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The Church in the New Testament

Bjarne W. Teigen

It is with a great deal of trepidation and humility that one approaches a discussion of the doctrine of the church in our midst. This is not only in view of all the study and discussion that has occurred over the past four centuries just in the Lutheran church, but also because it is a burning issue in the Lutheran church today. Besides, the topic is so vast and fraught with so many pitfalls that may cause misunderstanding that one is very sympathetic to Melancton's exclamation in the Apology regarding what had been said about the church of God in the Augsburg Confession, "Nothing can be said so carefully that it can avoid misrepresentation."¹

Perhaps I can begin by echoing the words of Martin Luther in his "Against Hanswurst," since the more I study the doctrine of the church the more apparent it is that the Reformer once again has revealed those profound exegetical insights which are characteristic of his writings. He says, "The church is a high, deep, hidden thing which one may neither perceive nor see, but must grasp only by faith, through baptism, sacrament, and work. Human doctrine, ceremonies, tonsures, long robes, miters, and all the pomp of property only lead far away from it into hell — still less are the signs of the church. Naked children, men, women, farmers, citizens who possess no tonsures, miters, or priestly vestments also belong to the church."²

I

In the New Testament *ekklesia* is used three times in its secular sense, once as an assembly regularly called together (Acts 19:39) and twice in a more general way as an assemblage or a general gathering (Acts 19:32,41). But our Savior took this word and used it with a specifically new meaning as *His* church. It is the assembly that God Himself has created because flesh and blood cannot do it. Those who believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, are apart of this church, and this church will endure into eternity (Matt. 16:18).

St. Paul in his letter to the Ephesians sets forth the hidden honor, worth, and glory of this church. God has blessed His church with every possible spiritual blessing. He has even made known to us His hidden purpose, that according to His good

pleasure and grace He would in the fullness of time collect and bring together in Christ all the elect so that He would have one single, united family in Christ, both in heaven and on earth (Eph. 1:10). Jesus Christ, who was raised from the dead and whom God has seated at His own right hand far above all principalities and powers, has become the head of the church. This church is His body of which He is the head and which He fills with the full measure of His gifts and power (Eph. 1:17-23).

Hence the *ekklesia tou theou* refers to the totality of all the elect in heaven and earth, the assembly of holy people justified by faith in Christ, chosen by God from eternity, the true Israel of God which has heard the voice of the Shepherd (Eph. 3:14-21; Eph. 5:25-27,32). This is the essential nature of the church. It is a *reality* composed of individual people who are one body in Christ. In I Cor. 1:2 the church is on the one hand described as the single body of Christ, and on the other, it is described as being made up of individual persons, so that Hort rightly observes, "In I Cor. 1:2, the two aspects are coupled together by a bold disregard of grammar."³ The synonyms which the New Testament employs for the concept of the church of God reveals this same double aspect of Christ's church. Paul says that we are fellow citizens with the saints and of the household of God, a family in which all members are equal, an holy temple in the Lord (Eph. 2:21,22). He further says to the Corinthians that they are the body of Christ, and members in particular (I Cor. 12:27). Peter writes to the scattered Christians of Asia Minor that they are lively stones, a holy priesthood, a holy nation, and a peculiar people (1 Peter 2:5-9). Although nowhere in the epistle has he addressed them as the *ekklesia tou theou*, yet by the use of these synonyms he has conveyed the concept to them. It is important to note this fact, for, as we shall see later, it carried great comfort for Luther, and it is an essential part of his doctrine of the church.

So then the *ekklesia tou theou* stands for the New Testament Israel, and this is the remarkable thing that the essence of the whole is in every part. Wherever two or three are gathered together in Jesus' name, there the *ekklesia tou theou* is with all its power, privileges, and blessings (Matt. 18:20).

