Sweet is the calm of Paradise the blest.
Alleluia! Alleluia!²⁷

Along with the oneness of the church there is a Scriptural emphasis also on its holiness. The term holy is one that goes back to the Old Testament church. When *God* is described as a holy God, this means on the one hand that He is entirely separate and different

²⁷ *The Lutheran Hymnal* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1941), Hymn 463, stanza 8.

from anything in this world. On the other hand, the reason why God is entirely separate and otherworldly is because He is all perfection and righteousness and truth. When this holy God made a covenant with His people of Israel, He wanted them to be holy even as He is holy (Lev. 19:2). The Old Testament makes perfectly clear that the people of God can be holy only insofar as the Lord, their God, makes them holy.

And so also in the New Testament the Christian Church may be called holy only because the Lord of the church, the Savior Jesus Christ, is Himself holy and because He makes His church holy.²⁸ Of this Head of the church the apostle says: "Such an High Priest became us who is *holy*, harmless, undefiled, separate from sinners" (Heb. 7:26). That this holiness of our Lord was applied to us, the members of His church, is indicated in His sacerdotal prayer, in which He prays: "For their sakes I make Myself holy, that they also may be made holy in truth" (John 17:19). That the holiness of the church is not of its own making is indicated in the words of the apostle: "God saved us and called us with a *holy calling*, not in virtue of our works but in virtue of His own purpose and the grace which He gave us in Christ Jesus ages ago" (2 Tim. 1:9 RSV). The manner in which the holy Lord made His church holy is reflected in those beautiful words of the Letter to the Ephesians: "Christ also loved the church and gave Himself for it that He might *sanctify* and cleanse it with the washing of water by the Word, that He might present it to Himself, a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but that it should be holy and without blemish." (Eph. 5:25-27)

There is a close relationship between the terms "holiness" and "righteousness." We may say that the church is also called holy because the Lord bestowed His righteousness upon it.²⁹ Paul speaks for the church when he tells the Philippians that his one objective is "that I may win Christ and be found in Him, not having mine own righteousness, which is of the Law, but that which is through the faith of Christ, the righteousness which is of God by faith" (Phil. 3:8, 9). That the apostle is speaking for the church is also shown in the words: "But you were washed, you were sanctified,

²⁸ Hoenecke, p. 153.

²⁹ Ibid.

you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God" (1 Cor. 6:11 RSV). The purifying, sanctifying influence of our Lord upon the church is further emphasized in the statement: "The blood of Jesus Christ, His Son, cleanseth us from all sin." (1 John 1:7)

The church may even be characterized as a holy church because the gracious Savior regards her life and her works as holy.³⁰ He assures His followers that they are already made clean by the words which He has spoken unto them (John 15:3). Paul tells those who are under grace that sin shall not be able to have dominion over them, that because they are not under the Law, they shall be able to abound in the works of grace (Rom. 6:14). Speaking for himself and for all his fellow members in the body of Christ, the apostle says: "We are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them." (Eph. 2:10)

Therefore whenever we say in the Apostles' Creed, "I believe in the *holy* Christian Church," then we are confessing that the Lord Jesus has redeemed us and purchased us with the price of His own blood, that we may be His own and live under Him in His kingdom and serve Him in true righteousness and holiness.

The original texts of the Apostolic and Nicene Creeds have been modified somewhat for use in our church. The original texts read respectively: "I believe in the holy catholic church, I believe in one holy catholic and apostolic church."³¹ In our church the word "Christian" has been substituted for "catholic" to avoid the impression that this word refers to the Roman Catholic Church, which has its headquarters at Rome. The word catholic with a small *c* means general or universal. When we state that the church is catholic or universal, then we mean, on the one hand, that it extends all over the earth to every corner of the world, and on the other hand, that this church includes people who have lived in all generations in the history of the world. That is to say, the church universal is restricted neither in space nor in time.³²

³⁰ Mueller, p. 548; Spitz, p. 275.

³¹ *Concordia Triglotta*, p. 1.

³² Pieper, p. 473, Hoenecke, p. 154.

There are no geographical limits to the church. When God raised the Lord Jesus from the dead, He put all things under His feet and made Him the Head over all things *for the church* (Eph. 1:22). God gave Jesus "a name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow of things in heaven and things in earth and things under the earth" (Phil. 2:9, 10). These global dimensions of the church were already pointed to and suggested during the Old Testament dispensation. One psalmist could sing jubilantly: "The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof, the world and they that dwell therein" (Ps. 24:1). Another predicted: "All the ends of the world shall remember and turn unto the Lord, and all the kindreds of the nations shall worship before Thee" (Ps. 22:27). The world-encircling nature of the church is also clearly implied in the words of the Great Commission: Jesus told His disciples to go and teach *all nations*, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost (Matt. 28:19); He told them to go into *all the world* and to preach the Gospel to *every creature*. (Mark 16:15)

The church, however, includes not only people who live in every geographical area of the world, it also includes people in all generations of men who have ever lived and who ever will live. This truth must be emphasized especially over against those who maintain that in the early history of the world religion was on a very primitive level and included all types of polytheism. As Christians we believe that from the time when God first announced the Gospel to Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, there were people who believed the promise of the Savior and who therefore constituted the church in their day. The members of the Old Testament church are united with us by the same faith in Christ which is ours today. God did not give all believers in the Old Testament the same measure of spiritual knowledge, the same understanding of the truths of salvation which He gave in the ultimate sending of His Son; but God did provide sufficient knowledge of His plan of salvation throughout the Old Testament period to make it possible for people to come into the fellowship of His church. Paul told the Romans that the righteousness of God by faith in Christ Jesus without the Law was made manifest and that it had already been witnessed by the Law and the prophets of old (Rom. 3:21, 22). Peter

told Cornelius that all the prophets of the Old Testament witnessed to Christ, that through His name whoever believed in Him would receive forgiveness of sins (Acts 10:43). Our Lord told the people of His time that their father Abraham had rejoiced to see the day of Christ, that he had seen it and had been glad in it (John 8:56). Quoting Genesis, Paul observed that Abraham believed God and that the Lord accounted it to him for righteousness. (Gal. 3:6; Gen. 15:6)

The universality of the church also includes this feature, that the church's doctrine is universal, that it has always been the same throughout the history of the church.³³ This truth must be emphasized especially over against those proponents of the history of dogma who argue that the teachings of the church have varied and changed throughout the many periods of the church's history. Surely no one can deny that the doctrines of the church have been stated in different forms at various periods in the past and that these truths will be stated, yes, need to be stated, in a form that will fit each generation of the church. That is not to say, however, that the church's doctrine has changed or that it will change. The teachings of the church embrace those changeless truths of the Word of God on which the church of all generations has drawn for its spiritual strength and life. On various occasions our Lord gave us a guarantee that His unchanging Word would always abide. Heaven and earth would pass away, He said, but His Word would not pass away (Matt. 24:35). Those who continued in His Word, as it was preserved in the Old Testament and as it was to be preserved in the sacred record of the New Testament, were given the promise that they would be His disciples indeed (John 8:31). The dictum that the Scriptures could not be broken included this, that the truths of the Bible could not be modified or altered in any way. (John 10:35)

As there was no development of revelation during the Old Testament era, so there is no development of doctrine in the history of the church. We may speak of an explication of the divine will, of a progressive unfolding of the great facts of God's salvation, but we cannot speak of a development that was characterized by radical changes and contradictions. The universal church has always taught the same doctrine and will continue to teach it until the end of time.

³³ Hoenecke, p. 154.

The sovereignty of the church is a characteristic that follows from the close connection between the church as the body and Christ as its Head. As the body cannot be independent of its head, but is always subject to its head, so the church has but one Master, under whose jurisdiction it falls, namely, its Lord and Savior Jesus Christ (Matt. 23:8). Within the church all the members are brethren, they are all on an equal level. One is not greater or less than the other. Because Christ is the church's only Master, therefore the Scriptures state that the church should not become subject to the authority of people. Because the Christians have been bought with the price of Christ's blood, therefore the apostle admonishes them not to be the servants of men (1 Cor. 7:23). In Christ its divine Lord the church possesses everything, whether it be life or death, or things present or things to come; everything is the church's, and the church is Christ's, and Christ is God's. (1 Cor. 3:21-23)

It follows from these statements of Scripture that the congregation of believers enjoys a sovereignty under Christ which dare not be restricted or limited in any way. Christians may not be made subject to a minister or a priest, because they are all ministers and priests in their own right who have the privilege of approaching God directly.³⁴ To say that the church derives its sovereignty from the fact that its priests or bishops are the successors of the first bishop, namely, the apostle Peter, is to limit the sovereignty of the church in an unscriptural manner.³⁵ No special sovereignty was conferred on the apostles as individual persons; they did not receive divine authority to pass on to their successors the sovereignty which Christ had bestowed upon them; rather the sovereignty of the apostles was the same sovereignty which the Christians of all ages enjoy, namely, the sovereignty of being believers in Christ and of enjoying all things by virtue of that faith. Any sovereignty that is derived from a direct succession of bishops from the apostles is a sovereignty based not on Scripture but on a claim of the traditions of the church.

