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*The Abiding Word*

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*The*  
ABIDING  
WORD

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AN ANTHOLOGY OF DOCTRINAL  
ESSAYS FOR THE YEARS  
1954-1955

*Volume Three*

Continuing the Centennial Series

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## *Publisher's Preface*

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**T**he 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**

# Contents

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	PAGE
PUBLISHER'S PREFACE	v
THE LUTHERAN SCHOOL IN THE AMERICAN EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM . . . . . <i>S. J. Roth</i>	3
YOUTH: FIRST-CLASS COMMUNICANTS . . . . . <i>Arthur H. Gerhardt</i>	45
THE LAST THINGS . . . . . <i>A. H. Schwermann</i>	87
OUR DIVINE ADOPTION . . . . . <i>R. P. Sieving</i>	131
THE DOCTRINE OF THE ANGELS . . . . . <i>Richard C. Jahn</i>	184
CHRIST IN COLOSSIANS . . . . . <i>W. H. Wentz</i>	244
THE DOCTRINE OF THE CHURCH . . . . . <i>Alfred von Rohr Sauer</i>	287
THE STRUCTURE AND FUNCTION OF THE CHRISTIAN CHURCH . . . . . <i>H. Richard Klann</i>	342
THE MEANS OF GRACE IN AN EFFECTIVE CHURCH PROGRAM . . . . . <i>Carl A. Gaertner</i>	394

THE LORD'S SUPPER . . . . .	425
<i>Ottomar O. Krueger</i>	
THE PROPER USE OF THE SACRAMENT OF HOLY COMMUNION . . . . .	476
<i>A. E. Krause</i>	
THE PRACTICE OF HOLY COMMUNION . . . . .	531
<i>Richard R. Caemmerer</i>	

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*The Abiding Word*

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## *The Structure and Function of the Christian Church*

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THOSE who are familiar with the history of our Lutheran Church — Missouri Synod know that the question What is the church? stirred the minds and souls of our fathers to their very depths. Historians have vividly described for us how the Saxon fathers diligently searched the Scriptures, the Confessions, and the writings of the great Christian teachers, in order to find certain and conclusive answers to this question, which seemed to them to place their recent and very great sacrifices under a dark cloud.

The spiritual struggles of those men, their intense and prayerful concentration upon it, restored to the Lutheran Church the heritage of the Reformation in the matter of the doctrine of the church. Indeed, because the external, that is to say, the political and social, conditions of our country made it possible to do so, our synodical fathers were able to introduce practical and concrete applications of the Christian doctrine of the church, such as Luther had recommended but was unable successfully to introduce in his time.

As a result of this diligent inquiry on the part of our synodical fathers regarding the precise Biblical teaching concerning the doctrine of the church our synodical literature is extraordinarily rich in dissertations and discussions of the subject. We who are the heirs of this treasure have every reason to be deeply grateful to God, who has shown us the remarkable grace of having preserved in our midst this true and comforting doctrine for more than a century.

Indeed, from the viewpoint of the history of dogma we might be permitted to venture the judgment that our doctrine of the church was a powerful factor in the very rapid growth of our Synod, especially in its early years. Today we ought gratefully to affirm that by God's grace we have grown from fewer than 3,000 souls

in 1847 to more than 2 million souls in 1954, and are growing faster than most other Lutheran bodies in this country, also because we have so far loyally adhered to the Scriptural doctrine of the church. This evidence of God's marvelous and undeserved grace ought to stir us to give fervent thanks to Him.

By way of introduction to our topic, let us consider some interesting points of history regarding the term "church." Most scholars tell us that the term "church" is derived from the Greek word *kyriakon* (*domos*), "the Lord's (house)." As Christianity spread, the word became common, under various forms, in the Teutonic, Slavonic, and other languages of Christendom. Originally the word was used with reference to the building in which Christian worship took place *kyriakon* (*domos*), and was later on extended to designate the Christian community (*ekklesia*). On the other hand, the Greek term *ekklesia* was transferred in its application from the community to the building and used in both senses, especially in modern Romance and Celtic languages (e. g., French — *eglise*, Welsh — *eglwys*).

When the apostle Paul wrote of himself as one who had "persecuted the church of God and made havoc of it" (*ten ekklesian tou Theou*) he used an expression which had indeed a long history. The Old Testament Hebrew words *'edah* and *kahal* are translated by the Septuagint with *synagoge* or *ekklesia*. Moses used these words to mean the general assembly or congregation of the people of Israel during their wanderings of forty years in the desert. Elsewhere in the O. T. the terms also mean the people, without reference to a physical assembling. Examples of this kind are Neh. 13:1, where we have the phrase *ekklesia Theou*, and Ps. 74 (LXX, 73):2, where we read *tes synagoges sou*. The word *synagoge* is used more frequently and, as we know, the Hellenistic Jews used it popularly with reference to their local assemblies or congregations.

That the New Testament employs the term *ekklesia*, a popular revival of a little-used O. T. expression, tells us much about the origin and essential character of the church. The *ekklesia* are people who have been "called out." As such the term has its roots in O. T. prophecy, which deals at length with the repeated lapses and ruin of God's chosen people, followed by the recovery of a small

remnant. The apostles spoke in this vein after Pentecost ("save yourselves from this untoward generation"). Paul develops the same argument in Romans 9—11. In Phil. 3:3 we read: "We are the circumcision, who worship by the Spirit of God, and glory in Christ Jesus, and have no confidence in the flesh." "The circumcision" meant the Jewish people, who were regarded as bound in a covenant to God. The actual rite of circumcision was being abandoned by Christians, and the sentence may be paraphrased thus: "Not those who practice the circumcision of the flesh, but the believers in Jesus as the Christ, are all that circumcision signifies, namely, the covenanted people of God." Similarly, James in Acts 15:17, while giving the conclusions of the first apostolic council, identifies the remnant with the new Christian community.

When our Lord spoke of the "church," He obviously meant a group of people who constituted an intimate community (Matt. 18:17: "Tell it to the church"). St. Paul writes to the Ephesians (2:19ff.): "Now therefore ye are no more strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints and of the household of God, and are built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief Cornerstone; in whom all the building, fitly framed together, groweth unto an holy temple in the Lord; in whom ye also are builded together for an habitation of God through the Spirit." In this expression St. Paul reveals to us both the structure and the function of the church: its structure is organic—a community of people which belongs to God and which functions as the temple of God. The same theme is elaborated when we read that the church is called the body of Christ, of which all believers are the members (Eph. 5:30-32; Col. 1:18). Paul does not mean to say that the relationship between Christ and the church is of a physical character. On the contrary, the relationship is a surpassing mystery, but it is nonetheless real and genuine.

That we must be careful in our evaluation of the meaning of the metaphors which are employed in the text of Scripture in order to designate the church is clearly indicated when we read of the church as "Mount Zion," "the city of the living God," "the heavenly Jerusalem," "the general assembly and church of the first-born, which are written in heaven" (Heb. 12:22, 23). Again, Paul writes

Timothy to instruct him (1 Tim. 3:15): “. . . that thou mayest know how thou oughtest to behave thyself in the house of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of truth.” How theologians have misconstrued, e. g., the term “body” with reference to the church can be seen from the encyclical *Satis cognitum* of Pope Leo XIII, who wrote: “The church is visible because she is a body.” The present pope, Pius XII, conforming to the doctrine of his predecessors, wrote in his encyclical *The Mystical Body of Christ*: “If we would define and describe this true church of Jesus Christ – which is the One, Holy, Catholic, Apostolic, Roman Church . . .” (par. 14), thus arrogantly absolutizing the Roman Church by identifying it with the church of Christ. On the other hand, liberal Protestant theologians have wrongly interpreted the term “body” of Christ to mean a social institution which exists for the improvement of the life or conduct of the human race. We shall have to inspect these errors more closely later on.

The term “church” – *ecclesia* – is used by Scripture in four clearly distinguishable meanings: (1) The totality of all those who believe in Christ (Eph. 5:25; Matt. 16:18; Eph. 1:22; 3:21). (2) The Christians of a local congregation (1 Cor. 1:2; 2 Cor. 1:1). (3) The visible local congregation as an organization (Matt. 18:17). (4) Any assembly of Christians. (1 Cor. 11:18; 14:34)

After these introductory remarks and comments on the history of the term “church,” let us consider our theme,

## THE STRUCTURE AND FUNCTION OF THE CHRISTIAN CHURCH

according to the following parts:

### I. The Structure of the Christian Church.

- A. Errors Regarding the Christian Doctrine of the Structure of the Church.
- B. The Scriptural Doctrine of the Structure of the Church.

### II. The Function of the Christian Church.

- A. Errors Regarding the Christian Doctrine of the Function of the Church.
- B. The Scriptural Doctrine of the Function of the Church.

## I. THE STRUCTURE OF THE CHRISTIAN CHURCH

## A. HISTORICAL ERRORS REGARDING THE DOCTRINE OF THE CHURCH

The study of the historical development of errors regarding the Biblical doctrine of the church is not merely an academic enterprise but of very great practical benefit for all of us today. For just as a navigator of a ship will seek to be guided by the charts of reefs and sandbanks which have been prepared as a result of the shipwreck of others, so the Christian will unhesitatingly desire to learn from the disastrous experiences of older generations of Christians how to avoid suffering similar shipwreck of the faith. Since it is hardly possible within the brief time available to us to consider all the major departures from the teaching of our Lord and His apostles, we shall seek to deal with them partially and in outline.

In retrospect we can see the beginnings of error even in some of the early apostolic fathers, who were also contemporaries of the apostle John. Clement of Rome addressed the Christians at Corinth, probably early A. D. 97, in a letter dealing with the Christian faith. It is clear from this document that the apostolic teaching was being maintained, but one does not gain the impression that the writer made a great effort to penetrate deeply in the message, e. g., on the order of the epistles of the New Testament. On the basis of what we have left of Clement's writings we cannot say unequivocally that the author has grasped the profundity of the Biblical conception of Christ's work and of the significance of faith. This is also reflected in Clement's presentation of the doctrine of the church.

To be sure, we learn from him that the church is the people of God, which He has chosen for His own possession (59.4; 30.1; 6.1; 64). They are called to be saints (inscription and 65.2) and have become the flock of Christ (16.1). Yet Clement presents us with a legal argument based upon the O. T. in support of the authority of the elder. His emphasis on the duty of the elders (40) for the conduct of worship (*leiturgia*) and sacrifice (*thusia*) would seem disproportionate without a corresponding emphasis on the responsibility of the congregation. The external structure of the fixed office and its authority appears to be made part of the structure of the church, which is the communion of saints. It is prob-

ably not too much to say that Clement unintentionally discloses that the subtle growth of the "mystery of iniquity" of which St. Paul wrote (2 Thess. 2:7) was already at work in his time. Looking at the document with consideration for the subsequent history of the church, it would seem proper to conclude that we have here an indication, perhaps unconscious, that the welfare of the flock of Christ is bound up with the conservation and strengthening of the external apparatus, rather than dependent upon the free activity of the Holy Spirit. (Note his stress upon discipline, order, and subjection to leaders in 1.3; 2.6; 4-6; 47.6; 21.6; 40.)

In the epistles of Ignatius of Antioch (to Ephesians, Magnesians, Trallians, Romans, Philadelphians, Smyrnans, and Polycarp), written about A. D. 110, we find for the first time the expression "catholic church" (*katholike ekklesia*): "Wherever the bishop appears, there let the people be," just as wherever Christ is, there is the catholic church (Smyrn. 8.2). The *ekklesia katholike* here denotes the church universal in contrast with the single congregation. Ignatius' idea is that as the universal church has its center in Christ, so the separate congregations should find their centers in their bishops. The bishop is a type of God or of Christ, the presbyters types of the apostles (Tral. 2.1; 3.1; Magn. 2; 6.1; Smyrn. 8.1; Eph. 6). Christ, the unseen Bishop, is contrasted with the bishop who is seen (Magn. 3.2; cf. Rom. 9.1). Subject to the bishop and presbyters, the individual congregation is a copy of the church universal, which is led by Christ and the teaching of the apostles. Thus in principle, it would seem, the condition of unity in the church universal is Christ and the apostles, not the episcopacy.