Given this core of meaning of "God's people," i.e., those who have been grafted into Christ the Head through faith, the New Testament demonstrates a freedom of use of *ekklesia* and applies it in various ways. The Scriptures speak of the "churches of God," but it is still the one church of Jesus Christ, part of which is found in this place and part in that place. *Ekklesia* refers to the believers here on earth which the dogmatists called the church militant, *stricte dicta*, to distinguish it from the church triumphant (Acts 20:28; Rom. 16:4; I Cor. 10:32; I

Cor. 12:28; I Cor. 14:4,5; I Cor. 16:19; II Cor. 8:1). There is no essential difference between the church triumphant and the church militant since they are both the one church grafted into Christ the Head through faith. But Scripture sometimes focuses attention on believers here on earth who find themselves in various places and under various circumstances.

It is helpful to see how Scripture does this. At times Scripture refers to a part of the church militant in as narrow a sphere as a house gathering (Rom. 16:5; I Cor. 16:19; Col. 4:15; Philemon 2), which might come closest to what we today call "congregations" or "local congregations." At times the church of God is thought of as the community of Christians living in one city, possibly one congregation, or several congregations (Jerusalem, Acts 5:11; 8:1; 8:3, etc.; Cenchrea, Rom. 16:1; Corinth, I Cor. 1:1,2; Thessalonica, I Thess. 1:1). Sometimes Scripture is thinking of apart of the church militant in as wide a sphere as a region of three provinces (Acts 9:31). Similar to this usage of *ekklesia*, the Apostle Paul (Gal. 1:13, I Cor. 15:8, Phil. 3:6) asserts that he persecuted the church of God. Galatians 1:22,23 and Acts 26:9-11 inform us that Paul persecuted the *ekklesia* from Jerusalem throughout Judea and even to foreign cities. It is evident that Paul is referring to the Christian community which he persecuted before conversion. It is also evident that Paul uses the singular and plural of *ekklesia* interchangeably without any change in the essential meaning when he on the one hand speaks of the churches of Judea which he persecuted, and on the other hand he says of these churches that he persecuted the church of God. In 1 Corinthians 10:32, Paul uses the term *ekklesia tou theou* as equivalent to Christians in general, without any reference to their specific locality. And, finally, there are those "*ekklesia*" passages (1 Cor. 11:18; 14:19,28,35) which indicate that Paul here does not have reference to the entire community of believers in a city but to a portion of them, that is, only to those who are in actual attendance in a worship service.

One more fact remains to be noted from the New Testament, and that is that our Savior gathers His holy church through His Word, "My sheep hear my voice" (John 10:27). He promised to send His Holy Spirit to testify of Him, which He does through the word of the Gospel. The word is the power of God unto salvation (Rom. 1:16,17). The Gospel is with power and the Holy Ghost, and it is the Word which effectually works in us (I Thess. 1:5; 2:13). It is that incorruptible seed by which we are born again and become members of His body, which is the Church. The Apostolic-Prophetic Word is the foundation of the church (Eph. 2:20). The only authority in the church is

Christ's Word and through this He creates, nourishes, and rules His church.

From this brief summary it is evident that the church is a high, deep, hidden thing that is grasped only by faith. The doctrine of the church is an article of faith. The kingdom of God does not come with observation (Luke 17:20). No human eye sees the church as the body of Christ, for only the Lord knows them that are His (II Tim. 2:19).

II

Before one jumps over fifteen centuries to see what Luther finds to be the Scriptural doctrine of the church of God, it might be helpful to see how the intervening centuries understood and confessed this doctrine. The doctrine of the church is confessed in both the Apostolic and Nicene Creeds. But just what was meant by these confessions? Briefly summarizing J. N. D. Kelly,⁴ it is evident that there is considerable variance of opinions among the Early Church Fathers. But when the early Christians expressed their belief in the "Holy Church" (the "Old Roman Creed"), they meant to confess that they were the new Israel, the heirs of all the promised blessings of the Gospel. St. Justine says that the church is composed of all who believe in Jesus Christ and form a single soul, a single synagogue, a single church. The "Holy", of course, comes from Ephesians 5:27. Many of the Fathers emphasized that the church was founded before the world and embraces the elect in heaven as well as on earth. Others stressed its concrete character, that it was a world-wide society which accepted the doctrine of the prophets and the apostles. At first there did not seem to be much distinction between what has come to be called "the invisible church" and "the visible church." But there is no question that the term "Holy" originally had reference, not to its goodness of character or moral integrity, but rather to the fact that it was chosen by God and that He dwells in it in the person of the Holy Spirit. The church was the holy people of God, the redeemed of the Lord (Isaiah 62:11,12).