Additional characteristics of the church that are usually treated under this heading include its invisibility, its infallibility, and its

³⁴ Pieper, p. 476.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 474, 475.

exclusiveness. These characteristics are not being discussed here because they will be taken up in connection with other aspects of the church. In the history of the church its invisible character was emphasized over against a false concept of the visible church. For that reason we shall discuss the invisible church in connection with Section IV, the church in the applied sense. The fact that the Roman Church makes such an unreasonable claim of infallibility and exclusiveness constrains us to leave a discussion of these characteristics for the last point in the outline, namely, Section VI, in which we shall discuss some of the false concepts of the church in Romanism.

III

THE FUNCTION OF THE CHURCH

As we endeavor next to find out what the church does, what its function is, we may begin with a significant statement of Luther, namely: "The church should do nothing else than teach the Gospel in its truth and purity."³⁶ Inasmuch as that Gospel has come down to us in the form of the written and the spoken Word, and also in the visible form of the sacrament of Baptism and the sacrament of the Lord's Supper, therefore it is correct to state that the church's function consists of administering the means of grace.

These means of grace are the instruments which God uses to sustain and maintain His church here upon earth. By these means God brings people into His grace through faith in the Savior Jesus Christ. Therefore the very life of the church depends on this, that the means of grace be administered. That the church lives by these means is indicated in the words of the apostle: "According to His mercy He saved us by the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Ghost" (Titus 3:5). That is to say, Baptism is one of the means whereby God saved us and brought us into the fellowship of His church. Peter also sees the church living by means of the Word. He tells its members that they have been born again, "not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding Word of God." (1 Peter 1:23 RSV)

But Word and sacrament are not merely the means whereby the church *lives*, they are also the means by which the church *grows*.

³⁶ Mueller, p. 552.

Teaching and baptizing were the two great activities which the Lord entrusted to His apostles when He told them to go and bring people into His church (Matt. 28:19). The church has grown throughout the centuries because Christian people seriously carried out this double commission of teaching and of baptizing. Paul reminded the Romans that people could not be saved without calling on the Lord's name, that they could not call on the Lord's name unless they believed, that they could not believe in the Lord without hearing of Him, that they could not hear of Him unless a preacher preached to them (Rom. 10:14). The preaching of the Word is essential to the growth and expansion of the church. To a church which functions properly by administering the Word of God and the sacraments the Lord has also given a wonderful promise of growth in the future. The prophet Isaiah tells us that as the rain and the snow fall from heaven and do not return thither except after they have watered the earth and have made it productive, so the Word of God will also be that goes forth out of the Lord's mouth: it will not return unto Him empty, but it will accomplish and carry out everything which God pleases. (Is. 55:10, 11)

The church not only *lives and grows* by the means of grace, its presence may also be recognized by them. In the writings of the church the means of grace have been called the marks of the church, that is, the outward tokens whereby one can recognize the church's presence.³⁷ If people come to faith in Christ *only* when the means of grace are being administered, and if people always come to faith in Christ when the means of grace are being administered, then it follows that the functioning of the means of grace will mean that the church is present.

To what extent do these marks of the church indicate the presence of the church? Must the means of grace be administered in their purity if they are to indicate the church's presence? That is an old error of the Buffalo Synod. According to the Buffalo position the church could not be presumed to be present if any kind of error had found its way into the preaching of the Word or the administration of the sacraments.³⁸ Over against this view Professor Hoenecke

³⁷ Hoenecke, p. 162.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 166.

stressed the fact that if the means of grace are administered *in an essentially correct way*, they indicate the presence of the *una sancta*, i. e., the congregation of believers. If the means of grace are administered *in their purity*, they indicate the presence of an orthodox group. If the means of grace are administered *with some kind of error*, they indicate the presence of a heterodox group. Thus the marks of the church may be interpreted in various ways, depending on whether they are administered in an essentially correct manner, in their purity, or with some kind of error.³⁹

While the marks of the church may thus be used as an indication *that* the church exists and *where* the church exists, yet it would be entirely unscriptural to say that this is the chief significance of the means of grace in the church. The church certainly may not be satisfied merely to have the means of grace *in statu*, rather the church must realize that it will be functioning properly only if it *uses* these means of grace in the manner prescribed by its Lord and Head. That is to say, if the marks of the church are not *functional*, they thereby lose their status as marks of the church. The church has the divine commission to *preach* the Gospel and to *administer* the sacraments; the Lord Jesus said, "Go and teach! Go and baptize! This *do* in remembrance of Me!" So there is activity involved, there is motion, there is the *real discharge* of an obligation laid upon the church by her Lord and Master. Part II of the *Common Confession* puts it this way: "The Gospel in the Word is not to be thought of as an inarticulate possession of the truth, but as a real proclamation of the Christ for us, the declaration of God's forgiveness for the sake of Christ, our Substitute, 'who was delivered for our offenses and raised again for our justification.' Likewise it is not mere knowledge about the sacraments which constitutes a mark of the church, but the actual administration of them according to the institution of Christ."⁴⁰ Thus it is clear that the function of the church is that of communicating a treasure which has been entrusted to it, of transmitting to others the benefits which Christ offers in the means of grace.

The functioning of the church in and through the means of grace is an activity that should involve all members of the church. All

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 162.

⁴⁰ *The Common Confession*, Parts I and II, 23.

members of the body of Christ will take an aggressive part in telling one another again and again about the forgiveness which God has wrought for them in Christ. Neither will the members of the church proclaim this mercy of God only when they are directly involved in church functions such as public services, Bible classes, and meetings. If the church is true to its calling, it will carry this function into every nook and corner of its daily life, whether that be in the home, at the factory, at the office, on the farm. Thus the marks of the church will always be in evidence by the fact that they are being used.

It should also be noted that the function of administering the means of grace may not be displaced by a variety of types of table service which the church is frequently tempted to indulge in. It is so easy for the church to think that something else is more important than the function of simply preaching the Gospel and administering the sacraments. When the trouble arose between the Greeks and the Hebrews in the church at Jerusalem because of an unfair allotment which deprived some widows of their rights, the twelve apostles refused to be drawn away from their rightful work in order to settle these differences. They called the church together and said: "It is not fit that we should leave the Word of God and serve tables" (Acts 6:2). They recommended that seven competent men be appointed to look after these business affairs of the church. The apostles in turn resolved to devote themselves entirely to prayer and to the administration of the Word. And so today in a church that has been streamlined to fit the pattern of 1955, the mere organization of the church involves so many types of table service that the servants of the Word need to be reminded again and again that their job is to administer the means of grace. The personnel of the church must be budgeted in such a way that men who have been trained to administer the means of grace are not used for other tasks which do not necessarily require such training.

A generation ago there was a decided tendency on the part of the church in America to push the ministry of the Gospel into the background and to give first place to the social gospel. Surely we will all agree that the church dare not pass by on the other side as the priest and the Levite did in the parable of the merciful Samaritan. But neither should the church be deceived into believing that the

Lord commissioned it to go forth into all the world to alleviate its *physical* suffering. Slums must be cleared, the underprivileged must be given help, all sorts of social services must be established. But such removal of the causes of physical suffering dare not replace the aggressive communication of the means of grace as the main task, the main function of the church.

While we usually include only the Word of God and the two sacraments as marks of the church, attention must be called to the fact that others have gone further in recognizing the church's marks. Luther, e. g., included not only the Gospel and the means of grace, but also holy absolution, the calling of ministers, public prayer, and the Christian cross.⁴¹ In the Roman Church some of the characteristics of the church which we considered under Section II, e. g., the unity, the holiness, the universality of the church, are regarded as marks of the church.

Another important function which the church engages in is that of using the Office of the Keys. Although this activity may be regarded as being almost identical with the administration of the means of grace, yet there is a special emphasis in the Biblical references to the Keys which needs to be noted separately. Professor Meyer makes the important observation that the Keys were given to the church so that its members might use them to serve one another.⁴² Our Lord told Peter that He was giving him the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and He attached the promise that whatever the church would bind and loose on earth would be bound and loosed in heaven (Matt. 16:19). To avoid any misunderstanding of what He meant by binding and loosing, the Savior took the opportunity on the first Easter Day to show His disciples what He meant by these terms. When the Ten were assembled and Jesus appeared to them, He said: "Whosoever sins ye remit, they are remitted unto them; and whosoever sins ye retain, they are retained." (John 20:23)

This power which Christ gave to His church to forgive and to retain sins is not to be used as a whip or as a stick; rather it is to be used for "the mutual service of its members." When one member of the body of Christ suffers, all the other members will suffer

⁴¹ Mayer, p. 191.