But Ignatius attaches great practical importance to the episcopacy. He evidently emphasizes the authority of the bishops in order to maintain the moral principle of authority and subjection in human society, just as he demands of Christians the same subjection and reverence for the presbyters and deacons. Of these offices he says: "Without these it is not called a church" (Tral. 3.1). Perhaps Ignatius' stress upon the authority of bishops was due to the fact that the bishops presented a fixed authority in opposition to the Gnostic tendencies then spreading in Asia Minor. We must take notice here that in Ignatius' presentation of the structure of the church the bond of unity has become concrete in the ecclesias-

tical institution of the episcopacy. The unity and harmony of the members of a congregation in prayer and temper, in love and faith is achieved by attachment to the bishop and obedience to him (Philad. 7.2; 8.1; Polyc. 1.2; Magn. 1.2; 6.2; 7; Eph. 4.13). "It is not allowed without the bishop to baptize or hold the Agape, but whatsoever he shall approve, that is also well-pleasing to God, in order that whatever is done may be safe and secure." (Smyrn. 8.2)

This trend is not apparent, however, in that little liturgical handbook called *The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles*, which, scholars say, came into existence shortly after the turn of the first century after Christ. Here the doctrine concerning the structure of the church is still quite apostolic. But perhaps this becomes a little easier to understand, in view of the trend of the times, when we learn that the *Didache* (like the Epistle of Barnabas) was based upon a much earlier work. However, this cannot prevent us from observing in the writings of the apostolic fathers the beginning of the conflict between tradition (*paradosis*) and succession (*diadoche*) on the one hand, and the Spirit and *charismata* on the other.

In their polemics against the heretics, Irenaeus and Tertullian are still quite far from finding an identification of the episcopacy with the structure of the church. But since they sought for a criterion, not possessed by the heretics, for the right understanding of the Scriptures, they turned to the bishops, who in their unbroken succession in the "mother churches" since the days of the apostles (Iren. III.3; 4.1; V.20.1) were believed to possess a tradition of orthodox interpretation. For this reason Tertullian writes (*praescr.* 21.36,32): "Let them [the heretics] therefore produce the origins of their churches through succession from the beginning in such a way that the first bishop had as his teacher and predecessor someone of the apostles or of the apostolic men who were closely associated with the apostles!" This applied especially, and the practice agreed with Irenaeus' claim, to the church of Rome: "For it is necessary that the whole church, i. e., those from all places who are believers, should come, on account of its more potent headship, to that church in which have been preserved by believers from all places those things which are a tradition from the apostles. (Iren. III.3.2)

In defense of these fathers we should clearly understand that they had no awareness of what their insistence upon the authority and

power of the episcopacy would do to the Biblical doctrine of the structure of the Christian Church. So far we find no identification of the visible institutions of the church with the church itself. Origen (third century) also affirms that the church is the congregation of believers, the assembly of the righteous, the "city of God." (*Contra Celsus*, III.30)

However, we find the trend toward a doctrine of the church as an institution far more pronounced in Cyprian's claims. Cyprian, bishop of Carthage (died A. D. 258), confronted the question of the readmission of the backsliders (*lapsi*) after the Decian persecution. Their number was so great it soon became apparent that the ancient practice of a rigorous discipline had to be modified, i. e., the practice to exclude the lapsed from the communion of the church and the benediction (*pax*) with the congregation. Those who had fallen applied to their "confessors" for letters of recommendation (*libelli*). Although these were originally intended to be letters of recommendation only, they soon obtained the force of command (e. g., the letter of the confessor Lucian to Cyprian, ep. 23; cf. 21.3). Cyprian did not dispute the right of the confessors in these matters, but he thought that an assembly of the bishops should first consider the matter and lay down the principles to govern such cases before any action was taken — particularly in view of the distractions caused by the persecutions. This was also the position of the church at Rome.

Cyprian's conception of the church may be summarized briefly as follows:

(1) The bishops are the successors of the apostles, and like them chosen by the Lord Himself, inducted into their office (Cypr. ep. 3.3; cf. Firmil 75.16) as leaders (*praepositi*) or pastors (*pastores*) (ep. 8.1; 19.2; 20.3; 27.3; 33.1; 13.1; 59.14). By this he did not mean a mere "ordinance of succession," but that every bishop is inducted into his office by a "divine decree, for his own sake" (59.5). However, he is a bishop, and his ministrations are effective only as long as he remains faithful and leads a holy life (ep. 64.4; 67.3). He who criticizes a bishop presumes thereby to pass judgment upon the judgment of God and Christ. An appeal is made to Matt. 10:29 ("Are not two sparrows," etc.) for the argument that no bishop is appointed by the church except through God (66.1). Accordingly, bishops are said to be guided in their decisions by divine

inspiration and visions (ep. 11.3,4; 57.5; 68.5; 66.10; 63.1; 73.26). On the one hand Cyprian asserts that bishops are the successors of the historical apostolate, and consequently the rightful teachers of the apostolic tradition. But they are also inspired prophets in their own right, endowed with the *charismata* – a claim we don't find in his predecessors. Hence bishops may not be criticized, for, like the prophets of old, they are the mouthpieces of God.

(2) Basing himself upon Matt. 16:18f., Cyprian claims that the church is founded upon the bishops, who have complete direction of its affairs. "Hence through the changes of times and of dynasties the ordination of bishops and the order of the church moves on, so that the church is constituted of bishops, and every act of the church is controlled by these leaders" (33.1). The bishops decide who belongs to the church and who shall be restored to her fellowship. He conducts the worship as the priest of God, and offers the sacrifice upon the altar (67.1 – Cyprian is the first to assert an actual priesthood of the clergy, based upon the sacrifice offered by them). He defends the pure tradition against errorists (ep. 63.17; 74.10), and he is the leader (*Vorgesetzter* – *praepositus*) who rules the laity (*laici*, or *plebs*) by virtue of divine authority.

(3) The bond which holds the church together in unity is the episcopate, which is the bishops constituted as a college (*collegium*). The councils developed this conception. In them the bishops represented the unity of the church practically, as Cyprian now theoretically formulated it. "These are the church united (*adunata*). . . . Whence thou shouldst know that the bishop is in the church and the church in the bishop, and he who is not with the bishop is not in the church" (ep. 66;8). This unity of the episcopate rests upon the divine election and endowment which the bishops have in common as successors of the apostles, and finds expression in the same sense (75.3) in their united conferences and mutual recognition (ep. 19.2; 20.3; 55.1,6,7,24,30). Cyprian traces this unity back to the apostolic authority of Peter, and accordingly called the Roman church "the mother and root of the catholic church" (ep. 48.3). The Roman bishop made practical applications of these ideas (ep. 67.5; 68.1-3), but Cyprian still insisted that all bishops were equal. Consequently he rejected the claim of Stephanus of Rome to primacy as the justification for independent action. (Ep. 71.3; 74)

(4) The true members of the church will, above all else, recognize the bishop and obey him. Thus they remain in the one church, outside of which there is no salvation: "It is not possible that he should have God for his Father who has not the church for his mother (*de unitate* 6). The members of the church are related to the bishop as children to their father. (Ep. 41.1)

Thus we are confronted with a momentous transformation of the Biblical conception of the structure of the Christian Church. No longer does the term mean the holy people of God who believe on Jesus Christ, but a group of men who constitute the episcopacy. The faithful (the laity) obey the episcopacy, not because the bishops proclaim the Gospel of the apostles, but because, as historical successors of the apostles, the bishops are the legitimate leaders of the faith, appointed to the position by God and ruling the laity in God's name and authority. This subjection of the faithful to the episcopacy creates the unity of the church, and hence the episcopacy is the essential structure of the church. Only he who obeys the bishop belongs to the church and thus preserves a salutary relationship to God.

Plainly, the evangelical view of the structure of the church as the community of believers has been displaced by the idea of the structure of the church as an institution governed by a spiritual aristocracy. No longer the assembly of believers and "the communion of saints" in Christ, the church has become a visible body which is governed by divinely authorized "ecclesiastical law." Here we have the theological foundation for the monarchical papacy. "The mystery of iniquity doth already work; only he who now letteth will let, until he be taken out of the way" (2 Thess. 2:7). As soon as the Roman Empire collapsed in the West, we can see in retrospect, the emergence of the Antichrist of Rome, "that man of sin," "the son of perdition, who opposeth and exalteth himself above all that is called God or that is worshiped, so that he as God sitteth in the temple of God, showing himself that he is God." (2 Thess. 2:3, 4)

Since we cannot follow the growth of the distortion of the doctrine of the Christian Church in great detail because of the limitations of this essay, let us seek a perspective of what was happening by looking briefly at the fundamental and gigantic conflict of

ideas which raged in the ancient world. The impact of Christianity upon the Graeco-Roman world resulted in nothing less than a complete revolution in thought and action.

In the course of the several millennia after the Flood the Gentiles had reared a series of civilizations, visibly expressed in mighty empires, which culminated, as Daniel had also prophesied, in the unique Roman Empire. The Gentiles, whom God had given up "to uncleanness" and "a reprobate mind," and thus largely left to their own devices because of their idolatry (Rom. 1:21-28), were now being sought by God through the Gospel. This Gospel was being preached in the empire of the Caesars, whose founder, Caesar Augustus, had just re-established it upon a foundation which held out the pretension of "eternity." It was everywhere affirmed by the people as the final and definitive expression of classical order.

The empire was based upon the belief that man could attain the goal of permanent security, peace, and freedom through political action, especially through submission to the "virtue and fortune" of a political leader. This notion the Christians denounced with uniform vigor and consistency. To them the state, so far from being the supreme instrument of human emancipation and perfectibility, was a strait jacket to be justified at best as "a remedy for sin." To think of it otherwise they considered the grossest of superstitions.

The Christian apologists traced this superstition to the acceptance of a defective logic, the logic of classical "naturalism," to which they ascribed the characteristic "vice" (*vitia*) of the classical world. In this connection it is important to observe that the early Christians did not revolt against the natural order of things, or as we might say with Luther, the order of creation, but against the picture or the idea of the natural order which classical science ("falsely so called," 1 Tim. 6:20) had projected, along with its implications for the practical life. The Christians demanded a radical revision of first principles as the presupposition to an adequate understanding of the world and of man. The basis for such a revision, they asserted, was to be found in the *logos* of Christ, which was the new revelation of eternal truth. As St. Augustine brilliantly presented it in his writings, the Christians accepted the revelation as an answer to the promise of illumination and power extended

to mankind and, consequently, as the basis for a new physics, a new ethics, and above all, a new logic, the logic of human progress as illustrated by the construction of the "city of God." By this claim Christians were prepared to stand and fall: God has redeemed men. "Behold, I make all things new." (Rev. 21:5)

The social and economic collapse of this "eternal" classical order which Caesar Augustus thought he had established came during the third century after Christ. The totalitarian reforms of Emperor Diocletian having failed utterly, the empire was re-established under Constantine with the formal adoption of Christianity as the basic principle of political integration.

The fourth century after Christ, from the time of Constantine to Theodosius (who made Christianity the state religion in the year 395) is the historical watershed from the viewpoint of the practical application of the doctrine of the Christian Church. Allied with the state, the church became an institution like the state, functioning within the state. No longer the persecuted "bride of Christ," the church employed coercive measures to insure its place and growth in this new political world. In St. Augustine's phrase, she set herself the task of changing the city of man into the city of God. This meant, as St. Augustine also taught, the recognition that the "communion of saints" and the visible church were identical.