By the fifth century, Augustine in the West becomes absorbed in the relationship between the outward empirical society and the community of believers, while in the East there is not this concern, Chrysostom simply stating that the church is the bride which Christ has won for Himself at the price of His own blood.⁵ The Donatist Controversy fought chiefly by Augustine, provoked deep thought and discussion over the problem of the external and the internal church. The Donatists, who were the rigorous pietists of the day, conceived of a church which is *de facto* holy, consisting exclusively of actually good men and women, which alone could be the *ecclesia catholica*, the im-

maculate bride of Christ. From this they drew the deduction that the validity of the sacraments depended upon the worthiness of those who administered them.

To counteract this idea, Augustine pointed out that the sacraments derive their validity from God, for no matter who plants and waters, God gives the increase. Further, for Augustine the church is the mystical body of Christ, the realm of Christ's bride. The life-principle of this mystical body is the Holy Spirit. Through faith in the incarnation and the cross men are brought into fellowship with the Mediator; love unites the members in a common hope that looks forward to the fullness of redemption. Also, to counteract the Donatists' point the Christ's bride must be without spot or wrinkle *now*, Augustine draws a careful distinction between the essential church composed of those who belong to Christ and the outward empirical church. And here is where the two terms "visible" and "invisible" come into play. For Augustine, the invisible church compasses those who belong to the "invisible fellowship of love," and it is to be found only in the historical Catholic Church, within whose boundaries there is a "mixed communion."

When Luther comes on the scene, the primary emphasis is on the visible character of the church. The church is so visible a society that one can find it in the bearers of the sacerdotal office under the one head, the vicar of Christ, the Pope at Rome. Luther scholars inform us that by about 1515 Luther had developed at least in embryo, his doctrine of the church in his first lectures on the Psalms, and that these ideas crystalized and clarified themselves by the time of the Leipzig Disputation.⁶ Luther has given us several specific definitions of the church of God, which may well serve as a starting point for understanding all that he has written on this doctrine. In 1528, Luther appends to his "Great Confession Concerning Christ's Supper" his confession concerning all the Articles of Faith lest anyone should say after his death, "If Luther were living now, he would teach and hold this or that article differently" (LW 37,360). He declares, "I believe that there is one holy, Christian church on earth, i.e., the community or number or assembly of all Christians in all the world, the one bride of Christ, and His spiritual body of which He is the only head. . . . This Christian church exists not only in the realm of the Roman Church or Pope but in all the world, as the prophets foretold that the Gospel of Christ would spread through out the world, Psalm 2 [:8], Psalm 19 [:4]. Thus this Christian church is physically dispersed among Pope, Turks, Persians, Tartars, but spiritually gathered in one Gospel and faith under one head, i.e., Jesus Christ" (LW 37, 367). A more detailed examination of this

section will reveal that Luther puts under the Third Article, with the doctrine of the church, the doctrine that faith is created and sustained through the Word and the sacraments, "But because this grace would benefit no one if it remained so profoundly hidden and could not come to us, the Holy Spirit comes and gives Himself to us also wholly and completely. . . . He does this both inwardly and outwardly—inwardly by means of faith and other spiritual gifts, outwardly through the Gospel, baptism, and the sacrament of the altar, through which as through means or methods He comes to us and inculcates the sufferings of Christ for the benefit of our salvation" (LW 37, 366). Luther, by tying the Means of Grace to the doctrine of the church, has here set the pattern for all other definitions of the holy Christian church. In 1529 he follows the same pattern in the Small Catechism. Likewise, in the same year one sees this pattern in his Explanation in the Large Catechism. There he discusses the word "church" and "communion of saints," Luther explains that in the mother tongue *ekklesia* should be translated "a Christian congregation or assembly" (*Gemeine oder Sammlung*), or better still, "a holy Christian people" (*eine heilige Christenheit*; in Latin, *sancta Christianitas*). It is a community composed only of saints (LC II, 47-50). Luther summarizes by saying, "I believe that there is on earth a little holy flock or community of pure saints under one head, Christ. It is called together by the Holy Spirit in one faith, mind, and understanding. It possesses a variety of gifts, yet is united in love without sect or schism. Of this community I also am a part and member, a participant and co-partner in all the blessings it possesses. I was brought to it by the Holy Spirit and incorporated into it through the fact that I have heard and still hear God's Word which is the first step in entering it" (LC II, 51, 52).