⁴² Meyer, IV, 1 and 2.

along with it (1 Cor. 12:26). When one member makes a mistake, the others will not approve of this mistake and thus do their brother a disservice; rather they will speak to him to convince him of his fault and thus to win him (Gal. 6:1). When this is done in meekness and in love, then the body of Christ will be edified thereby (Eph. 4:16). That means that the Keys are to be used in the spirit of Him who gave them.⁴⁸ In all His contacts and dealings with people Jesus always followed the ideal pattern of that Servant of the Lord who had been spoken of in the Servant Poems of Isaiah. Just as Jesus took upon Him the form of a servant, so He also recommended such an attitude to His church. As He came not to be ministered unto but to minister, so He wants His church to be a real *service* organization (Matt. 20:28). As the Son of Man came to seek and to save that which was lost, so the church will use its God-given Office of the Keys for the sole purpose of winning, gaining, bringing back those who are lost (Luke 19:10). In order to gain the brother, love will not merely go the second mile, it will go many miles. It will forgive not merely one time but many times. It will suffer not only on the one cheek but on the other cheek also. In the spirit of Christ brother will speak to brother again and again, in a constant process of trying to win him. And brethren will reluctantly speak to the whole church only after every possible means of winning the brother has failed. (Matt. 18:15-17)

The third function of the church that interests us is the confession of the truth, or as it is known today, Christian witnessing. Like the use of the Office of the Keys, Christian witnessing is really nothing more than administering the means of grace. And yet there is an element in witnessing that implies more than just administering the means of grace or using the Office of the Keys. We may say that witnessing for Christ or confessing the Christian truth is closely related to the very nature of the church. If the church consists of believers, then the church certainly also consists of confessors; one who believes in Christ as his Savior will self-evidently confess that faith in Christ. When there is an abundance of faith in the heart, the mouth will also be constrained to speak by that faith (Matt. 12:34). Paul mentioned as requisites for sal-

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, IV, 3.

vation not only believing in the heart that God raised Jesus from the dead, but also confessing the Lord Jesus with the mouth (Rom. 10:9). The apostles who had witnessed the glorious events in the life and death and resurrection of Jesus could not but speak to others about the things which they had seen (Acts 4:20). The church of all times may well confess with the psalmist of old: "I believed, therefore have I spoken" (Ps. 116:10). In that early reference to the church in Matt. 16 it was the faith in Christ which Peter not only had in his heart but which he also confessed with his lips, on which the Lord Jesus promised to build His church. We can understand why one theologian said of this important function of the church: "Confession is the church's answer to God's address to us in Christ."⁴⁴

When such a confession of faith is made, Christian love requires that the church will regard this confession as genuine. No one can tell whether the confession of a person actually reflects the condition of his heart. But in this connection it does behoove every Christian to use the words which Paul wrote to the Philippians: "It is meet for me to think this of you all" (Phil. 1:7). If such a confession proves to be false and insincere, then the Lord can certainly determine that without our help.

Finally, the function of the church involves the exercise of Christian love. This has reference not only to acts of charity with regard to the material things of this world, but also to the love which is shown the brother in helping him in his Christian faith and life. The members of the body of Christ will submit themselves one to another in the fear of God (Eph. 5:21). They will make their own wants and needs subordinate to the wants and needs of the brother. Their first concern will be for the other members of the body, rather than for themselves (Rom. 12:5; 1 Cor. 12:20). Every church member will reach out to help his brother in his fight against Satan; he will assist him in putting on the whole armor of God, teaching him how to use the shield of faith and the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit in order to vanquish his spiritual enemies (Eph. 6:11, 17). The bearing of one another's burdens will be recognized by all the brethren as

⁴⁴ Graebner, p. 125.

a mutual obligation which they have to one another; in the sharing of such burdens they will recall that they are following in the footsteps of Him who took all their burdens upon Himself (Gal. 6:2). The brethren will regard it as a privilege to "walk in love, as Christ also hath loved us and hath given Himself for us" (Eph. 5:2). They will be "kind one to another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God for Christ's sake hath forgiven you" (Eph. 4:32). They will be forthright and courageous in speaking the truth to one another, but always in love (Eph. 4:15). They will be "kindly affectioned one to another with brotherly love; in honor preferring one another"; they will "rejoice with them that do rejoice, and weep with them that weep"; instead of being overcome of evil they will "overcome evil with good." (Rom. 12: 10, 15, 21)

Brethren, when we consider the functions of the church, as we have just looked at them, we should all be filled with a deep sense of humility and responsibility. We are those to whom God has entrusted the most precious instruments which this world knows, namely, the means of grace, the Word of God and the sacraments. To be faithful in our administration of these means of grace should therefore be our main objective as a church. Especially also at this convention we will call upon the Spirit of God to lend us His aid and support in this important task of preaching the Gospel and administering the sacraments. We will pray that the Lord may use us as His agents not only to preserve the church which He has gathered thus far, but also to bring many others into His church through the use of the means of grace. We will ask the Lord of the church to give us a spirit of meekness and of love as we administer the important Office of the Keys. We will ask the Spirit of God to make us generous and consistent in the exercise of our Christian love. May our church function in such a God-pleasing way!

IV

THE CHURCH IN THE APPLIED SENSE

What do we mean when we speak about the church in the applied sense? The church in this improper sense, or figurative sense, includes "the total number of those who have been called

by the Word and are gathered about the Word of God.”⁴⁵ Thus this use of the term church also involves people. But the people that it includes are not merely the congregation of believers, rather it consists of all those people whom we associate with membership in the outward organization of the church. Strictly speaking, this group can be called the church only because of the fact that *in it* there are believers in Christ, who really constitute the church. That raises the question why we speak about a church in the applied sense at all? This use of the term church has a long history. It is reviewed briefly in the last published article of the sainted Prof. Frederick E. Mayer.⁴⁶

According to this study the first church father who clearly distinguished between the church as the congregation of all believers and the church as an outward fellowship or organization was Augustine. Thus it is only since the fourth century after Christ that the church in the proper sense, or the invisible church, has been distinguished from the church in the applied sense or the visible church. Why did Augustine make such a distinction between the visible and the invisible church? At his time a group within the church who were called the Donatists claimed that there was no room in the church for a sinner, that is, a hypocrite who merely pretended to be a Christian. Their argument was this, that because the church included only believers, therefore one who was not a believer but a hypocrite could not be included in the church. It was this claim which constrained Augustine to make allowance for a wider use of the term church, which included all those who came together to use the means of grace, the true believers as well as the sham believers or hypocrites. From this time on, the church in the wider sense referred to that outward group called the visible church, which *claimed* membership in the body of Christ. It is clear from what has been said that the term visible church was born as the result of controversy, that this term was first used to allow for the presence of hypocrites in the outward fellowship of the church.

By the time of Martin Luther the Roman Church had over-emphasized the concept of the visible church to such an extent

⁴⁵ Hoenecke, pp. 159, 160.

⁴⁶ Mayer, p. 179.

that Luther was compelled to take issue with this abuse. Roman theology had lost sight of the fact completely that the church is really the congregation of all believers; therefore Luther was constrained to refer to the real church as invisible (“unsichtlich”). By thus emphasizing the real character of the church as including only the believers Luther wanted to bring out as clearly as possible the fact that the Roman concept of the church was one-sided and unscriptural, that it included only the church in the applied sense.

The same error as that of the Church of Rome found its way into the ranks of the Lutheran Church here in America. The old Buffalo Synod maintained that the real Christian Church was the visible church, in fact, that it was the Evangelical Lutheran Church as it appeared to men in its outward organization.⁴⁷ For this reason the old Buffalo Synod and its parent group, the Breslau Synod in Germany, have been charged with being Romanizing Lutherans. As Luther stressed the invisible character of the church against the Roman view that the church was visible, so Walther stressed the fact that the church is essentially invisible in order to combat the error of the Buffalo Synod that the visible Lutheran Church alone is the real Christian Church. Thus we see again that the term visible church is one that is associated with controversies in the church. From Augustine to Luther to Walther the terms visible and invisible have always been used to show that some faulty use of the term church needed to be corrected. This is offered in explanation of the fact that while the terms visible and invisible church do not occur in Scripture, yet they have assumed major importance in the history of the church.

Although the Bible does not use the term visible church, there is a Scriptural basis for the use of the word church in the applied sense. Such evidence is to be found, on the one hand, in the fact that the apostles spoke of the churches in the plural. To the Corinthians Paul writes: “The churches of Asia salute you” (1 Cor. 16:19). To the Romans he writes: “The churches of Christ salute you” (Rom. 16:16). In Gal. 1:2, 22 Paul also refers to “the churches of Galatia” and to “the churches” of Christ in Judea. This plural

⁴⁷ Hoenecke, pp. 166, 167; *THE ABIDING WORD*, I, 291.

use of the word church implies that there were groups of Christians who were gathered together in outward fellowship.