As the centuries passed, the structure of the church was viewed as constituting a department of the state in the Byzantine East, whereas the Church of Rome, having to fend for itself during the repeated barbarian invasions, claimed in theory to have dominion over both the state and the ecclesiastical establishment. The extravagance of the papal claims is attested by the *Donations of Constantine* which were publicized about A. D. 754. The pope is here represented as the spiritual emperor in contrast with the secular emperor, but sharing the latter's glory and power, and even demanding and receiving services at his hands. According to this fraudulent document, which Western Christendom for many centuries accepted as genuine, the pope was given the dominion of the West by Constantine. To him, as the successor of the prince of the apostles, belongs the primacy of the universal church. To him all secular powers owe service and obedience. The later

*Pseudo-Isidorian Decretals* carried these hierarchical claims still further. The clergy, particularly the bishops, are the church. As such the clergy is above all secular law and may not be judged in any secular court. No one may judge a bishop except the bishop of Rome, who by God's will governs the church from Rome. The clergy of the hierarchical state direct the secular government, since they are the rulers, have the truth, and the keys to the kingdom of heaven. But no more comprehensive a claim than we find in the papal bulls of Boniface VIII (1294–1303), *Clericis Laicos* and especially the *Unam Sanctam*, have ever been made in Christendom. The pope is *dominus*, lord of the church and the world, and sits in Rome as the vicar, or vice-regent, of Christ. The church is the hierarchy, ruled by the pope. Pope Pius IX repeated the assertions of the *Unam Sanctam* in his *Syllabus of Errors* (1864), and flatly claimed that all secular governments on earth owed the pope service as the vicar of Christ on earth.

Since the post-Reformation period the Roman theologians have followed the statement of Cardinal Bellarmine regarding the structure of the church: "The Church is a body of men united together by professions of the same Christian faith, and participation in the same sacraments under the governance of lawful pastors, more especially the Roman Pontiff, the sole Vicar of Christ on earth" (*Catholic Encyclopedia*). Modern Roman theologians begin their presentation of their doctrine of the church with an analysis of its purpose and function, instead of with a definition of its nature. In this respect they have shifted from their usual Aristotelian methodology to the thought structure of modern times. F. E. Mayer (*Religious Bodies of America*, 3d ed., pp. 96, 97) presents the Roman position as follows: "The purpose of the Church is said to remove the effects of the corporate fall of mankind, i. e., man's separation from God, through the corporate redemption, i. e., man's blissful reunion with God. In His incarnation in the flesh, Christ made this reunion with God possible. But this possibility does not become an actuality unless Christ continues His incarnation in the Church. The Church is therefore the mystical body of Christ, the 'prolongation of the incarnation.' In the Church the grace which Christ brought is said to link all the members together as the body of Christ, of which He is the Head. It is therefore no longer quite correct to say with Bellarmine that the Catholic Church

is as visible as the kingdom of Venice. Roman theologians are endeavoring to find a mediating position between such coarse externalism and a transcendent view of the Church. They say that as there was a synthesis of the visible with the invisible in the incarnate Christ, so also in the mystical body of His continued incarnation, the Church. The invisible side is said to be the salutary operation of the Holy Spirit in the teaching, sacerdotal, and pastoral offices. The visible side is said to include the bearers of the threefold office as well as the faithful in their daily (visible) activity."

Until 1943 it was the current teaching that all Roman Catholic faithful, living in a state of sacramental grace, belong to the body and the soul of the church. Roman Catholics who are such in name only, and otherwise live in a state of sin, belong to the body of the church only. Those sincere non-Roman Catholics who are unaware of the demands of the Roman Church belong to the soul of the church (by virtue of their "baptism of desire"). According to some expositions of the encyclical, this would include such men as Socrates or Ghandi. But the papal encyclical (*The Mystical Body of Christ*, pars. 60-62) of 1943 seems to offer a theoretical modification of the hitherto standard Roman doctrine of the church as to its structure. It speaks of the "body" and "soul" of the church differently. Pope Pius XII teaches that the "spirit" of the church is the "life force" of the mystical body of Christ, or the "soul" of the mystical body. Hence the "soul" is not the mass of earnest religious seekers who are imagined to be in the church without having actual membership in the visible institution, but the gracious activity of the Spirit, the life-giving principle of the church residing in the church and every one of its members.

To quote Dr. Mayer again (*ibid.*, p. 98): "The mystical body of Christ can be established only if the grace of God is restored to mankind. Only a threefold office can remedy or remove the threefold damage of Adam's sin, namely, man's sin, his spiritual ignorance, and his weakness to do what is right. The 'continuous incarnation' of Christ in the mystical body requires the continuation of Christ's threefold office. Every textbook on Roman dogmatics states in effect that Christ bestowed upon the apostles and their successors the threefold authority: to teach (prophetic office), to administer the sacraments (priestly office), and to rule (the pas-

toral or shepherd office). All three offices are indispensable for the 'prolongation of the incarnation,' i. e., for the mystical body of Christ or the 'Catholic' Church. This is said to be true especially of the sacerdotal office. Roman dogmaticians maintain that as Mary conceived the Son of God and brought the Invisible One to earth in visible form, so the priest by the same Holy Spirit conceives the incarnate Son of God and gives Him existence in the bosom of the Church under the consecrated host. Thus the priest becomes for the Eucharistic body what Mary was for the incarnate Son of God, and He becomes as it were the agent whereby the mystical body of Christ is established."

The church as the mystical body of Christ is said to be visible in its teaching, ministerial, and jurisdictional offices. The Roman Church asserts that the claims of her divine origin are as visible as those which Christ produced for His divine mission. These are unity, holiness, catholicity, and apostolicity.

The doctrine of the church in the Reformed bodies, insofar as they have remained faithful to the Reformation heritage, is Biblical in the sense that they do not identify the visible structure of the church with the invisible, as it has been the case in the Roman Church. However, they almost invariably establish discipline as one of the marks of the church, alongside the pure preaching of the Gospel and the administration of the sacraments according to the institution of Christ. The addition of the idea of the visible holy community, established by church discipline, alters the idea of the structure of the church in the direction of the Roman Catholic conception as in the old Puritanism of New England.

Liberal Protestants have no genuine or Biblical conception of the structure of the church. Their view of its structure is sociological, and in this sense it is no different from any other human society, except in its ethical purposes. Having rejected the Christian foundation, the authority of the Scriptures, and the cardinal doctrine by which the church stands or falls, the justification of the sinner before God by faith in Jesus Christ alone, it is understandable that they should have given up the Biblical teaching regarding the church. The Christian Church is indeed far more than "an association of persons in the interest of religious living." (H. N. Weiman, *Normative Psychology of Religion*, New York, 1935, p. 501)

B. THE SCRIPTURAL DOCTRINE CONCERNING THE STRUCTURE  
OF THE CHRISTIAN CHURCH

In our limited analysis of the Biblical passages which speak of the church the Holy Ghost presents us with several metaphors designed to convey to us some insight into the structure of the Christian Church. A number of O. T. passages refer to God, or the Messiah, as a King (Ps. 5:2: "my King and my God"; Ps. 10:16: "The Lord is King forever"; Ps. 74:12: "God is my King of old"; Is. 32:1: "King shall reign in righteousness"; Is. 33:17: "Thine eyes shall see the King in His beauty"; Jer. 10:10: "The Lord is an everlasting King"), who rules a glorious and everlasting kingdom (Ps. 22:28; 103:19; 145:12; Dan. 4:3). The context of these references signifies to the reader that the holy writers do not wish to speak merely of what our Lutheran Catechism calls God's Kingdom of Power, but rather of the Kingdom of Grace.

In Dan. 2:44 we have the prophet speaking very clearly of the Christian Church, which was to come as a kingdom: "And in the days of these kings shall the God of heaven set up a kingdom which shall never be destroyed; and the kingdom shall not be left to other people, but it shall break in pieces and consume all these kingdoms, and it shall stand forever." In the N. T., which often speaks simply of the "kingdom" (Matt. 9:35; 24:14) or the "kingdom of Christ" (Eph. 5:5; Col. 1:13; John 18:36), or, more often, gives us the favorite phrases of our Lord Jesus Christ, "the kingdom of God" and "the kingdom of heaven," we cannot escape the clear indication that the church is a kingdom and as such is in certain respects similar to the kingdoms of this world. As an illustration of this we can briefly refer to Matt. 22, the parable of the marriage of the king's son. Our Lord begins thus: "The kingdom of heaven is like unto a certain king which made a marriage for his son." The term "kingdom" could hardly have served Christ as a suitable metaphor to convey His instruction regarding the structure of the church if genuine points of relationship did not exist. Nor did Christ disavow Pilate's designation of Him as a king, but rather He accepted the term and sought to explain that His kingdom was not of this world, so that Pilate would not confuse His Messianic kingdom with a secular monarchy.

But though we must not, as also the Apology (Art. VII) states, think of Christ's kingdom in terms of external society, bound to

some historical institution or political organization, we would err in another direction if we were to think of His kingdom as being without the structure of law and order. We are reminded that Jesus in His Sermon on the Mount compared His church to a city placed on a hill, and affirmed that the Law and the Prophets in the spiritual sense remained valid for His kingdom. Clearly, the kingdom of Christ on earth does not exist without law, but that is indeed very far from saying that law is either the essence or the structure of His kingdom.

In Matt. 6 we read: "Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth . . . (v. 19), but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven . . . (v. 20). Seek ye first the kingdom of God and His righteousness . . ." (v. 33). Christ's comparison of the kingdom to a "treasure" is consistent with His parable of the hidden treasure in the acre which a man bought after selling all that he had, and is illumined by His reference to the "pearl of great price." The apostle Paul uses the same thought in Rom. 14:16-18: "Let not, then, your good be evil spoken of. For the kingdom of God is not meat and drink, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Ghost. For he that in these things serveth Christ is acceptable to God and approved of men." Superficially it might seem as though the kingdom of God were a treasure which consists of the righteousness and the good works of the Christians. But a closer examination of the language and context will convince us that these are reckoned as the treasures of the kingdom, not as the kingdom itself. Hence the structure of the kingdom consists not of the piety and godly life of Christians but of the Christians themselves. Otherwise Christ could not very well have said: "For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also." (Matt. 6:21)

It will certainly be useful for our study to refer to the parables of Matt. 13, where Christ reveals things about the kingdom "which have been kept secret from the foundation of the world" (Matt. 13:35). According to these mysteries of the kingdom of heaven (v. 11), Christ tells His disciples that there is "the Word of the kingdom" (v. 19). This is not the Law but the Gospel. Indeed, there are several places in which Christ uses the very expression "Gospel of the kingdom." (Matt. 4:23; 9:35; 24:14)

These references undoubtedly suffice to picture to us the comprehensive content of the expression "kingdom of God." It is

nothing less than the total content of the Gospel which Christians have been commanded "to preach to every creature" (Mark 16:15). However, the references to a king, treasures, the Law and Gospel of the kingdom do not mean that these are parts of the structure of the kingdom which we must consider. On the contrary, when we search for the ultimate point of comparison under which Christ equates the structure of the church with the kingdom, we find that it is none of these. After all, a kingdom does not consist of institutions, laws, and treasures, but of persons having a common allegiance and living toward a common destiny. Therefore the structure of the kingdom consists of the "sons (or children) of the kingdom": "The field is the world; the good seed are the children of the kingdom, but the tares are the children of the wicked one." (Matt. 13:38)

The Christian Church is truly a kingdom because it consists of "a holy nation" (1 Peter 2:9), of which all members — men, women, children, Jew and Greek, slave and free — are "all one in Christ Jesus" (Gal. 3:28), as Jesus also prayed in His high-priestly prayer (John 17:21). Consequently we may say again: All believers in Jesus Christ constitute the structure of the Christian Church.