Luther's more famous definition in the Smalcald Articles (1537) confesses the same truth, "Thank God, a seven-year-old child knows what the church is, namely, holy believers and sheep who hear the voice of the Shepherd" (SA III, XII, 2). Christ the Good Shepherd creates His church through His voice, the life-giving Gospel.

There are not two churches for Luther but only one, and it is always hidden (*occulta, abscondita*). While Luther may have said that the church is invisible, he apparently did not use the later terminology of the dogmatists which speak of the invisible church and the visible church. Although this terminology may be understood correctly in line with Luther's teaching, it nevertheless has the tendency to cause one to think of two churches. But Luther's sentence, "The church is hidden away (*abscondita*); the saints are out of sight (*laten*), does not

mean for him that the church is only a platonic idea that cannot be grasped here on earth. Rather, it is a reality also here on earth, *but it is always hidden from sight*. It is under a mask, a shell, or form, and therefore the doctrine of the church is an article of faith. Even "the devil can cover it over with offences and divisions, so that you have to take offence at it. God, too, can conceal it behind faults and shortcomings of all kinds. . . . Christendom will not be known by sight but by faith. . . . A Christian is even hidden from himself; he does not see his holiness and virtue, but sees in himself nothing but unholiness and vice" (LW 35,410f).

The church is hidden under various forms but it dare not be identified with any specific empirical mode of appearance. The invisibility of the church does not consist in this that it is not *in* the world, but rather that it is not part *of* the world, and hence it cannot be judged according to the criteria which the world employs. The church, indeed, is not without place and body; but, nevertheless, body and place are not the church, nor do they pertain to it. It is not necessary that it have a certain place and a certain form (*persona*)—although it does not exist without place and form, all things are indifferent and free; for the freedom of the spirit rules here.⁸ The Church does indeed step forth in the world in a shell (*larva*), a mask (*persona*), and other clothing in which it can be heard, seen, and grasped; and these shells and masks are various but "none of them are the church."⁹

Luther could not give up this fundamental hiddenness of the church; one could not substitute sight for faith, and this was the fundamental error of the Roman view of the church. In his "On the Papacy of Rome" he declares, "There is not a single letter in Holy Scripture saying that such a church [i.e., "physical external Christendom"], where it is by itself, is instituted by God. . . . If they [i.e., Luther's opponents] can show me that a single letter of Scripture speaks of it, I will recant all my words. I know that they will not do me that favor" (LW 39, 70).

Now this church of God is created by His Word. Luther's faith in the church is part and parcel of his faith in the miraculous creative power of the Word of God. The Word is the "mark of the church." For Luther and the Reformers the term "mark (*nota*) denoted that which creates the church and then also that by which the church is recognized. The fundamental thesis of Luther is that the "church's only perpetual infallible mark has always been the Word."¹⁰ To be sure, this Word which creates and nourishes faith is also connected with outward signs ("It is not the water that produces these effects but the Word of God connected with the water."), so that this

Word is administered in manifold ways; for "God is surpassingly rich in His grace" (SA III, IV). When Luther speaks of "the seven principal parts" by which the holy Christian people are recognized, he is only giving a more detailed explanation of how the *one* mark of the church, the *Word*, operates in real life (LW 41,148f). He is demonstrating in detail how the Word is used and what effects it produces in teaching, proclaiming, baptizing, consecrating, binding and loosing sinners, praying for others, judging doctrine. All this is teaching the Word of God.