Again, the word church is used in the singular to refer to a discernible group of Christians to which one can write and appeal. Paul refers to the church that is in the home of Aquila and Priscilla (1 Cor. 16:19) and to the church which is at Corinth (1 Cor. 1:2). Luke refers to the church which is at Jerusalem (Acts 8:1). In the opening section of the Epistle to the Romans Paul refers to *all of those who are in Rome*, suggesting that his letter is meant for all of those who belong to the group of professing believers in the city of Rome. (Rom. 1:7)

That these various churches or discernible groups which one could address, with which one could plead, also included those who did not believe, is not explicitly stated in any of the references. That such churches, however, included both believers and non-believers is based on a reference to the kingdom of God in Matt. 13. One of the parables in this chapter has to do with good and bad fish. Even as the net that was drawn in from the sea brought in both good fish and bad, so the kingdom of heaven, which in this case may be referred to the visible church, includes both real Christians and sham Christians. As the contents of the net were separated, the good fish being saved and the bad thrown away, so the Lord Jesus says that at the end of the world the wicked will be separated from the righteous. (Matt. 13:47-50; cf. Matt. 7:21)

Much confusion has arisen in the church because of this double use of the word church, e. g., the church as the congregation of believers, and the church in the applied sense which includes all those who gather around the Word and the sacraments. It would be quite natural for someone to ask, Are there, then, two sides to the church, a visible side and an invisible side? The answer is an emphatic NO! Professor Hoenecke stated: "It is sheer nonsense to say that something is essentially both visible and invisible."⁴⁸ Therefore it may be preferable to speak of *the church according to its essence* and *the church according to its outward manifestation*. Then everyone will know immediately whether one is discussing the church essential or the church manifest. At the very beginning of this essay it was stated that the church according to its essence

⁴⁸ Hoenecke, p. 151.

is the congregation of believers. When this essential church is called invisible, it must be noted that the Scriptures nowhere use this term. There are, however, a number of plausible reasons for using the term invisible church.⁴⁹ From the fact that the Head of the church, namely, the Lord Jesus Christ, is invisible it follows that also the body, that is, the church itself, is invisible. Insofar as the faith which admits a person to membership in the church is invisible, the church itself is held to be invisible. Again, the church is called invisible because the blessings that are imparted to it are invisible, namely, righteousness and peace and life and salvation. In addition to these points there are Bible references which indicate that God alone can see and know and identify those who belong to His church. Solomon prayed to the Lord: "Thou, even Thou only, knowest the hearts of all the children of men" (1 Kings 8:39). Paul observed: "The Lord knoweth them that are His" (2 Tim. 2:19). Our Lord said: "My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me" (John 10:27). "The kingdom of God cometh not with observation; neither shall they say, Lo, herel or, Lo, there! For, behold, the kingdom of God is within you" (Luke 17:20, 21). Professor Mayer brings out a significant point: Luther's idea of the invisible church may well be conveyed by the thought "that the true nature of the church is hidden under the cross."⁵⁰

The church according to its essence is the congregation of believers; the church according to its outward manifestation includes all those people whom we can see as they gather to use the Word of God and the sacraments. This latter group, the church manifest, has the right to be called a church only insofar as the name fits a part of it, namely, the believers who comprise the church essential. The name of the essential part is applied to the manifest whole according to the figure of speech known as synecdoche. According to Luther the Bible does not refer at all to this church in the applied sense, rather it recognizes only the congregation of believers as the church of Christ.⁵¹ Luther justifies his use of the word church with two meanings by saying that he

⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 147.

⁵⁰ Mayer, p. 190.

⁵¹ Ibid., p. 186.

does it for the sake of brevity. He distinguishes between what he calls the real church ("die wirkliche Kirche") and the church that has been made ("die gemachte Kirche"). By making this distinction, however, Luther certainly did not want to speak of two churches; rather he says, it is as though one described a man according to his spiritual and corporeal side as soul and body. Luther also referred to the church manifest as the congregation of the called ("congregatio vocatorum"). According to Mayer, however, Luther never conceived of this group as being an *ecclesia mixta*. To him it was merely a *corpus mixtum*, a mixed body which strictly had no right to the name church.⁵² In European thinking today the distinction between the church essential and the church manifest is based on the analogous distinction between Christ's body and the bread which Luther made in his explanation of the Sacrament of the Altar. According to this view it is maintained that the church is the mystical body of Christ in the world. Even as the body of Christ is present in the Sacrament of the Altar in, with, and under the bread, so the essential church is present in, with, and under the manifest group.⁵³

According to Luther there are two standards that may be used to find out which people belong to the congregation of believers, namely, the standards of love and faith.⁵⁴ The standard of love constrains us to regard all who confess Christ as members of the congregation of believers. In other words, as long as people claim that they are Christians, as long as they maintain their outward membership in the church, as long as they give the impression that they are Christian people, we are obliged out of love for them to regard them as believers and as members of the church. If our charitable estimate of the neighbor proves to be wrong, no one will suffer by the mistake which we made. The other standard is the standard of faith; according to this standard no man, but only God can say who belongs to the church. As touching their faith, the believers are so constituted that the Shepherd, Jesus Christ alone, is able to determine who they are. Thus according to the standard of faith the Christian will be con-

⁵² Ibid., p. 192.

⁵³ Graebner, p. 123.

⁵⁴ Mayer, pp. 193, 194.

strained to withhold judgment at all times, while according to the standard of love he will always acknowledge that the brother who professes Christianity is indeed a true member of the flock of Christ.

Professor Mayer calls attention to two dangers that are connected with the use of the terms visible church and invisible church.⁵⁵ On the one hand, there is a danger that we place too much emphasis on the external concept of the church so that the *una sancta* loses its meaning. It is suggested that this danger is one to which also our Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod is exposed. The fact that throughout its history our Synod has emphasized the importance of the local congregation may lead someone to the mistaken view that this external form of the church is more important than the congregation of believers itself. There is another factor that has characterized our relationship to Synod throughout its history, namely, a very ardent synodical loyalty, which constrains many of us to refer very devotedly to “our beloved Synod.” If the impression is thereby given that The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod is more important than the communion of saints, then certainly the danger of externalizing the church has become very real.

The second danger is that of placing so much emphasis on the spiritual concept of the church that there is no room for the church in the applied sense. If we say, e. g., that only those belong to the real spiritual body of Christ who are one hundred per cent orthodox, then we are not only denying that there are Christians in other church bodies, but we are almost declaring that our righteousness is achieved by our orthodoxy. Furthermore, if we argue that the body of Christ includes only those who agree entirely with us, that will tend to make us extreme isolationists in the religious field. The orthodox church must always remember its obligations to win men for Christ from the unorthodox world.

V

THE CHURCH AND ERROR

Perhaps it should be noted at this point that some of the very significant phrases that we are using in connection with the doc-

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 195—198.

trine of the church are not Biblical phrases, but phrases which the church itself has coined during its long history. We are thinking of such terms as the visible and the invisible church, the Church Militant and the Church Triumphant, and also the true church and the false church. Strictly speaking, the visible church is no church, because it includes also nonbelievers. The Church Triumphant is no longer a church because the believers have *seen* that which they believed on earth. To speak of a *false church* is really a contradiction in terms: if the church consists of all those who constitute the body of Christ, then there is no place in it for falsehood or heterodox teaching. This explains in part why the Bible does not use the words true and false when it refers to the church. The Bible does, however, make a clear distinction between those who teach sound doctrine and those who teach corrupt doctrine. In other words, the Bible recognizes groups of people which may be designated as true and false; these groups are found within the church in the applied sense; only of such outward groups or outward bodies can it be said that their doctrine is either sound or corrupt, that they are either the true church or the false church.

Jesus and His apostles insisted that in the church the whole truth of the Gospel be taught. The Savior told His apostles that true discipleship, true qualifications for membership in the body of His church, consisted in continuing in His Word (John 8:31, 32). The Great Commission of our Lord imposed a similar obligation upon all who would believe in Him through the word of the apostles. The apostles were to teach people "to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you" (Matt. 28:20). That meant that the content of their teaching was to be the whole Word of God, only the Word of God and nothing but the Word of God.