This is further illustrated in the passage from Daniel (2:44) previously cited. The structure of the church will not be reared by human beings, as is the case with any secular kingdom, but by the "King of heaven." This heavenly characteristic of the church, to which our Lord also points when He calls it the "kingdom of heaven," conclusively eliminates any suggestion that the church owes existence or structure to the "institutionalizing activity of man," as some religious sociologists have argued.

The contrast between the expectations of Christ's pharisaic contemporaries, and indeed even of His own disciples on the occasion of His ascension into heaven (Acts 1:6: "Lord, wilt Thou at this time restore again the kingdom to Israel?"), and what Christ meant by the "kingdom of heaven" is so plain that it becomes difficult to understand the tenacity with which a crassly materialistic or physical conception of the kingdom has been upheld and defended. The "Jewish opinion" concerning the structure of the church as a visible or material kingdom has been upheld historically by those who have identified a visible institution, such as the

Church of Rome, with the kingdom of Christ, or who, like the millennialists of our day, hope for a physical realization of the promises of the kingdom.

We come to the same conclusion regarding the structure of the Christian Church when we consider this doctrine from the Christian view of history. In contrast to the creation of God as recounted for us in Genesis we confront the church as a new creation of God, because those who truly believe are new creatures in Christ (2 Cor. 5:17; Eph. 2:10). Of course, it was the original plan and intention of God to disclose His surpassing love in the creation of the world and of mankind. God meant to walk in them and among them, and to establish them eternally in this intimate association with Himself. The kingdom of the world and the kingdom of God were originally one. God did not originally intend to establish a church, a kingdom which was to be utterly different from the kingdoms of the world, because it was not part of His plan that the world should fall into sin. But after Satan quered this blessed plan of God for mankind, after the devil had cheated Adam and Eve out of their rightful heritage, God did not leave the devil in the peaceful possession of his booty. The first Gospel was immediately disclosed to fallen man. Christ, the Seed of the woman, would come and by His life and death bring salvation from death and the devil to all men. By this preaching of the Gospel God worked faith in Adam and Eve so that they believed in the coming Savior — “the man, the Lord.” According to the working of His power in this first Gospel, God called forth a new spiritual creation, the church in a fallen world.

This church did not include all men, for the Spirit of God strove with men through the means of the preached Gospel and hence could be resisted. Beginning with the Cainites and Sethites we have the division between those who were called the children of men and the children of God. The very expression “children of God,” set in contrast with the designation “children of men,” presents us with a comprehensive and spiritual association of human beings whose common bond is their faith.

The multiplication of the human race upon the earth aggravated and intensified the consequences of the Fall to the point where man made himself intolerable to God. The Flood erased mankind

from the face of the earth, leaving only those eight souls in Noah's ark. But again, this disaster did not change the nature of man. In a few generations' time, after the awful judgment of God in the Deluge was forgotten and the entire human race was in imminent danger of becoming irretrievably idolatrous, at this point God gave up the nations to their uncleanness. As St. Paul writes: "And even as they did not like to retain God in their knowledge, God gave them over to a reprobate mind" (Rom. 1:28). Out of this perishing mass of humanity God chose for Himself a remnant in Abraham and his seed of the promise. Upon these He bestowed the Holy Ghost and faith in His promises. This new division of mankind the Scriptures speak of as the "people of God" and the Gentiles, i. e., the heathen tribes in whose midst the people of God had their existence.

About 400 years later, Abraham's descendants through Isaac and Jacob, upon their exodus from Egypt into the Sinaitic peninsula, had grown to a people capable of furnishing 600,000 arms-bearing men. At this time God made a covenant with them: "Ye have seen what I did unto the Egyptians and how I bare you on eagles' wings and brought you unto Myself. Now therefore, if ye will obey My voice indeed and keep My covenant, then ye shall be a peculiar treasure unto Me above all people; for all the earth is Mine. And ye shall be unto Me a kingdom of priests and an holy nation." (Ex. 19:4-6)

In contrast to other nations of the time, Israel was constituted a unique theocracy. It was a kingdom but had no visible king, for God Himself was King and supreme Lawgiver, maintaining His Law and covenant through the priesthood. This was the people "to whom pertaineth the adoption and the glory and the covenants and the giving of the Law and the service of God and the promises." (Rom. 9:4)

The spiritual-social conception of the church seems to have been dulled or even nullified in the practical existence of the Israelitish theocracy, so that it was assumed that all descendants of Abraham were automatically also children of the promise and hence constituted the Old Testament church. This false notion was clearly repudiated by Christ, who in His long exchange with the Jews (John 8:33-40) affirmed that membership in the covenant depended

on having the faith and works of Abraham, not upon mere natural descent. Until the time of John the Baptizer and our Lord Jesus Christ the true Israel was also a society of believers called by the Holy Spirit. "They which are the children of the flesh, these are not the children of God; but the children of the promise are counted for the seed" (Rom. 9:8). Therefore only those descendants of Abraham who truly believed the promises and who were ruled by the Holy Spirit, these constituted the church of the Old Testament. Accordingly there is no difference in the structure of the church, whether before Christ or after Christ.

During this period of world history, in which God made and maintained His covenant with His chosen people, He permitted the Gentiles to pursue their own paths. "Because that, when they knew God, they glorified Him not as God, neither were thankful; but became vain in their imaginations, and their foolish heart was darkened. . . . Wherefore God also gave them up to uncleanness through the lusts of their own hearts. . . . For this cause God gave them up unto vile affections. . . . And even as they did not like to retain God in their knowledge, God gave them over to a reprobate mind . . ." (Rom. 1:21, 24, 26, 28). In contrast to Israel, the chosen remnant of the human race, the Gentiles fixed their attention upon this world and the possibilities which it offered to shape its affairs, for the purpose of determining the nature and the destiny of human life according to their notions.

Hardened in their apostasy, the Gentiles sought to establish on earth a well-integrated community of men. This process began with the building of the Tower of Babel and continued to the establishment of the immense world empires: Babylonia, Persia, Greece, Rome. The revelations of Daniel show how the moral content of these empires progressively deteriorated from the golden quality of the Assyrian-Babylonian empire to the silver of Medo-Persia, the bronze of Macedonia, to the iron and clay of Rome. Israel, of course, was swallowed up politically by these predatory giants, being governed directly, at the last, by the Romans.

During this last era, the failure of human philosophies of betterment and justice having become thoroughly apparent, and civil righteousness having reached universally the very nadir in human experience, thoughtful men of the period began to expect some

catastrophic turn in human affairs. The Fourth Eclogue of Vergil yearns for the possibility that humanity might be given yet another chance, although his poetic hope was naively attached to a descendant of Caesar Augustus. The world was indeed ripe for a catastrophic judgment, as even some heathen thinkers of the time admitted. This event did indeed come about, but in a manner utterly inconceivable to the mind of man.

Nebuchadnezzar's dream pictured a stone cut out without hands "which smote the image upon his feet that were of iron and clay, and brake them to pieces" (Dan. 2:34). This "stone" smashed the last and greatest world monarchy, even to its divisions, first the Eastern and Western Empire as represented by the legs and feet of the image, and subsequently the ten successor kingdoms of the empire as represented by the toes of the image. The world empires "became like the chaff of the summer threshing floors"; the winds of history carried them away; "and the stone that smote the image became a great mountain and filled the whole earth" (Dan. 2:35). This dream Daniel interpreted thus: "And in the days of these kings shall the God of heaven set up a kingdom which shall never be destroyed; and the kingdom shall not be left to other people, but it shall break in pieces and consume all these kingdoms, and it shall stand forever." (Dan. 2:44)

This kingdom is the Christian Church, which God Himself established after executing His judgment of human sin upon His Son instead of the world. The Christian Church displaced the man-made world monarchies, and indeed — as long as the Christian Church continues to exist — there will never again be a genuine world monarchy, although we shall continue to have world empires of various dimensions. This Christian Church is the kingdom of heaven, because, unlike Israel, it does not exist alongside earthly kingdoms, nor is it organized like any earthly kingdom, for its structure and functions are utterly different from those of the kingdoms of this world. Established by the Holy Ghost through spiritual means, it has as its inhabitants representatives of all the nations of the earth. Enlightened by the Holy Ghost, this kingdom of heaven, the Christian Church, is also the light of the world, the salt of the earth, to pierce the spiritual darkness and to check the moral corruption of the world. Having destroyed their last world

monarchy, God calls the nations of the world away from their self-chosen task of establishing a one-world monarchy by political and military means. Now all men and nations are to render the obedience of faith; they are called to become part of the Christian Church and to carry the sway of this kingdom to the uttermost parts of the earth. The fullness of time has indeed come. All men are now warned to bring forth fruits meet for repentance (Matt. 3:8). "For the time is come that judgment must begin at the house of God; and if it first begin at us, what shall the end be of them that obey not the Gospel of God?" (1 Peter 4:17)

We also have some description of the history of this indestructible kingdom of the King of kings and Lord of lords. The Revelation of St. John the Divine presents us with a prophetic form of historical description concerning the destiny of the church from the time of the apostles until Christ's return for the judgment of the world. Let us summarize it for our consideration, in the light of our knowledge of world history.

Shortly after the establishment of the Christian Church there would come a widespread falling away from the faith. Indeed, the dimensions of this apostasy were to become so enormous that the very centers of Christianity, Asia and Africa, were occupied by the adherents of the false prophet who oppressed the church and sought to eliminate its strength and choke its growth. Meanwhile the church of the West, after having been subjected to the repeated social, economic, and political chaos which was a result of the successive invasions of barbaric tribes, managed to survive anxious centuries of what was virtually a twilight existence, only to fall prey to the designs of the Antichrist and to come under his sway. During this period of history the true church existed, as it were, in the desert, like the figure of the woman in St. John's prophecy.

Again, God showed the world another period of grace when He broke the yoke of the Antichrist, beginning with the time of the Protestant Reformation, by the preaching of His Gospel. "Their sound went into all the earth, and their words unto the ends of the world" (Rom. 10:18). Surely we have witnessed the high tide of Gospel preaching during the past century and down to our present time. As the church historian Latourette has asserted, the

19th century was indeed the "great century" of missionary expansion. The words of the psalmist apply to it: "There is no speech nor language where their voice is not heard" (Ps. 19:3). Over the four corners of the earth extends a kingdom which is different in its structure from any of "the powers that be" on this earth. This kingdom is the Christian Church. It has an extensive record in this world which admits of no other description or picture than that it has the structure of a spiritual society.

This is also, according to the Revelation of St. John, the description of the church during the last days of this world. Rev. 20:8, 9 pictures for us the final attempt of the enemies of Christ to smash His church, which is represented as the "camp of the saints" and "the beloved city." It would, of course, be a gross misunderstanding of these figures of speech if anyone were to think that during the time immediately before Christ's return the Christians of this world would gather themselves together and establish a fortified Roman camp or a fortified city such as ancient Jerusalem. The text itself clearly does not admit of such an interpretation, for we read that the enemies of the church "went up on the breadth of the earth and compassed the camp of the saints about, and the beloved city." If the structure of the Christian Church were that of a visible, external society, occupying definite boundaries within which observable powers of government are exercised, we should be unable to account for the statement that the church's enemies "went up on the breadth of the earth." No, we cannot take St. John's figure of speech, which is derived from the military science of his day, in a crudely literal way. Until the end of time the faithful will remain scattered over the face of the earth. They constitute the Christian Church. This church, as a spiritual society, has a structure comparable to that of the "beloved city" or a military camp (*parembole*). Though invisible, the church is not formless or chaotic, but a perfectly integrated society of Spirit-filled human beings.