From this it is evident that although Luther is intensely personal with regard to his conviction that a man is justified by *his* faith alone, he is never *private* in the sense that each individual can and should keep to himself without regard for the other members of the church of God. For him, too, the believer is to search out his fellow-believer because it is God's will. The believers use these marks of the church together in the manifold ways in which God has commanded them. We are reminded of how Luther prays in his great hymn, "O Holy Ghost, To Thee We Pray" (*Lutheran Hymnary* 39, 3):

Thou Fount of love, our hearts inspire
 With the holy flame of Thy pure fire;
 That in Christ united, One in all endeavor,
 Loyal friendship plighted, We may walk together.
 O have mercy Lord!

It would, however, be a distortion of Luther's doctrine of the church to hold that the office of the local pastor must be established before one could point to the church. Luther has the most high regard for the office of the public ministry and teaches that no one should preach publicly in the church or administer the sacraments without a regular call (AC XIV). But it is also evident with regard to the essential nature of the church and how it is constituted that Luther never included the ministry within the fundamental nature of the church.¹¹

Organization and other sociological matters were secondary with Luther. In his Reformation sermon on the Pentecost Gospel at Leipzig (May 24, 1539), he demonstrates that the true church is created only through the Gospel, and it is there wherever any use is made by the individual of the Gospel in any form, "and it is also the true church, not cowls, tonsures, and long robes, of which the Word of God knows nothing, but rather where two or three are gathered together (Matt. 18:20), no matter whether it be on the ocean or the depths of the earth, if only they have before them the Word of God and believe and trust in the same, there is most certainly the real, ancient, true, apostolic church" (LW 51,303-312).¹²

Since it has sometimes been maintained that in view of

Matthew 18:16-17, "two or three" cannot be called a church, it should be noted that this would not be in harmony with Luther's understanding of the doctrine of the church of God. For Luther, even if the number is down to one or two, if they but have the Word which quickens and upholds them, they are the church. This is a common theme with Luther, and nowhere does he express this so clearly as in his commentary on Genesis 28:16-17 ("Surely the Lord is in this place. . . . This is none other than the house of God"): "It is sufficient for us to know that Jacob was strengthened here in his faith and promise, and that he saw the same Lord God, heard the same words, and in his dream saw the same church he had heard and seen at home. Yet he is alone here, and beside him there is no one else, in order that we may learn that God's church is where God's Word resounds, whether it is in the middle of Turkey, in the Papacy, or in Hell. For it is God's Word which establishes the church. He is the Lord over all places. Wherever the Word is heard, where Baptism, the Sacrament of the Altar, and Absolution are administered, there you must determine and conclude with certainty: 'Surely this is God's house; here heaven has been opened,' but just as the Word is not bound to any place, so the church is not bound to any place. One should not say: 'The chief Pontiff is at Rome. Therefore the church is there,' But where God speaks, where Jacob's ladder is, where the angels ascend and descend, there the church is. There the kingdom of heaven is opened. . . . Accordingly, this is what Jacob says: 'This place in which I am sleeping is the house and church of God.' Here God Himself has set up a pulpit and He Himself is the first to preach about the descendants and about the uninterrupted continuance of the church. But Jacob, together with the descendants in his loins, is the listener. Likewise the angels in heaven. For if there is even one person who hears the Word together with the angels who are present along with him, it is sufficient. . . . Jacob saw this, his descendants also saw it, we too and all who are now in the church or will be in the church after us see it, namely, that church is the house of God which leads from earth to heaven. The place of the church is in the temple, in the school, in the house, in the bedchamber. Wherever two or three gather in the name of Christ, there God dwells (Matt. 18:20). Indeed, if anyone speaks with himself and meditates on the Word, God is present there with the angels; and he works and speaks in such a way that the entrance into the kingdom of heaven is open." (LW 5, 244-251).¹³