Thus the Lord Jesus urged His apostles to continue in His Word and to teach men to observe everything that He commanded. But He also pointed out that there were some who would fail to live up to His Word. He told the Pharisees and scribes who came to Him that they were the people of whom the prophet Isaiah had said, "In vain they do worship Me, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men" (Matt. 15:9). The Savior warned against those false prophets who would come in sheep's clothing to cover

up their true character, but who were inwardly ravening wolves. (Matt. 7:15)

And it did not take long before the apostles experienced the presence of these false prophets. Paul marvels that the Galatians are so soon removed unto another gospel from Him who called them into the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ (Gal. 1:6). He not only marvels, but he also warns the Galatians, saying, "If any man preach any other gospel unto you than that ye have received, let him be accursed" (Gal. 1:9). Paul also exhorts his young co-worker Timothy to charge some that they should teach no other doctrine than that which they have received (1 Tim. 1:3). John states explicitly that he who does not abide in the doctrine of Christ does not have God (2 John 9). Many centuries before Christ, Jeremiah had issued the solemn warning of the Lord: "Behold, I am against them that . . . cause My people to err by their lies." (Jer. 23:32)

As there were people in New Testament times who did not continue in all of Christ's words, so the church of today is beset by false prophets who do not adhere to the pure Word of the Gospel. And the criterion for distinguishing a true church from a false church is still the whole truth of the Gospel. If someone asks, "What is meant by the whole truth of the Gospel?" the answer is this: The entire Word of God is to be taught in its truth and purity. Whoever teaches otherwise than the Word of God teaches, whoever replaces the whole Word of God by human doctrine in any form, thereby becomes guilty of being a false prophet.⁵⁶

How does one determine whether a church body teaches the whole truth of the Gospel? That is done primarily on the basis of statements of faith which a church body publishes. A good example of such a published statement of faith is the Augsburg Confession. We could also include among such published statements new documents that are prepared by the church from time to time to restate and clarify its position in every generation. But such a written confessional statement is not enough, as has frequently been pointed out by theologians of our church. There are altogether too many church bodies today who have a perfectly sound theological platform on paper, but whose actual teachings are a far cry from their written creedal statements. It may rightfully

⁵⁶ Pieper, p. 486.

be asked of every church body that it actually teach what it professes to teach. The doctrine which is recorded in the official statements of a church body should also be the doctrine which is preached in the pulpits, which is taught at the theological seminaries, and which is officially voiced in the publications of that church body. Professor Pieper was right in calling for "die tatsaechlich im Schwange gehende Lehre," i. e., the doctrines that are actually being taught.⁵⁷

On the other hand, a church body is not to be charged with being a false church because occasionally a false teaching finds its way into this or that congregation. As the *Brief Statement* emphasized, it is not "casual intrusion of error" which makes a church body false; rather it is the persistent refusal of a church body to remove such an error which makes the denomination guilty of being a false church.⁵⁸ When a church is willing to tolerate error and permits it to continue without combating it, then it has deserved the name false church. But in this connection a point must be noted which Professor Hoenecke brings out, namely, that the distinction which we make between a true church and a false church is not an absolute distinction, rather it is a relative one.⁵⁹ This distinction does not mean that the true visible church is the only real church while all the false churches in the world are not churches at all. It does not mean that the true visible church is perfectly pure and free of all error while the false churches are entirely and constantly evil. On the contrary, it is an important thesis of our church that people come to faith in Christ and are saved also in a corrupt church, provided the essential truths of the Word of God are taught in it and Baptism is administered according to the institution of our Lord.⁶⁰ Luther found comfort in the fact that there were believers even in the established Roman Church of his day, because the Gospel lessons, Creed, and Lord's Prayer were still being used in the services and Baptism was still being performed according to the words of Christ. Therefore, despite the many errors that were apparent in the Roman Church

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 487.

⁵⁸ *Brief Statement*, 29.

⁵⁹ Hoenecke, p. 160.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 161.

of Luther's day, people were still coming to faith in the Savior Jesus Christ and were being saved in that church. In the Old Testament there was a time when the church had become utterly corrupt, and yet there was faith left in its midst. Under King Ahab the people as a whole had become idolaters, worshiping the heathen god Baal. So the church of that day certainly came under the condemnation of being a false church; and yet the prophet Elijah received the assurance from God that there were seven thousand faithful followers of Jehovah left. (1 Kings 19:18; Rom. 11:4)

At our Lord's time there was a church body which ranked as a false church, namely, the Samaritans.⁶¹ Their religion was of a hybrid nature, part of it being traceable to the ancient religion of Jehovah in the Old Testament, the other portion being the pagan belief of the Assyrians which they had incorporated into their creed. Because of this strange mixture of religious faiths the Lord Jesus was constrained to tell the woman of Samaria whom He met at Sychar: "Ye worship ye know not what; we know what we worship, for salvation is of the Jews" (John 4:22). So the Samaritans as a religious group constituted a false church, and yet the New Testament demonstrates clearly that there were individual Samaritans who accepted Christ as their Redeemer and were saved. Real Christian love toward the unfortunate one who had fallen among the thieves was manifested not by the priest or the Levite, who were both members of the official church; rather it was an individual Samaritan who ministered unto this poor man in his great need (Luke 10:33). Of the ten lepers who were cleansed by our Lord the one who came back and gave thanks was a Samaritan. And it was this Samaritan to whom the Lord Jesus said: "Arise, go thy way; thy faith hath made thee whole" (Luke 17:16-19). On the basis of such criteria in Scripture Professor Pieper looked at the great variety of heterodox churches in Christendom and said: "There are more Christians than there are one-hundred-per-cent orthodox Christians."⁶² He granted not only that there are Christians in other Protestant bodies and in the Roman Catholic Church, but that there is also a definite bond

⁶¹ Pieper, p. 488.

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 488.

of fellowship which links us Lutherans to these Christians in other church bodies. He stated unequivocally: "Whoever is in fellowship with Christ through faith is also in fellowship with all of those in whom Christ dwells, that is, with the invisible church."⁶⁸

Perhaps someone will say: If we Lutherans of the Missouri Synod *are* in fellowship with believing Christians in other church bodies, then why can't we *practice* this fellowship? Why can't we *demonstrate* our fellowship with these other Christians? The answer is this: While the fellowship is there which unites Christians in the *una sancta*, in the congregation of believers, yet we cannot practice fellowship with the Christians in these other church bodies as long as some difference of doctrine separates them from us. According to the Word of God we can practice fellowship only with those Christians with whom we are united in doctrine and practice. Therefore, while we recognize that there are Christians in other church bodies, we cannot practice fellowship with them because the Word of God forbids this.

When the church confronts false prophets who teach otherwise than the Word of God teaches, the church is to beware of them (Matt. 7:15). Surely the church would not be wary of such false teachers if she joined the hand of fellowship with them. In his letter to the elect lady the apostle John tells her to beware of such teachers as do not abide in the doctrine of Christ. He warns her in all earnestness: "If there come any unto you and bring not this doctrine, receive him not into your house, neither bid him Godspeed, for he that biddeth him Godspeed is partaker of his evil deeds" (2 John 10, 11). Paul also warns against joining in fellowship with those who teach otherwise than the Gospel of Christ teaches. He advises Timothy that if anyone teaches otherwise and does not submit to the wholesome words of our Lord Jesus Christ, then young Timothy is to withdraw from such a person (1 Tim. 6:3-5). Some may argue that the reading in the fifth verse just quoted is a questionable reading, therefore we should not rely upon it. Yet it must be noted that the idea of withdrawing from those who teach falsely is mentioned by Paul in other passages. The passage on which a God-pleasing separation has always been based in the history of our church is Rom. 16:17,

⁶⁸ Ibid., p. 489.

where the apostle says: "Now I beseech you, brethren, mark them which cause divisions and offenses contrary to the doctrine which ye have learned, and avoid them." Recent opinions have varied in our circles as to who the people are that are to be avoided according to Rom. 16:17. There have been those who say that it is the division-makers, the faction-starters who are to be avoided because such divisive activity is contrary to the doctrine of Paul and of our Lord. It is the essayist's conviction, however, that the chief emphasis in this verse should be on the phrase *para ten didachen*; that is, the divisions and offenses in the church are caused by those who teach a doctrine contrary to that of the apostle and of our Lord, and these are to be avoided. Finally, the apostle has a word to say to Titus in this connection. Concerning the man who tends to be heretical, that is, who is inclined to go out on a limb with regard to doctrine, Titus is urged to speak to such a one several times; if, however, he cannot be gained, then Titus is not to have anything more to do with him. (Titus 3:10)

On the other hand, Pieper points out that it is not merely the clear statements of Scripture which forbid us to have fellowship with those who teach otherwise than the Word of God teaches. There is in addition the motive of Christian love which should constrain us not to practice fellowship with erring brethren, but rather to exhort them. It is unscriptural to expect love to cover a multitude of sins by being willing to overlook deviations in doctrine and practice for the sake of the unity of the church. It is the duty of love not to overlook error, not to gloss over it as though it did not exist; love's obligation is rather this, that it seeks to overcome error by the truth. Christian love sees a great danger in the fact that a brother is involved in error, be it ever so slight or small. Because the brother's soul is endangered by such error, love goes to him in order to convince him of the truth. Pieper certainly was right when he said that *divided Christendom was caused by unionism*.⁶⁴ What he meant to say was this: When false teachings crept into the church in the early centuries of its history, *someone failed in his duty of Christian love*, someone failed to avoid those false teachers who initiated the heretical movement

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 490.

in the church. Therefore the mistakes which the church has made in the past, its frequent failures to avoid false teachers, should constrain us today to take so much more seriously our obligation of brotherly love over against those who are in error. Both the precepts of the Word of God and the law of Christian love oblige us to walk together only with those with whom we agree in doctrine.