Therefore on the basis of the Scriptures we believe and teach that the structure of the Christian Church is the invisible aggregate, the sum total, of all believers in Jesus Christ. Eph. 2:19-21: "Now therefore ye are no more strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints and of the household of God; and are built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ

Himself being the chief Cornerstone; in whom all the building, fitly framed together, groweth unto an holy temple in the Lord." Anyone who rests upon the same spiritual foundation is part of the same structure, that is, the church. The sainted Professor Stoeckhardt wrote on this text: "The teaching of the apostles and prophets is a unit, it is that one and only Word of God. It is exactly on this account, it is because both the apostles and the prophets have spoken the Word of God, moved by the Holy Ghost, it is on this account that the Word of the apostles and prophets is the immovable foundation of the church of Christ. Upon this foundation the Gentile Christians were built when they became Christians, when they heard and believed the Gospel. It is in this way that they were built into the structure of the church, and just this Word which the Christians continue to hear, read, and learn bestows solidity and stability to the communion of saints. . . .

"This building is 'fitly framed together.' While it is stated of the building as a whole, it has a peculiar reference to each of the component parts. The stones of which the building is composed fit together, support one another, accommodate themselves to one another. Thus the building in its closely joined compactness everywhere shows symmetry and harmony. Dropping the simile: the members of the church live in harmony, joined in beautiful accommodation the one to the whole. However much they may differ originally as to origin, Jews, Gentiles, Greeks, and barbarians, learned and unlearned, they all are now at peace with one another, of the same mind, and all this in Christ." (*Commentary on St. Paul's Letter to the Ephesians*, trans. Martin S. Sommer, St. Louis, 1952, pp. 153-155)

But since the results of mechanical construction must be a lifeless building, the simile which the apostle used, if taken alone, is really inadequate as an expression of the true structure of the Christian Church. Indeed, it is truly a building in the sense that God the Holy Ghost calls and gathers the Christian Church through the Gospel. But in the sense of the relationship of the believers to Him on whom they believe the structure of the church is organic. The Christian Church is as closely united with Christ as the head is with the body. Wherever the Christian Church is, there is Christ with His gifts, power, and grace. From another point of view we can say that as Christ now reigns triumphantly over all things in

heaven and on earth, the church cannot ever be defeated or eradicated from the earth. This aspect of the structure of the church has important implications for the function of the church in the world. It means that wherever the church is active, there Christ is at work. The structure of the church, therefore, is that of a sensitive and responsive vehicle which accurately projects the gracious intentions of Christ, just as a body has no other will than that of its head.

Closely joined to this is Eph. 4:4-6: "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." The three verses contain three thoughts, each of which contains three parts. The bond of the most intimate and powerful unity is the one Spirit. His relation to the church is parallel to that of the soul and the body in a man. All Christians are moved and ruled by the same Spirit, the Holy Spirit, and in Him all Christians strive for the same goal. They are called in or for one hope of their vocation. The manner of their vocation consists in the presentation to their view of the same great hope of eternal blessedness.

In addition they are all joined into one communion by the "one Lord, one faith, one Baptism." The Lord of all Christians is He who has redeemed them with His own blood, to whom they belong, whom they serve, whom they have put on in Baptism, the unique Jesus Christ. The apostle continues to his climactic expression, "one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in you all." According to most commentators, the fourfold "all" refers to the whole body of Christians. Through Christ we have God as our Father who rules and controls the affairs of all Christians, works through them all, and lives in them all.

Luther writes of these verses (Eph. 4:4-6 — *Church Postil*): "Saint Paul here declares and explains the nature of the true Christian Church and how it is to be recognized, namely, that this church is one single church or people of God upon this earth, who have one and the same faith, Baptism, and confession of God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, etc., and who live together in peace and harmony among themselves. Whoever wishes to be saved and come to God must belong to this one Christian Church and be a mem-

ber of it, for its members alone will be saved and none besides, wherefore this unity of the church does not consist in unified, external rule, law, order, and ecclesiastical custom, as the pope with his adherents pretends, who wishes to exclude from the church all those who do not wish to obey him, but it consists in the one true faith, Baptism, etc. Therefore it is called one holy *catholica* or Christian Church."

This passage (Eph. 4:4-6) presents to us the very nature and structure of the Christian Church: one body, one Spirit, one Lord, one faith, one God and Father. It is therefore entirely according to the Scriptures to say that the church is the communion of saints, or of the believers, who are united in Spirit and in faith. All who have the true Christian faith, all who have been made spiritually alive by the Holy Spirit, and who now in spirit and in truth call Jesus their Lord and draw near to God through Christ, worshipping the Father of Jesus Christ as their God and Father in the Holy Spirit — all these are true members of the one true Christian and universal church.

But all those who do not have this true Christian faith, regardless of their external conduct or membership in Christian organizations or congregations, are outside of the church. Therefore it is not merely the manifest and express despisers and enemies of Christ and of God, nor the flagrant scoffers and blasphemers who by their ungodly and unholy words and actions profane their Creator — it is not these only who are *extra ecclesiam*. Far more! This excludes all hypocrites, though they may appear to be outstandingly pious and holy, though they may join in the external activities of the church, participate in its worship, customs, ceremonies, its works of education, mission, and charity. These are not members of this spiritual body of Christ, the church, they are not part of its structure. Nor are those who call themselves Christian but insist that Christianity is nothing more than a fine system of ethics; nor those who reject Christ as their Redeemer and their Lord and true God. On the contrary, they are the tares in God's acre, they are the true subversives and enemies of Christ, they really lend themselves to the same function within the kingdom of God which a fifth column performs within a country in behalf of the enemy which attacks it.

All believers belong to the Christian Church, regardless of time, place, race, sex, rank, intelligence, or cultural attainments. These believing Christians are the assembly or congregation, the remnant, the holy people, the chosen nation, the new Israel of God. They are truly and actually one body; each one is united with all others, regardless of time, place, or condition, by this common faith in Christ, which was engendered and is nourished by the Holy Spirit, who dwells in them all. If we may speak thus: *This faith is the chief social principle, it possesses the power of creating a communion. The Holy Spirit rears the structure of the Christian Church by means of the Christian faith in the hearts of men.*

This Christian faith cannot be erased from this world as long as it stands. Whether it be great or small, there will always be a communion of saints on earth. This communion is not created by the efforts of men, nor does it necessarily exist at any specific time and place even though men assert that they have brought it about by virtue of their consultations, negotiations, and signed agreements. The communion of saints is the work of God alone.

The structure of the church is reared upon one foundation only: Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God (Matt. 16:16). This structure is maintained as such, that is, its unity is preserved, by the work of God the Holy Spirit, who constantly creates faith upon earth, unceasingly calling one soul after another by the Gospel, enlightening them with His gifts, preserving and sanctifying them in the one true faith, constituting them to be the "lively stones built up [into] a spiritual house." (1 Peter 2:5)

This church is not an imaginary structure, it is not a "Platonic idea" which exists only in the minds of Lutherans, as the Roman Catholic theologian Bellarmine would have it. Nor do we accept the "ideal conception of the church" of the liberal Protestant school, such as that of Ritschl, according to which the kingdom of God is the *Geisteswelt*, the world of the spirit and intellect. Against this notion we witness that the structure of the church is that of a real society, not the construction of the human imagination, just as we must assert against the Roman Church and liberal Protestant theologians that the structure and function of the Christian Church is not that of an institution.

No! We affirm that the structure and function of the Christian Church is that of a spiritual society, of a communion of persons,

a community of Spirit-filled believers, who are in the world but not of the world. This is the plain, unadorned, and sober doctrine of the Scriptures. As such it also agrees with the Biblical view of history and with the record of world history that we have.

This unique spiritual society which God has called forth upon earth in Jesus Christ, the Redeemer of mankind, possesses a number of distinctive characteristics. Our theologians have enumerated them on the basis of Scripture as invisibility, unity, holiness, universality, and apostolicity.

When we say that the Christian Church is invisible, we mean that no man can know with finality who the Christians are. Only the Lord knows those who belong to Him: "I am the Good Shepherd and know My sheep" (John 10:14). The Christian Church is the kingdom of God as we have seen. But as Christ told the Pharisees (Luke 17:20, 21): "The kingdom of God cometh not with observation; neither shall they say, Lo, here! or, Lo, there! For, behold, the kingdom of God is among [within, AV] you." From this passage we may see that God has His church also among His enemies, such as the Pharisees were.

Because we are all human beings under sin, the temptation is very great that in our congregational and missionary activities we equate reality with what we can perceive. Indeed, we are so accustomed in our way of speaking of the church to think of the organizations which we have reared, and to whose care we give ourselves as pastors and laymen, that we may easily deceive ourselves into believing we unconditionally build the church of Christ when we have very well-attended congregational suppers, women's associations, men's clubs, rallies, etc. The prosperity of the kingdom of God is not necessarily revealed by imposing buildings, beautiful appointments, fine choirs, and a full calendar. It is not a vast membership file or mailing list. If these people attend the worship and the activities of the congregation, but are not by faith Christ's own through the forgiveness of their sins, if they bear the name "Christian" because they have signed pledge cards, but do not have their names written in the Book of Life, the gain for the kingdom of God has been nil.

There are moments of uneasiness when one reads the promotional publications of our churches or hears exhortations in behalf of greater efforts for the church, because sometimes these ring with

the overtones of the old team spirit familiar to us from the world of sports. There is that subtle yet dangerous temptation to human pride when our synodical growth is reviewed for us in glowing terms, or when our *Yearbook* features an array of encouraging statistics, or when the press takes sympathetic notice of us as a church body. Not that these things should not be done. Quite the contrary! But statistics and effective public relations do not necessarily build the kingdom of Christ. This is done only when souls are confronted with God's holy Law and by the Gospel are led to contrition and faith in the forgiveness of God through Christ's merit. The church of God does not consist of various forms of good-fellowship, it is not built by clever propaganda gimmicks, it does not "come with observation," it is not "a form of godliness," but the invisible ingathering of souls by the work of the Holy Spirit.

The invisible character of the Christian Church is also a source of courage. When we confront the fact that masses of unchurched people in our own country, and especially in our own District, have not yet been won for the Gospel, not to mention the multitudes of non-Christians which inhabit the world, when we see the relatively small loyal groups of Christians in our congregations, we may be inclined to give ourselves over to the feeling that we are but a handful of insignificant people and that the future of the kingdom of God is anything but bright and glorious. The prophet Elijah once felt that way. We read his mournful prayer to God: "The Children of Israel have forsaken Thy covenant, thrown down Thine altars, and slain Thy prophets with the sword; and I, even I only, am left; and they seek my life to take it away." But to this lamentation God replied: "I have left Me 7,000 in Israel, all the knees which have not bowed unto Baal, and every mouth which hath not kissed him" (1 Kings 19:14, 18). We cannot see or count the numbers which our preaching of the Gospel has affected and who are Christ's own. Nor should we be depressed by our inability to see, for we live by faith, not by sight. It is enough for us to have the assurance that His Word shall not return to Him empty, but will accomplish that for which He has sent it (Is. 55:11). Like Elijah of old, we would be greatly astonished to know how vast a flock Christ has gathered for Himself on earth also in our time.

Unity is another characteristic of the Christian Church on earth. There is only *one* church, which has one Lord, one Gospel, one

Baptism. Its unity is not man-made, but bestowed by Christ Himself. With our eyes we see a great number of visible denominations, often disputing one another. But this does not mean that the Christian Church itself is split thereby. Every person in whom the Holy Spirit has kindled faith in Jesus Christ, everyone who calls Christ his Lord, is part of the kingdom of God, which is the universal Christian Church, the communion of saints. The various denominations, Eastern Catholic, Western Catholic, or Protestant, undoubtedly contain many who are not Christ's own. But their membership in these denominations, which preach false doctrine along with the Gospel, does not automatically make them members of the communion of saints. Only a living faith that Jesus Christ is their Redeemer from sin will do that. And here we must be careful not to set ourselves up as judges of the faith of other people. However weak, however erroneous in its detailed presentation or confession, no matter how fragmentary their factual knowledge of the truth or deficient their conduct, if they will call upon Jesus the Crucified, they will be heard, as He heard the malefactor on the cross next to Him. "A bruised reed shall He not break, and the smoking [dimly burning] flax shall He not quench." (Is. 42:3)

The unity of the church in Christ is a fact which is good for us to remember especially in our attitude and relations toward members of other denominations. Certainly not all Christians are to be found in The Lutheran Church — Missouri Synod or even in the Lutheran Church. The universal Christian Church, the kingdom of God, knows no such organizational boundaries. A person does not become a Christian by joining a particular denomination, not even The Lutheran Church — Missouri Synod, but by believing, confessing, and living the Gospel of Jesus Christ, our Lord. This does not mean at all that we Lutherans need to modify our affirmation that the Lutheran Church is the true visible church on earth. It does mean, however, that while we must judge other Christians' doctrine, we may not judge whether the faith of their hearts makes them members of the communion of saints, the church of Christ. God has reserved that to Himself. Let us therefore be careful not to repeat the error of the Roman Church, which claims in effect that it and the invisible church of Christ are identical. The distinction which God recognizes is between believers and unbelievers, not between members of various denominations. It

behooves us, therefore, to recognize and encourage those Christians in other denominations who confess and struggle for the fundamental truths of the Christian faith. This does not mean, however, that in our efforts to seek outward union with other Christians we may shut our eyes to doctrinal differences.

In the Third Article of the Apostles' Creed we confess: "I believe in the holy Christian Church." This holiness of the Christian Church is not a characteristic which Christians have earned or made for themselves. Christians are not "self-made saints." They are not called "holy" because their behavior is without blemish. The Lord knows very well that Christians also are sinners. We Christians confess with St. Paul: "But I see another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind and bringing me into captivity to the law of sin which is in my members. Oh, wretched man that I am! Who shall deliver me from the body of this death?" (Rom. 7:23, 24). The old Adam, original sin, is still so powerful in us and fitfully tosses us like possessed into all manner of sins against our better knowledge. We can therefore be under no illusions regarding the quality of holiness which is possible by our own efforts.

But when the Scriptures call Christians "an holy nation" (1 Peter 2:9), this is no mere playing for literary effect. We are indeed holy and righteous and perfect in God's sight, but only because we are veiled in the mantle of Christ's holiness. We are what Christ has earned for us and now bestows upon us by faith in His Gospel, as we also read: "But ye are washed, but ye are sanctified, but ye are justified in the name of the Lord Jesus and by the Spirit of our God." (1 Cor. 6:11)

What God ascribes to us here in this life for the sake of our Redeemer will be made perfect in the life which is to come. Then the fragmentary, broken character of our lives shall be healed. We shall be free of all the blemishes of sin which still works in us; we shall be like Him, as the apostle also says: "Behold what manner of love the Father hath bestowed upon us that we should be called the sons of God! Beloved, now are we the sons of God, and it doth not yet appear what we shall be; but we know that, when He shall appear, we shall be like Him; for we shall see Him as He is. And every man that hath this hope in Him purifieth himself even as He is pure." (1 John 3:1-3)

It is therefore right and important that we never forget that the church and the members which constitute the church are holy by virtue of God's marvelous act of justification. It is well that our pulpits constantly proclaim the fact. But it is equally important that our people always be exhorted zealously to produce the fruits of justification, which are those of a holy life spent according to God's holy will. Let there never be the slightest disposition toward carelessness in this respect, for our God is a zealous God who expects results from us. "Faith without works is dead" (James 2:20). Hence there can be no valid claim to have the Christian faith unless we have become new creatures, with new and holy attitudes and God-pleasing works.

When our teachers speak of the catholicity or universality of the Christian Church, they mean, on the basis of the Scriptures, that the church is not restricted to any locality or group of people. Its field is the world. People of all races, conditions, and periods of history are part of the church of Christ. There never has been any salvation for any human being except through Jesus Christ, the Seed of the woman whom God promised our first parents. Everywhere human beings become members of the Christian Church on the same basis: through faith in Christ, our Lord. This Gospel has never changed, and never will change. By its preaching God calls to Himself the church, against which the gates of hell cannot prevail.

This preaching is the same as that of the apostles. Upon this foundation the church shall stand forever, Christ Himself being the chief Cornerstone. For that reason we have taught that apostolicity is the final characteristic of the Christian Church. No preacher has the right to preach anything but the Word of God, the doctrine of the prophets and the apostles. No discovery of science can at any time modify this Gospel, no new interpretation of philosophy may become a substitute for this Word of God. It must remain forever, without addition or subtraction. It is most important that this be stressed continually in our congregations, because the spirit of our times has made the notion fashionable that science and philosophy are perhaps able to give us truer and more precise insights into the mysteries of human existence and destiny than the "sure prophetic Word" which God has spoken in the Holy Scriptures. The doctrine of the apostolicity of the church

is a challenge to a deeper and more tenacious faith on our part that the things of which the apostles have spoken are utterly true, that they have been accurate witnesses of stupendous events which God has brought about in Christ Jesus. There must be no doubting here on our part, for the Gospel is not merely true in a general way, but for every one of us. We have the right and the duty to be utterly in earnest about it, for by the Word which He has spoken we shall be judged in due time. This fact makes the Christian Church something radically different from a mere sociological entity or visible institution which men may govern or manipulate according to their momentary insights and for their mundane convenience. When we deal with the Christian Church, we are on the ground of God's holy activity, His Kingdom of Grace.

The Christian Church is invisible for the reason that no man can look into the heart of another man in order to judge whether he is a Christian or not. The question of how we may be able to recognize the presence of the Christian Church is therefore very important. It is not the doctrine of the Bible that the church is where a bishop is, or that the presence of the church depends upon the existence of a "legitimately" ordained clergy. Nor is it true that the church exists only where we find church buildings, institutions, or organization. On the contrary, the church may exist very feebly or not at all in such places.

The answer to the question of how we can recognize the presence of the church of Christ is quite simple: it exists wherever the Word is preached. By this Word the church (*ekklesia*) is called into being. But in particular we believe, teach, and confess that the Christian Church "is the congregation of saints, in which the Gospel is rightly taught and the sacraments are rightly administered" (Augustana, Art. VII). These are the means of grace, and wherever God's grace is conferred, there is the church, however little notice may be taken of it by the world.

At this point we must deal with the question whether the church of Christ has a "visible aspect," since the preaching of the Gospel and the administration of the sacraments obviously represent a visible activity. The answer must be: No. They are as little a part of the structure of the church as food and drink are part of the structure of the human body. However, as we may say that the human body which consumes food and drink is alive and no cadaver, so

we may say of the congregation of saints that we recognize its presence by its peculiar marks, the means of grace.

For this reason the Scriptures ascribe the term "church" to visible congregations. Thus we read of the church at Jerusalem (Acts 5:11), the churches in Galilee and Samaria and throughout Judea (Acts 9:31), the church at Antioch (Acts 13:1), "the church which is at Cenchrea" (Rom. 16:1), the church that is "in the house" of Priscilla and Aquila (Rom. 16:5), "the churches of Christ salute" the church at Rome (Rom. 16:16), "the church of God which is at Corinth" (1 Cor. 1:2), the seven churches in Asia (Rev. 1:4, 11, 20; 2:7, 11, 17, 29; 3:6, 13, 22), "if therefore the whole church be come together into one place" (1 Cor. 14:23), "and when they had ordained them elders in every church" (Acts 14:23), etc.

What is the relation of the local churches to the church universal? Does their visible existence modify what we have said regarding the structure of the church? Not at all. "The church universal and the local churches are not two different churches or two kinds of churches, but the church universal consists of all the local churches plus those believers who are prevented by circumstances from joining some local church. When we speak of a Christian congregation, or local church, we always mean only the Christians or believers in the visible communion. The congregations, too, consist only of believers. . . . When Paul writes to the congregation at Corinth, he addresses 'them that are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints' (1 Cor. 1:2)." (F. Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, ed. W. W. Albrecht, St. Louis, 1953, III, 419, 420)

These visible congregations are not optional organizations but exist by the will of God; they are not sociological structures but divine institutions in which Christians are in duty bound to gather. There have always been people who claimed the name Christian but also taught that they were free to be or not to be members of Christian congregations. This prompted Dr. Walther in 1880 to write his famous tract, "Of the Duty of Christians to Join an Orthodox Congregation." The outline of his presentation is as follows: "We maintain: (1) Because it is the will and order of God that Christians who dwell in one locality should not merely read God's Word privately, but also fellowship with one another, hear God's Word publicly preached, to that end establish the public ministry among themselves, and after its establishment make use of it; and

(2) because it is the duty not only of the individual Christian but also of the congregation to admonish and reprove the sinning brother, the whole congregation is enjoined to exercise Christian discipline; and (3) because in particular the celebration of the Sacrament of the Altar is not merely a church custom, but a divine order for the exercise of brotherly communion (1 Cor. 10:17; 1 Cor. 11:17-21, 33): therefore the formation of Christian congregations, and membership in them, is not a human but a divine mandate. Accordingly our church accepts no "resignations" from membership in a Christian congregation, because neither individuals nor a whole congregation have the authority to grant a dispensation from a divine institution." (Pieper, *ibid.*, p. 421)

But the union of congregations into larger organizations, whether they be called synods, conferences, or churches, has not been instituted by God. They exist by human arrangement. As Walther has correctly stated it: "An association of a number of congregations to form a larger church body with governing officers, e. g., by means of a synod with the authority of supervision, a so-called superior board, a consistory, a bishop, etc., is not of divine right but only a human arrangement, and therefore it is not absolutely necessary; of this there can be no doubt because there is no divine command for it." (*Pastorale*, p. 393. Quoted by Pieper, *ibid.*, p. 421)

## II. THE FUNCTION OF THE CHRISTIAN CHURCH

Undoubtedly the fact has become obvious from our study until this point that while it is possible logically to distinguish between the structure and the function of the Christian Church, the relationship between those two concepts is so intimate that we recognize that structure determines function. This thought is brought into sharp focus when we consider

### A. ERRORS REGARDING THE CHRISTIAN DOCTRINE OF THE FUNCTION OF THE CHURCH

We have previously observed that the covenant which God made with Abraham and his descendants, which was renewed and formally established in the legislation of Moses, set Israel apart as "an holy nation." They were the people "to whom pertaineth the adoption and the glory and the covenants and the giving of

the Law and the service of God and the promises" (Rom. 9:4). But against them the prophet Isaiah spoke this terrible indictment: "Hear, O heavens, and give ear, O earth, for the Lord hath spoken: I have nourished and brought up children, and they have rebelled against Me. The ox knoweth his owner, and the ass his master's crib; but Israel doth not know, My people doth not consider. Ah sinful nation, a people laden with iniquity, a seed of evildoers, children that are corrupters; they have forsaken the Lord, they have provoked the Holy One of Israel unto anger, they are gone away backward" (Is. 1:2-4). The charge against Israel is that the nation, while seeming to preserve the outward form of the covenant, has retreated step by step from it into gross idolatry. The breakdown of the structure of the covenant began with the progressive perversion of its function.