That is not to say, however, that as a church or as individuals we may remain aloof to our fellow Christians in other church bodies and act as though there were no fellowship whatever between them and us, or as though any kind of outward fellowship could never be achieved with them. In our relations with those in other church bodies who are not in doctrinal agreement with us we ought always to operate with two important pieces of spiritual equipment, a *strict conscience* and a *wide-open heart*. Our strict conscience must always constrain us to contend for the whole truth of the Gospel, to insist that there must be doctrinal agreement before church fellowship can become possible. On the other hand, our heart should always be opened to those other Christians with whom we are not yet in agreement, in an effort to find a way of becoming one with them also in the practice of fellowship. With all of our strictness we must always cultivate an alertness and readiness to establish a proper, God-pleasing fellowship. The *Common Confession* states: "We must also be alert and susceptible to the Lord's leading to establish and maintain fellowship with those whom He has made one with us in faith and to seek to win the erring and the wayward for unity in the true faith."⁶⁵

It must also be noted that where church fellowship is involved, hearts and mouths are to be joined together in the same doctrine. The Lord is not pleased if a situation exists where the heart has one conviction but the mouth says something that does not conform to that conviction. Paul advised the Corinthians that they were all to speak the same thing, that they were to be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment (1 Cor. 1:10). The Romans were also urged to glorify God with one mind and with one mouth. (Rom. 15:6)

⁶⁵ The *Common Confession*, Part One, IX, 5.

Pieper therefore insisted that unity means not only the same confession but also the same understanding of that confession.⁶⁶ The charge is frequently brought against church documents that they do not speak unequivocal language, that they allow for ambiguity, that one group may understand them one way, while another group understands them in quite a different way. For that reason great care should be exercised when representatives of various church bodies get together to try to establish doctrinal unity. In endeavoring to reach an agreement they will not use language which permits a double meaning. Their purpose will always be not only to say the same thing but also to mean the same thing by what they say.

It is also to be expected that the *life* and the *practice* of the church will reflect the sound doctrine which is believed and confessed by it. It does happen that a church body readily maintains uniformity in the doctrines which it teaches; and yet, when it comes to the matter of putting those doctrines into practice, that same group is found wanting. Laxity in practice can do much harm and can undermine much of the good which a program of sound doctrine has brought about. As a church organization grows, as more and more congregations are brought into it, as more and more adult converts swell its membership lists, the danger increases that such a body will become susceptible to loose practices. At first, lapses in sound practice may be excused by the fact that they are exceptional cases. But the trouble is, the exceptions tend to become so numerous that instead of continuing to be exceptions they become the rule.

One area that deserves special attention in the realm of sound practice is that of the administration of the Office of the Keys. In all circuits and conferences and districts of our church the question ought to be asked again and again whether all the congregations in that particular unit are encouraging the practice of salutary church discipline. A program of sound brotherly admonition ought to be cultivated at all levels, in the church, in the home, in the school, at work, at play. Every Christian ought to be so concerned about the spiritual welfare of his brother that he really goes out of his way to help him, that he regularly encourages him in his

⁶⁶ Pieper, p. 491.

faith and supports him in his struggle against the enemies of his soul.

There are other areas in which the church must be careful that its practice conforms to its doctrine. It is not enough, e. g., that a church teaches that it is contrary to the will of Christ for its members to affiliate with a lodge. Such a teaching that the church and the lodge cannot join in a God-pleasing fellowship should also be backed up by a practice which in all charity endeavors to maintain the purity of its membership rolls. The matter of worshiping jointly with churches of other denominations is another area that calls for constant scrutiny. It certainly is not the will of Christ that congregations be willing to share their pulpits or their altars with representatives of other denominations with whom they are not in fellowship. It is obvious that in these matters the church, too, must heed the words of the apostle, not to be merely a hearer of the Word but rather also a doer of that Word. (James 1:22)

The term separatism is receiving almost as much attention in our church as the term unionism. A person who is a separatist, a divisionist, a factionist, certainly comes under the condemnation of the Word of God. A separatist or schismatic group is one which 'separates itself, withdraws from fellowship with another group without having a Scriptural basis for its withdrawal. It is obvious that no one wants to be called such a separatist or a schismatic. That is all the more reason why any persons or groups who are considering withdrawing from a church body should earnestly and seriously consider whether their reasons for withdrawal are Scripturally valid.

Certainly the presence of false teaching in a church is a valid reason for withdrawing from that church. Anyone who refuses to withdraw from a church that harbors false doctrine for fear of being called a separatist is clearly at fault. The charge of separatism, on the other hand, may actually be complimentary, namely, if a separation is based on the presence of false teachings in a church. Pieper commented: "Separatism according to Rom. 16:17 is the only means whereby the true unity of the church can be established and maintained."⁶⁷

⁶⁷ Ibid., p. 492.

VI

THE CHURCH AS OTHERS SEE IT

The purpose of the last section of this paper is to look at the views of the church which are maintained by other Lutherans, by other Protestant groups, and by the Church of Rome. We want to find out how our view of the church differs from the views which have been held by other Christians. For the sake of convenience we will begin by turning our attention to the controversy between the Missouri Synod and the Buffalo Synod shortly after the middle of the last century.

While the essayist was preparing this study on the doctrine of the church, his attention was called to an article on the doctrine of the visible and invisible church which appeared just one hundred years ago in the official church paper of the Buffalo Synod. The church paper was called *Kirchliches Informatorium* and was edited by the leader of the Buffalo Synod, Pastor J. A. A. Grabau. In its issue of Aug. 15, 1855, it contains the article on the visible and invisible church which was written by Pastor Heinrich von Rohr.⁶⁸ This article was of special interest to the essayist because the author of the article was his great-grandfather. It had been known previously that von Rohr came over from Prussia with the old Lutherans who emigrated under Grabau. It had also been known that at a later date von Rohr separated from the Buffalo Synod and Grabau and joined the Wisconsin Synod. It had not, however, been known that Heinrich von Rohr as early as 1855 seemed to be in complete agreement with Grabau's concept of the Church. The article demonstrates very clearly not only that von Rohr shared the false position with regard to the church which was held by Grabau, but that he also vigorously opposed the position of the Missouri Synod on the doctrine of the church.

In this article von Rohr reviews a study on the church by Superintendent Muenchmeyer of Germany. He laments the fact that the doctrine that there is a universal church which includes

⁶⁸ Heinrich von Rohr, *Mitteilungen aus und ueber Deutschland. Das Dogma von der sichtbaren und unsichtbaren Kirche (von Muenchmeyer). Kirchliches Informatorium*, redigiert von J. Andr. A. Grabau. Jahrgang 5, Nummer 1 (Buffalo, 15. August 1855), Seite 3, 4.

Romanists, Greek Orthodox, and Reformed as well as Lutherans appears to be gaining such popularity. He reports that theologians not only of the United Church but also of the Lutheran Church in Germany favor this doctrine of the universal church which includes all believers. This explains, he goes on, why many theologians who advocate this view indicate a preference for the Missouri Synod's doctrine of the church. The article continues with a firm denial of the viewpoint that the real Christian Church is invisible. In the course of the argument the author refers to his own church, i. e., the Buffalo Synod, as the church of Abel, which is being persecuted by the churches of Cain. The use of such terms throws significant light on the type of apologetics that was used one hundred years ago.

In a later paragraph von Rohr declares himself in agreement with the view that there is only *one holy visible church* and that it may be recognized by the preaching of the pure Word of God and the correct administration of the sacraments. Finally he subscribes to the statement that the one holy visible church of which the Confessions speak is "our Evangelical Lutheran Church" and that all the other sects, including Romanists, Greek Orthodox, and Reformed, have no part in it.

In the above statements of von Rohr we recognize immediately three of the well-known errors of the old Buffalo Synod. First, the real Christian Church is visible. Secondly, the one and only real visible church is the Evangelical Lutheran Church. Thirdly, the Word of God and the sacraments are valid marks of the church only if they are present in their full truth and purity. The essayist feels that in all fairness it should be stated here that Heinrich von Rohr in later years became convinced that he could no longer share the position of the Buffalo Synod and therefore joined the Wisconsin Synod. Incidentally, one of the first congregations which he served in America was the Lutheran church at Freistadt, Wis., which is now a member of the Missouri Synod.