It was the unique structure of the old covenant that all Israel should be a holy, separated nation for the purpose of witnessing to the Gentiles that God still meant to maintain the promise of redemption given to Adam and Eve. God meant Israel to be the light of the Gentile world like a city which is set on a hill, a preservative like salt, that men might see their good works and glorify the Father which is in heaven (Matt. 5:13-16). For this reason our Lord also said: "Think not that I am come to destroy the Law or the Prophets; I am not come to destroy but to fulfill" (Matt. 5:17). This fulfillment was described by the prophet Amos, who included in the re-establishment of the covenant not merely Israel but "all the heathen which are called by My name." (Amos 9:12)

Since Israel during its history repeatedly forsook its function as God's chosen people, it also ceased to represent God or to witness to God as the covenant required: "You only have I known of all the families of the earth; therefore I will punish you for all your iniquities. Can two walk together except they be agreed?" (Amos 3:2, 3). The cessation of this agreement with God brought about the ruin of the structure of Israel as the "people of God," so that God spoke to them through the prophet Hosea (1:9): "Ye are not My people, and I will not be your God."

To be more specific, we ought not to think that the structure of the church of the old covenant remained unaffected by the abandonment of the covenanted functions of Israel as "an holy nation,"

or a people uniquely belonging to God. Israel's unwillingness to act as the witnesses and bearers of God's Messianic intention toward the world, engendered by doubt in its truth and historical pertinence, led Israel first into the error of failing to fulfill the commandment to drive the Gentile nations out of the Promised Land. The charge against Israel, along with its predicted consequences, is written in Judg. 2:1-3: "And an Angel of the Lord came up from Gilgal to Bochim and said, I made you to go up out of Egypt, and have brought you unto the land which I sware unto your fathers; and I said, I will never break My covenant with you. And ye shall make no league with the inhabitants of this land; ye shall throw down their altars. But ye have not obeyed My voice; why have ye done this? Wherefore I also said, I will not drive them out from before you; but they shall be as thorns in your sides, and their gods shall be a snare unto you."

This is further illustrated by the demand of the elders of Israel that Samuel change the structure of the "congregation" of Israel into a kingdom: "Make us a king to judge us like all the nations" (1 Sam. 8:5). This demand would not have been made unless the people and their leaders had lost confidence in their structure as a covenanted nation, which was predicated upon God's promise that they should be to Him "an holy nation." It was this which led to their request that Samuel modify their national function from a free theocratic democracy (Judg. 17:6: "In those days there was no king in Israel, but every man did that which was right in his own eyes") to a theocratic kingdom. The implications of this request were duly noted by God: "And the Lord said unto Samuel, Harken unto the voice of the people in all that they say unto thee; for they have not rejected thee, but they have rejected Me, that I should not reign over them." (1 Sam. 8:7)

This critical decision on the part of Israel meant that the nation no longer trusted in the Mosaic settlement as a guarantee of its survival in the competition with the Gentile powers surrounding it, and endeavored to find a better way by the presumably more efficient, and therefore more effective, means of political activity which they thought possible through the apparatus of a constituted kingdom. It is noteworthy that the Lord did not outright refuse the request of Israel for a king, although Samuel warned the people

that the political choice would eventually change their function as the free people of the covenant to that of servants of a human autocracy. However, the reply of the people was that they must have a king in the interest of greater efficiency, order, and effectiveness among the Gentiles: "Nay, but we will have a king over us, that we also may be like all the nations and that our king may judge us, and go out before us and fight our battles." (1 Sam. 8:20)

Later on, after a series of disasters which culminated in the Babylonian Captivity of the house of Judah, God spoke again to the people through the prophet Zechariah that its strength and prosperity would come "not by might nor by power, but by My Spirit" (Zech. 4:6). We may, therefore, briefly summarize the point thus: The structure of Israel as God's peculiar nation rested solely upon His command and promise, and the function of Israel as the bearer of the Messianic promise was totally dependent upon retaining inviolate its divinely appointed structure as the "congregation of the Lord."

We must deal with the same fundamental principles in our consideration of the distortions of the functions of the Christian Church. Of the N. T. church it is written: "But ye are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, an holy nation, a peculiar people, that ye should show forth the praises of Him who hath called you out of darkness into His marvelous light" (1 Peter 2:9). The function of the Christian Church is therefore to "show forth the praises" of God. This was to be done according to the pattern which we find in the Pentecostal church: "And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship and in breaking of bread and in prayers." (Acts 2:42)

As we have seen in the first part of our essay, this function of the Christian Church was perverted very early in its history. Scholars seem to be agreed that the apostolic fathers no longer give evidence of a profound and comprehensive grasp of the Gospel. Moralism, which means that the justification of the sinner before God is made to depend in part on his moral efforts, received noticeable, though often perhaps unintentional, emphasis. This trend continued until it culminated in the Pelagian controversy of the fourth and fifth centuries, when it was checked by the monumental efforts of men like St. Augustine. However, there was no

complete victory. The church, through its bishops, settled for the well-known semi-Pelagianism of the Roman Church. The distortion of the apostles' doctrine now amounted to this: Christ died for men, but man contributes toward the acquisition of his own salvation.

Contributory to the distortion of the true function of the Christian Church as the bearer of the Gospel was the ethical goal which the church of the first centuries accepted for itself. This was the displacement of the city of men by the city of God, to use Saint Augustine's terminology. Historically speaking, it meant that the entire classical culture had to be changed, root and branch. Considered as a by-product of its preaching and evangelizing, this would not have been a mistaken or unworthy goal, for we know that a radical change in the culture of a period is the natural consequence of a general acceptance of the Gospel on the part of a people. Some of the nations of modern history illustrate that truth. The Reformation radically changed the national character of the Germans, the Scots, the Swedes, and others, as students of the phenomenon quite freely affirm. But the ancient church mistakenly was not content to accept beneficial cultural and social changes as a by-product of its evangelizing activities. Its apologists argued that the vices (*vitia*) of the age could be remedied only by the total victory of the Christian Gospel. Understood in spiritual terms, this would have been an entirely worthy objective, but from the fourth century on the church, now allied with the Roman state, deliberately aimed, according to the pronouncements of its bishops, to win the kingdoms of the world for Christ. In this light we must see a development such as the monastic movement, for example, not merely from its religious aspects but also as a powerful and effective instrument of cultural and political conquest, so that in the course of the millennium which culminated in the reign of Pope Innocent III (13th century) the Roman Church became the ruler and lord of Western Europe. This development was unquestionably a perversion of the true function of the Christian Church.

The Reformation restored the true doctrine of the structure and function of the Christian Church, but the Lutheran reformers were not able without qualification to establish the true function of the Christian Church practically. The emergencies of the Reforma-

tion period required the help of the princes, the lesser nobility, and the municipalities, not to mention the fact that Luther's attempts to establish local churches which would be exclusively dedicated to the preaching of the Gospel and the administration of the sacraments failed because he did "not have the people for it." The Reformation was not able practically to overcome the Roman idea of a *corpus Christianum* which is identical with the community. Indeed, the practice of the "Christian community" principle has remained in Lutheran territories of Europe until this day, although the theologians of the Lutheran Church knew very well that the function of the Christian Church does not extend beyond the preaching of the Gospel and the administration of the sacraments (A. C., Art. VII), and that "the power of the church and the civil power must not be confounded" (A. C., XXVIII). Luther himself, when he observed how the function of the church was being claimed for secular or civil purposes, declared: "We must break up the consistory, for we will not have the jurists and the pope in it; that's final." (Walch ed., 22, 2210)

It is well known that Calvin, though he maintained the separation of the functions of the civil government and that of the church in theory, actually established a theocracy at Geneva. His example, coupled with the fundamental idea of Calvinism that the third function of the church is the maintenance of a moral discipline, was generally accepted as normative by the later Calvinism, and in theory, at least, is still generally accepted by the Reformed bodies of America. The practical consequences of this view of the function of the Christian Church confront us on all sides also today, not the least of which are frequent attempts on the part of Reformed denominations to impose a moral discipline upon communities, and even upon the nation, through political means.

#### B. THE SCRIPTURAL DOCTRINE OF THE FUNCTION OF THE CHURCH

The Christian Church has had, and continues to have, only one assigned function in this world: "Ye shall be witnesses unto Me." (Acts 1:8)

For the execution of this function the apostles and disciples existed as a congregation in Jerusalem and established congregations wherever their preaching was received. These congregations

functioned as the church in a particular place. As such they possessed all the gifts and rights of the Christian Church which Christ had bestowed upon it. Specifically, the function of the Christian congregation is to administer the means of grace in its midst and to serve in this world for the conversion of the sinner to God. This is nothing else than the administration of the keys of the Kingdom. (Matt. 18:17-20: "Tell it to the church"; Matt. 16:19; John 20:22, 23: "Whatsoever ye shall loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.")

By giving the church the keys to the Kingdom, Christ gave all things to the church, as St. Paul also writes to the Corinthians (1 Cor. 3:21-23): "Therefore let no man glory in men. For *all things are yours*; whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or things present or things to come; all are yours; and ye are Christ's; and Christ is God's." This means that all that Paul or Peter or Apollos possessed were no more than goods or gifts from the heavenly treasury of believing Christians, that is, the church. There is literally nothing, according to this statement of St. Paul, which Christians do not share.

The church, therefore, functions as the administrator of the office of the keys of the Kingdom. The means whereby this divinely appointed function is exercised is the office of the public ministry, which is also divinely appointed thereto. "And He [Christ] gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers" (Eph. 4:11). All those who have a call to the public ministry have been placed into the office by the Holy Ghost, according to the description of Scripture: "Take heed therefore unto yourselves and to all the flock over the which the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers to feed the church of God, which He hath purchased with His own blood" (Acts 20:28). The same is also stated by Jeremiah (3:15): "I will give you pastors according to Mine heart which shall feed you with knowledge and understanding."

The primary duty of those invested with the office of the ministry is to teach or to preach the Gospel of Christ so that men may come to believe in Christ the Savior. Matt. 28:19: "Go ye and teach all nations . . . *teaching them to observe all things* whatsoever I have commanded you." 1 Cor. 3:5: "Who, then, is Paul, and who is Apollos, but *ministers by whom ye believed?*" Col. 1:24, 25: "For

His body's sake, which is the church, *whereof I am made a minister* according to the dispensation of God which is given to me for you to fulfill the Word of God."

From the office of the public ministry, which is the means whereby the Christian Church executes its function to convert the sinner to Christ through the Gospel, all other offices in the church are derived. 1 Cor. 12:28: "And God hath set some in the church, first apostles, secondarily prophets, thirdly teachers; after that miracles, then gifts of healing, helps, governments, diversities of tongues." The office of the public ministry is therefore the highest office in the church, and all other offices exist to supplement or aid it (Walther, *Church and Ministry*, Thesis VIII). Therefore there is basically only one office in the church, one means whereby the church proclaims the Word and administers the sacraments. "The office of the proclamation of the Gospel and the administration of the sacraments has been instituted that we may come to this faith." (A. C. VII)

However, very early in the life of the Christian Church the need for supplementary offices arose (deacons — Acts 6:1-6; rulers — Rom. 12:8; others who do not labor in the Word and doctrine — 1 Tim. 5:17). These served as the means whereby the function of the Christian Church was accomplished.

Since the details of the divinely ordered function of a local Christian congregation have often been discussed in our midst, specifically the stewardship of the means of grace in a local congregation and the administration of its local affairs, we shall devote the remainder of our study to some aspects of the execution of the function of the Christian Church which have acquired immediate pertinence among us.