The fact, however, that midway in the last century Grabau and von Rohr placed such an unscriptural emphasis on the visible church made it necessary that representatives of the Missouri Synod point out very clearly that the congregation of believers is an invisible group. It is invisible in this sense, that one cannot discern

who is a believer and who is not. Thus it was a reaction against the Romanizing tendency of the Buffalo Synod which moved Walther to insist upon the invisible character of the church. When Walther in turn emphasized the church's invisible character, his Buffalo opponents charged him with disparaging the church in the applied sense, e. g., the visible church, and with being so unionistic that he cared little to which outward body a person belonged. As Walther pointed out at Fort Wayne in 1866, it was this counter-criticism of Buffalo which constrained him to draw up his theses on the visible church.⁶⁹

Over against the Buffalo position Walther stressed in his very first thesis that the one holy Christian Church, e. g., the congregation of saints, includes "the total of all that truly believe in Christ and are sanctified through this faith." Theses III and IV then take up the church in the applied sense.⁷⁰ Thesis III speaks of visible churches which include both hypocrites and believers. Thesis IV speaks of visible congregations which become "guilty of a partial lapse from the true doctrine." Both of these kinds of outward bodies can be called churches only in an improper sense. After discussing the difference between the true church and false churches in Theses V and IX, Walther takes up the term "Evangelical Lutheran Church." As a direct answer to the Buffalo Synod Walther states unequivocally in Thesis XI: "The Ev. Lutheran Church is not the one holy Christian Church outside which there is no salvation."⁷¹ While the position is thus definitely safeguarded that people may be saved outside the Evangelical Lutheran Church, Thesis XII shows the high regard in which Walther held his own Lutheran Church. This thesis states: "If the Ev. Lutheran Church has these marks, namely, pure Gospel preaching and unadulterated administration of the holy sacraments, it is the true visible church of God on earth."⁷² With that statement we conclude our discussion of the controversy between Missouri and Buffalo.

⁶⁹ P. F. Koehneke, "The Evangelical Lutheran Church, the True Visible Church of God," in *THE ABIDING WORD*, I, 291.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 296—299.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 306.

⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 307.

We turn next to the controversy between the Missouri Synod and the Wisconsin Synod. These synods have been in fellowship in the Synodical Conference for more than three quarters of a century. Yet there have been divergent views in them concerning the doctrine of the church. The areas in which they maintained different viewpoints were in particular the true nature of the local congregation and the true nature of a synod. We propose to discuss first of all the Missouri Synod's view of the local congregation and of the synod, and then the position of Wisconsin with regard to the same areas. The position of the Missouri Synod concerning the local congregation is stated by Pieper as follows: "The local congregation is the congregation of believers who in a definite locality have gathered around Word and sacrament."⁷³ Two points especially should be noted in this definition. First, the local congregation includes only those who believe in Christ; it does not include those who gather around the Word and sacrament but are not believers. The local congregation is not a *corpus mixtum*, rather it is an *ecclesia pura*, that is, the *una sancta* in miniature. The second point to be noted in Pieper's definition is the fact that the believers are gathered in a *definite locality*. If this phrase is interpreted correctly by the essayist, then it means that there is a local congregation only when Christians who have *settled down together in one place* are gathered into a congregation. In other words, a local congregation does not exist when Christians gather only on particular occasions or for functions that are not held regularly. In his article on "Church and the Churches," Theodore Graebner seems to uphold this interpretation. He says: "Nowhere in the New Testament is the Lord's Supper celebrated by groups who gather only occasionally in a certain locale. The sacrament is always associated with the congregations as such."⁷⁴

Concerning the relation between this local congregation and a group of congregations called synod, the Missouri Synod has always taught that the local congregation is a divine institution, while the synod is a human organization that has only advisory powers. This distinction between congregation and synod may be observed in five different areas. *First*, the local congregation

⁷³ Pieper, p. 484.

⁷⁴ Graebner, p. 126.

is a divine institution because it preaches the Word of God, administers the Office of the Keys, and distributes the sacrament publicly *according to God's will*.⁷⁵ The synod, on the other hand, is a human organization because various congregations unite to form a synod *for practical reasons*.⁷⁶ *Secondly*, because of this important distinction between congregation and synod a person may not resign from a local congregation; but a local congregation may resign from a synod. In this connection Pieper comments that we do not accept resignations from a local congregation, because no one has the authority to grant a dispensation from a divine ordinance; but we do not regard the union of a number of congregations in a synod as a divine ordinance.⁷⁷ *Thirdly*, the phrase "tell it to the church" is a divine precept; whereas the phrase "tell it to the synod" is a human precept.⁷⁸ *Fourthly*, the local congregation possesses the Office of the Keys; the synod does not possess this authority. *Fifthly*, the local congregation has authority to administer the sacrament; a synod has no such authority. From the above presentation it is clear that the Missouri Synod insists on a clear line of demarcation between the local congregation and the synod.

The Wisconsin Synod, on the other hand, does not see such a distinct line of separation between the local church and the synod. The position of the Wisconsin Synod is given in the following statement of Meyer: "For the purpose of mutual edification and for more efficient work in the kingdom of our Lord, Christians will organize congregations."⁷⁹ It is clear from this statement that according to the Wisconsin view the congregation is regarded as an organization in the same sense that the synod is an organization. God does not command that this particular organization must be the form in which His church appears here upon earth. Wherever two or three believers in Christ gather together in Jesus' name, there is a church, a congregation of believers (Matt. 18:20). When such a group organizes, then you

⁷⁵ Pieper, p. 485.

⁷⁶ Spitz, p. 282.

⁷⁷ Pieper, p. 485.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

⁷⁹ Meyer, V.

have a local congregation. The organization is formed not by divine command, but for the two reasons stated above: for mutual edification and for more efficient Kingdom work. Christian people unite outwardly so that they may abound more and more in a God-pleasing way of life (1 Thess. 4:1); that they may "grow up into Him in all things, which is the Head, even Christ" (Eph. 4:15). Christians join hands in order that they may promote the program of Kingdom building, e. g., of missions. Even as the churches were to separate Barnabas and Saul for the work into which the Lord had called them, namely, extending the kingdom of Christ (Acts 13:2), so today Christians join hands in order to be able to support missionaries who go into all the world. By such collective action Christians are enabled to show forth the praises of Him who has called them out of darkness into His marvelous light (1 Peter 2:9). The organization of such Christian congregations for the most part follows geographical lines. But there is hardly Scriptural justification for stating that it must follow geographical lines.

From the position of the Wisconsin Synod stated above another significant point follows, namely, that there is no *essential* difference between the local congregation and the synod; both constitute the church. Meyer points out that the congregation is merely the smaller group, the synod is the larger group; yet the activities of the congregation cover a greater range than the activities of the synod.⁸⁰ The congregation, e. g., has regular worship, regular use of both sacraments, regular training of children. The synod, on the other hand, has worship and Communion services only when the convention is in session; it does not baptize, but it does train workers for the churches and administers their mission program for them. Finally, it should be stated with regard to the Wisconsin view that Scripture does refer to activities that approximate the work of a synod. First, Timothy and Titus were sent by Paul to see how the congregations were getting along. Secondly, the Letter to the Galatians is addressed to a group of churches. Thirdly, a large group of congregations participated in the offering for the church at Jerusalem. Fourthly, the fact that the Pauline

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, V, 4, a and b.

Epistles were exchanged suggests that a group of congregations had connections with one another.⁸¹

What has been done to overcome these difficulties between the Missouri and Wisconsin synods with regard to the doctrine of the church? We note with deep gratitude to the Lord that progress has been made in resolving these differences. In the year 1932, the same year in which the *Brief Statement* appeared, the so-called Thiensville Theses were drawn up. These theses were called the Thiensville Theses because they were drawn up in Thiensville, Wis., a suburb of Milwaukee, where the seminary of the Wisconsin Synod is located. The theses were drafted by a group composed of the Thiensville faculty, representatives of the St. Louis faculty, and the presidents of the Missouri and Wisconsin synods on April 16, 1932. The Thiensville Theses have never been ratified by either of the two synodical bodies; but they were adopted at the convention of the Lutheran Synodical Conference at St. Paul in August 1952.⁸² The four theses are not too long; therefore we quote them in full at this point.

- I. As we know from Scripture, it is God's will and regulation that Christians who reside in the same area also establish an external connection in order to exercise jointly the obligations of their spiritual priesthood.
- II. As we know from Scripture, it is furthermore God's will and regulation that such Christian local congregations have shepherds and teachers, who in the name and on behalf of the congregation carry out the duties of the ministry of the Word in their midst.
- III. As we know from Scripture, it is also God's will and regulation that Christian local congregations give expression to their unity of faith with other congregations and carry on jointly with them the work of the kingdom of God as is done among us in the unprescribed form of a synod.

⁸¹ These four points were brought out by Professor Meyer in his lectures on the Doctrine of the Church at the Lutheran Seminary, Thiensville, Wis.

⁸² *Proceedings of the Forty-second Convention of the Ev. Lutheran Synodical Conference of North America*, assembled at Concordia College, St. Paul, Minn., August 12—15, 1952 (St. Louis: CPH, 1953), pp. 142, 143.

IV. Because every Christian possesses the keys of the kingdom of heaven, every judgment pronounced in agreement with God's Word by an individual Christian or by more Christians in any kind of combination is valid also in heaven. But, as we know from Scripture, it is God's will and regulation that proceedings against a brother who has sinned shall not be considered completed until his local congregation has acted. Congregational discipline and synodical discipline, if everything is done properly, cannot cause a conflict, since the local congregation excludes from the local congregation and not from the Synod, and Synod excludes from Synod and not from the local congregation.

NOTE: In accordance with ecclesiastical usage we call the exclusion executed by a congregation excommunication (ban).

A brief evaluation of these Thiensville Theses is in order. It is to be noted that especially in Thesis I and Thesis III an effort is made to reconcile the views of the two synods with regard to the local congregation and the synod. In Thesis I the Wisconsin Synod concedes *that it is God's will* that Christians living in the same area establish an external connection. In Thesis III the Missouri Synod concedes *that it is God's will* that congregations unite with other congregations to carry on jointly the work of the kingdom of God. The use of the phrase "*external connection*" (instead of local congregation) in Thesis I suggests that the form of organization in the local area is not prescribed by God. Again, the use of the phrase "*in the unprescribed form of a synod*" in Thesis III clearly indicates that the form of the larger group or synod is not prescribed by God. In Thesis IV Missouri concedes that when Christians "*in any kind of combination*" pronounce a judgment that is in agreement with God's Word, this is valid in heaven. Wisconsin, on the other hand, concedes that any proceedings against a brother who has sinned are not to be regarded as completed "*until his local congregation has acted.*" The authority to exclude is granted to both the congregation and the synod, but each excludes only within its own distinct area.

That these Thiensville Theses represent a sincere effort to overcome the differences between the two synods is indicated by other statements from members of both bodies which point to a greater

measure of agreement on the doctrine of the church. Professor Meyer seems to imply that he agrees with Missouri's position when he writes: "In purely local, internal affairs of the congregation the synod can exercise no more than advisory authority."⁸³ On the other hand, Professor Graebner in his paper on "Church and the Churches" seems to show a measure of sympathy for Wisconsin's position when he says: "Every gathering of people, even though it consists of only two or three, may consider itself a congregation of Christ, provided it recognizes the Gospel and acts according to its norms."⁸⁴ Graebner also cites with apparent approval a quotation from Althaus, which reflects Wisconsin's traditional position: "The outward church organization exists for the purpose of making possible and guaranteeing the right proclamation and hearing of the Gospel and the right administration of the Sacraments. What form that organization will take may be determined by the use of intelligence and common sense in the light of a given historical situation. No form of church organization exists by divine right."⁸⁵ Finally, it should be noted that Article VII of the constitution of The Lutheran Church — Missouri Synod allows room for an interpretation that is satisfactory to both synods. Article VII does not state that the synod is *purely* an advisory body, that is, *in all respects*; rather the constitution specifies that "*with respect to the individual congregation's right of self-government it (synod) is but an advisory body.*"⁸⁶ It is also significant that one of the bylaws pays a high tribute to the authority of the synod when it states: "Synod expects every member congregation to respect its resolutions and to consider them of binding force if they are in accordance with the Word of God and if they appear expedient as far as the condition of the congregation is concerned."⁸⁷

Finally, we take note of the views of the church which are held by a number of sectarian bodies. As Mayer points out, the concept

⁸³ Meyer, V, 4, b, (2), (c).

⁸⁴ Graebner, p. 124.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 122.

⁸⁶ *Handbook* of The Lutheran Church — Missouri Synod (Corrected to June 26, 1953, by the Houston convention). Constitution, Article VII — Relation of Synod to Its Members.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, Bylaw 1.09 b.

of the visible church which was first posited by Augustine became the pattern for the doctrine of the church for the Calvinist system, the Arminian system, and the Roman system.⁸⁸

According to John Calvin the visible church is of primary importance; the famous *Institutes* of 1559 reflect the extreme Calvinist view that salvation can be found only within the visible church. This visible church is pictured by Calvin as the earthen vessel through which God chose to come to meet man. Following Rome, Calvin also pictures the visible church as the spiritual mother, without whom there can be no life.⁸⁹ Christ is, indeed, acknowledged as the Head of this visible church, but it is not Christ, the Author of our redemption, but rather Christ as the sovereign Lord of His church. Because a sovereign is there to be obeyed, therefore the church, according to Calvin's view, is not so much a group of believing Christians as it is a group of obeying subjects. In our own country the region which is acknowledged to be more representative of Calvinism than perhaps any other is New England. It was there that the obedience of the Christian to God and to his government was symbolized by the fact that both the courthouse and the church were given a place of prominence in the public square.⁹⁰

The same emphasis on the visible church is to be noted among the followers of Arminius. The Arminian system which includes such groups as the Anabaptists, the Pietists, and the Methodists, emphasizes not so much *the obedience* of the visible church as the fact that it is a visible group of *holy people*. This is, of course, going back to the concept of the holy people which was originally stated in the Old Testament. According to the Arminian view the church consists of holy people who achieve holiness by their own life and conduct, who measure up to a high human standard of piety. The movement on the European continent which was known as Pietism had a close affinity to the position of Arminius. In England the Arminian viewpoint was represented by John Wesley and Methodism. Wesley called for perfect lovers of God in the church.

⁸⁸ Mayer, p. 179.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 182.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 183, 184.

Thus the visible church became closely associated with a program of sanctification.⁹¹

No doubt the Roman Church goes farther than any other group in emphasizing the visible church. Membership in the true visible Church of Rome, it is claimed, is the only way to be saved. The famous Latin line, *Extra ecclesiam nulla salus*, meaning, "No salvation *outside* the church," is applied to the visible Church of Rome. Because of the host of errors in the Roman Church Protestant theologians have changed the *extra* to *intra*, thus bringing out the meaning, "No salvation *within* the church."⁹² What counts in the Roman Church is justification by good works, not by faith. Salvation is secured by the faithful use of the seven Roman sacraments and by obedience to the laws of the church, e. g., of the visible church.⁹³ To safeguard its authority and its prestige, the Roman Church has set up the premise that the visible church as represented by the pope and the hierarchy under him cannot become guilty of error. Especially since 1870 the infallibility of the church under its papal head has been a bulwark of Roman teaching.

What is to be said about the infallibility of the church? The leaders of the Lutheran Church in the past have taught that the congregation of believers is infallible. Pieper, it should be noted, did not speak of such an infallibility of the communion of saints. But Hoenecke states as his fifth chief thesis on the church: "The one Holy Church of God is infallible."⁹⁴ Such a viewpoint certainly has some basis in the statement of Paul that "the church of the living God (is) the pillar and ground of the truth" (1 Tim. 3:15). It should be noted, however, that if there is such an infallibility in the church, it is only in the *una sancta* and not in the outward manifestation of the church. And even in the *una sancta* it is only the new man in Christ who is infallible. When our Lord says that the gates of hell will not prevail against His church (Matt. 16:18), and when He says that if it were possible, the false prophets would deceive the very elect (Matt. 24:24), these passages do not seem to give evidence of the infallibility of the church.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 184, 185.

⁹² Mueller, p. 549.

⁹³ Mayer, p. 180.

⁹⁴ Hoenecke, p. 155; cf. Meyer, VII, 1.

Certainly in the light of Matt. 16:18 it would be more Biblical to call the church indestructible than to say that it is infallible. Thus Article VII of the Augsburg Confession also teaches "that one holy church is to continue forever."⁹⁵

Over against the above-named errors of the Calvinist, the Arminian, and the Roman doctrine of the church, the Lutheran view must be reiterated. The visible church can be called a church only in the applied sense. For the sake of order, and to avoid confusion, it might even be well to cease altogether calling the outward visible fellowship a church. If the term church must be applied to the visible organization, then it should be clearly indicated that it is so called only in a figurative, in an improper sense. The only church that has a right to refer to itself as the exclusive church is the congregation of believers. The so-called *una sancta*, which transcends all the boundaries of church denominations, is indeed the one exclusive church. Outside the *una sancta* there can be no salvation for the simple reason that there is no salvation except through faith in Christ. Therefore the Lutheran doctrine of the church is inextricably bound together with the Lutheran doctrine of the justification of the sinner by faith in the Savior Jesus Christ.

⁹⁵ *Concordia Triglotta*, p. 47.