While a local Christian congregation is a sovereign church body, it is plainly not God's intention that each local congregation should exist as though it were an island unto itself, without concern or responsibility for other Christian congregations or for the work of extending the preaching of the Gospel wherever possible on the face of the earth. The apostle Paul specifically admonished the Christians of his time to "endeavor to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (Eph. 4:3), and drew upon resources of the congregations which had been established by the preaching of the

Gospel in order to bring the Gospel to others. We learn that the congregation at Antioch commissioned Paul and Barnabas as missionaries to the regions of Asia Minor (Acts 13:1-4). Paul tells the congregation at Corinth that he preached the Gospel to them without salary because he received his wages for this service from other congregations (2 Cor. 11:7, 8). We may obtain some notion of the organization and finances of the apostolic church when we consider that the party of Christians which accompanied the apostle Paul on his voyage from Greece to Jerusalem, bearing the collection for the Judean Christians, had to pay approximately \$900 each for the trip, according to modern estimates of such matters. (Russell P. Davies, *The Doubting Thomas Today*, New York, 1953)

This should be a strong hint to us that the organization of the early Christian congregations for the purpose of mutual help was on no small-scale or primitive level. Indeed it is inconceivable how the early church could have spread with such amazing rapidity during the first century of its existence without superb management of its affairs. For while it is true that the Holy Spirit conferred special gifts upon the early Christians, it is well to remind ourselves that otherwise they were converted sinners like the Christians of our time. Indeed, we can think of a number of advantages which we have today over the Christians of the ancient church, such as a friendly government, the experience of former generations of Christians, the technological development of the modern age, etc. The N. T. records a number of fine examples of church fellowship and church co-operation in the apostolic church: 2 Cor. 8:1, 18, 19, 24; 9:1-5; Acts 15; Rom. 1:8-15; 15:24-32; 2 Cor. 1:24; 1 Thess. 1:7, 8; 2 Thess. 1:3, 4.

As we have seen, the local Christian congregation exists by divine ordinance. Any organization for the purpose of furthering the function of the Christian Church among several or many congregations is not a divine but a human institution. Such is our Lutheran Church — Missouri Synod. The fathers of our Synod recognized very clearly that a congregation or pastor is not for conscience' sake bound to affiliate with such an organization. But surely the advantages of such an organization are so obvious that it is scarcely necessary to discuss its merits. The objects of Synod, as stated in its constitution, are clearly God-pleasing (synodical *Handbook*, Art. III):

1. The conservation and promotion of the unity of the true faith (Eph. 4:3-6; 1 Cor. 1:10) and a united defense against schism and sectarianism (Rom. 16:17);
2. The joint extension of the kingdom of God;
3. The training of ministers and teachers for service in the Evangelical Lutheran Church;
4. The publication and distribution of Bibles, church books, schoolbooks, religious periodicals, and other books and literature;
5. The endeavor to bring about the largest possible uniformity in church practice, church customs, and, in general, in congregational affairs;
6. The furtherance of Christian parochial schools and of a thorough instruction for confirmation;
7. The supervision of the ministers and teachers of Synod with regard to the performance of their official duties;
8. The protection of pastors, teachers, and congregations in the performance of their duties and the maintenance of their rights.

The same is also broadly suggested by our Lutheran Confessions (Smalcald Articles, Part II, Art. IV): "The church can never be better governed and preserved than if we all live under one Head, Christ, and all the bishops, equal in office (although they be unequal in gifts), be diligently joined in unity of doctrine, faith, sacraments, prayer, and works of love, etc., as St. Jerome writes that the priests at Alexandria together and in common governed the churches, as did also the apostles and afterwards all bishops throughout all Christendom, until the pope raised his head above all."

The objective of each District of Synod is the same as that of Synod, for each District is Synod in a specific geographic area, such as our Atlantic District. As members of this organization we have mutually agreed to execute the function of the Christian Church in this area according to the wisdom and ability which God has given us. We know what we must do. Christ has clearly stated His command for us. It must, therefore, always be our concern that we be faithful stewards and managers of His business in our midst. It is at this point that we are reminded of our Lord's admonition: "The children of this world are in their generation

wiser than the children of light" (Luke 16:8). The management of our Lord's business requires foresight and common sense as well as spiritual dedication and zeal.

Some years ago the recommendation was made and considered that the management of our King's business in the Atlantic District would be furthered by the establishment of the full-time presidency of the District. Although the proposal was considered at length, and eventually declined by a former convention of this District, many of the brethren have continued to believe that the recommendation was essentially sound. Consequently it may happen that the proposal of establishing a full-time District presidency will be introduced again for fresh consideration and study.

According to the description of the office in our synodical *Handbook* (par. 3.41), the District President has the duty, in accordance with the constitution of Synod, to supervise the doctrine, the life, and the official administration on the part of the pastors and the teachers of the District, and he shall inquire into the prevailing religious conditions of the congregations of the District. He shall be the "Visitor, Adviser, and Counselor" of the pastors, teachers, and congregations of the District.

Clearly the office is invested with very broad responsibilities. The District President, according to the constitution of Synod, is in fact the overseer, *episcopos*, or bishop of the Atlantic District, although his office is given the term "president." However, his personal and direct supervision of the doctrine, life, and official administration of the pastors and teachers, as well as the inquiry into the prevailing religious condition of the congregations of the District, obviously demand more time and effort in a large District than even a full-time President could give. Whether full-time or not, the President would need much assistance.

This is plainly provided for by our synodical constitution, which states: "Every District of Synod shall create a sufficient number of circuits and elect a Visitor for each circuit, from among the pastors thereof, to make possible official visits to each congregation. . . . Each Visitor, by virtue of his office, shall assist the District President within the circuit." (Pars. 3.61a and 3.63a)

The purpose of the activities of the Visitor is "to bring about the greatest possible degree (of) achievement of Synod's objec-

tives" (par. 3.71). To this end the synodical *Handbook* outlines with great wisdom the relationship of the Visitor to the pastor of a congregation (par. 3.73):

"a. The Visitor shall conduct his official visits in an evangelical manner. . . .

"b. He shall come to the pastor as a brotherly adviser, reminding him of the glory of the ministry and of its great responsibilities.

"c. He shall ascertain whether the pastor is faithful in preaching the Law and the Gospel in their purity, properly dividing and applying them, whether he privately ministers to the needs of the individuals, exercises church discipline in an evangelical manner, and properly supervises all Christian education and training in his parish.

"d. He shall in a brotherly manner discuss the spiritual life, home life, and studies of the pastor with him, also his library and professional studies and professional growth."

Regarding the relationship of the Visitor to the congregation we have this prescription in the *Handbook* (par. 3.75):

"a. The Visitor shall keep in mind the glory and responsibility of the universal priesthood of all believers as it applies to the congregations. He shall remind them that they are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, an holy nation, a peculiar people to show forth the praises of Him who has called them out of darkness into His marvelous light. He shall meet with the entire congregation, if possible, rather than with the voting members only.

"b. He shall inquire whether the congregations are zealously guarding the purity of doctrine, not tolerating errors or schismatic tendencies.

"c. He shall inquire regarding the attendance at services, at Communion, and at voters' meetings; the salaries of pastors and teachers; the participation of the congregation in work of the church at large and in missions; the reading of Christian literature; the Christian training of the children; the adequate indoctrination of adult catechumens; and the family altar.

"d. He shall inquire what means are being used to guard against the evil influences of sects and organizations which endanger the spiritual life of the congregation.

“e. He shall inquire concerning excommunications and examine the minutes referring to them, with a view to possible adjustment according to the Word of God.

“f. He shall strive to bring about a peaceful adjustment in a Christian manner (Matt. 18:15-17; 1 Tim. 5:19) if any differences between a pastor and his congregation have arisen and have been brought to his attention.

“g. He shall report on the work of Synod and urge support of Synod’s work on the part of the congregation.”

When we examine these duties of the Visitor, we shall find it difficult to add anything which might aid in the faithful execution of the function of the Christian Church. We often sing, and rightly so: “Like a mighty army moves the church of God” (*The Lutheran Hymnal*, No. 658). But we must continually remind ourselves that a good army devotes meticulous care to the training and supervision of its smaller units. It is the companies and regiments which do the actual fighting, not army headquarters. Likewise, our congregations and circuits constitute the strength of our District and Synod. Our conquests for Christ on any level are always, directly or indirectly, dependent upon the vitality, zeal, and efficiency of our congregations and circuits. They are in closest proximity geographically, and therefore able to strengthen and encourage one another. Among them the relationship of person to person is strongest, for smaller units are in a better position to learn to know one another and grow to depend one on the other. It is obviously far more difficult, if not impossible, to maintain an effective fighting morale in an entire division than in a company or regiment, where the soldiers have a direct and personal relationship to their leaders.

According to the available statistics it appears that our Atlantic District is about 33 per cent below the synodical average in effectiveness. If we may learn from the wisdom of the children of this world, whether this be the world of business or that of the military, it becomes entirely obvious that we must direct a great effort to the strengthening of the sense of mission, of service, and of sacrifice on the part of the basic units — the congregations. To this end we urgently need to raise the effectiveness of the institution of circuits and the office of Visitor in our midst. The need for this is recognized not merely in our District but also in Synod at large.

The attempt to strengthen the circuit and the effectiveness of the office of the Visitor will occasion some discussion regarding the best method to accomplish this. We must remind ourselves at this point that legislation or coercion has no place in the church of God. We are all brethren; only One is our Lord and Master, Jesus Christ, who has purchased and won us with the blood which He shed for us on Calvary. He alone has the right to command in this as in all other matters. Through His apostle Peter we are told: "Yea, all of you be subject one to another, and be clothed with humility; for God resisteth the proud and giveth grace to the humble" (1 Peter 5:5). We shall discover the best method of executing the function of His church through the institution of the circuit and the office of the Visitor in the spirit of humility and zeal for His kingdom.

The visitation of pastors and congregations for the purpose which our *Handbook* outlines began shortly after the Reformation, when the reformers became acutely conscious of the need of pastors and congregations for a much greater measure of mutual strengthening and supervision. It is noteworthy that also in those days of the Gospel's second dawn there were men who found it difficult to clothe themselves with humility and for the sake of furthering the kingdom of God to submit themselves one to another. With just such un-co-operative people in mind Luther had to write the following regarding the first visitation of churches: "If, however, some willfully oppose it and without any good reason get their own way, as, indeed, there are some uncontrollable heads who out of sheer malice will not join in a good cause, but rather delight in being different from other people and in opposing them, we must let them separate themselves from us as the chaff is separated from the threshing floor. . . . May God, the Father of all mercy, however, give unto us through Christ Jesus, His Son, the Spirit of unity and the power to do His will." (St. L. ed., X, 1634)

#### CONCLUSION

The structure of the Christian Church is that of a spiritual society, consisting of all those who have been justified by faith through the redemption of Jesus Christ. As such it is invisible, since no one can determine whether a person has this saving faith, except God alone. He knows all those who belong to Him, and

He will maintain them as His church on earth until Christ's return for judgment.

This spiritual society of Christians exists in the most intimate spiritual unity. They are members of the "body of Christ," faith in Christ being their common bond of unity. The unity of the structure of the Christian Church cannot be shattered by any other factor than loss of this justifying faith in Jesus Christ.

The function of the Christian Church on earth is to witness to Christ. This function began in the N. T. in Jerusalem, extended to Judea and Samaria, and includes geographically "the uttermost part of the earth." This function of witnessing to Christ consists of the right application of the means of grace.

The office of the public ministry is the means or instrument whereby the Christian Church executes its function in the world. All offices in the Christian Church derive from this office.

Only the local Christian congregation has been divinely ordained. All other organizations of the church exist as the consequence of the need to give the local congregation means of greater effectiveness. For this reason we believe that organizations such as Synod, District, and the circuits, although they exist by the human wisdom of the children of light, nevertheless please God. They are invaluable aids in the execution of the function of the Christian Church.

It behooves us to use all opportunities to strengthen our ties as a spiritual community "to show forth the praises of Him who has called us out of darkness into His marvelous light" on all levels of Christian work in our Atlantic District. But since our congregations are the base upon which the external structure of our District rests, let us help them and their pastors by strengthening our circuit organization.

Let us always recognize ourselves in practice as *one* spiritual people, and as pastors, teachers, and people build the New Zion of God, God's people of the new covenant, who have "a mind to work." (Neh. 4:6)

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