But one more aspect of Luther's doctrine of the church must be examined before we move to a consideration of the Lutheran Confessions. The New Testament does apply *ekklesia* to

communities which are not composed only of those who have been grafted into Christ by faith. This raises the question as to whether there are two distinct churches or whether something purely external is an essential part of the church. Luther recognized from the very beginning that this posed a problem which in the course of centuries had led to views such as had been developed in the Roman church. In his commentary on Galatians he answers "an important question" which Jerome had raised a thousand years earlier, "Why does Paul call 'churches' those that were not churches?" Luther not only picks up the example of the Galatian church which had within it those who had been bewitched by the doctrines of men, but he uses also the notorious example of the Corinthians who, although they had been enriched in Christ, had among them many who "had been perverted by false prophets and did not believe in the resurrection of the dead, etc. So today, we still call the church of Rome holy and all its sees holy, even though they have been undermined and their ministers are ungodly." Luther's answer to this vexing question reveals his profound understanding of God's revealed will. "I reply: When Paul calls them the 'churches of Galatia,' he is employing synecdoche, a very common practice in the Scriptures. . . . Even if the Church is in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, as St. Paul says to the Philippians (2:15), and even if it is surrounded by wolves and robbers, that is, spiritual tyrants, it is still the church. . . . Therefore even though the Galatians had been led astray, Baptism, the Word, and even the name of Christ continued among them. . . . Wherever the substance of the Word and sacraments abides, therefore, the holy church is present even though the Anti-Christ may reign there" (LW 26, 24.25). By way of explanation, for Luther a synecdoche was found not only in Holy Scripture, but also in every common language; so we cannot do without it. At Marburg, when Oecolampadius wanted Luther to grant that the admission of the synecdoche in the word "cup" would mean that the words of institution are to be understood symbolically. Luther elaborates, "By synecdoche we speak of a containing vessel when we mean content, or the content when also including the vessel. But the content, or the content when also including the vessel. But the content is not done away with. The core is there, but it may be in a shell."¹⁴ Such an understanding of the use of *ekklesia* is demanded by the text. Given its core meaning of the people of God, *ekklesia* has various applications in the New Testament. But it must again be noted that in the discussion of the doctrine of the church, Luther always gives priority to the creative power of the Word. The Word is the mother and the church is the daughter. To say that the church is over the Word is to say, "*puer est uber die muter.*"¹⁵

III

Three of Luther's definitions of *ekklesia tou theou* are included in the Book of Concord and are therefore confessionally binding on all Lutherans. But the Confessions also contain two other rather formal definitions of God's church. "Our churches also teach that one holy church is to continue forever. The church is the assembly of saints in which the Gospel is taught purely and the sacraments are administered rightly" (AC VII,1). "In accordance with the Scriptures, therefore, we maintain that the church in the proper sense is the assembly of saints who truly believe the Gospel of Christ and who have the Holy Spirit" (Ap. VII,28). All these definitions agree with one another, so that it can be rightly said that Luther's doctrine of the church has been taken into the Book of Concord as the doctrine of Scripture.

The definitions in the Augsburg Confession and the Apology are similar to Luther's in that they assert that only the pure Gospel of Christ brings the church into existence and keeps it with Jesus Christ in the one true faith. But there are two aspects of the church over which there is some dispute. Some hold that the church cannot be referred to as "invisible," since the terms "invisible" and "visible" are not found in the Confessions. Fagerberg, for example, says that "because of the Word and sacraments the church cannot be referred to as invisible. The Reformers were by no means ignorant of this term, and they were well aware of its many meanings. The fact that it is not used in the Confessions must be interpreted as a specific repudiation."¹⁶ Another viewpoint, with a slightly different emphasis, asserts that in the Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions *ekklesia* is used in a two-fold sense: (1) It denotes the *Una Sancta*, that is, the one Holy Christian Church consisting of the whole number of all true believers in Christ as their Savior; (2) Apart from this meaning, the Scriptures and the Confessions use *ekklesia* only to designate a local group, that is, Christians in a certain locality who regularly gather for public worship, for the preaching of the Word and the administration of the sacraments, and to carry out other which a church is to do. The "Majority Report" of the 1948 Synodical Conference Interim Committee posed two questions, "1) What is a Christian congregation?; and 2) Is the local congregation a specific, divine institution, and is it the only divinely instituted unit in the church?" The authors of the report gave the answer that on the basis of Scripture and the Confessions they were compelled to the following conclusions, "a) That a congregation is a group of professing Christians who by God's command regularly assemble for worship (Col. 3:16) and are united for the

purpose of maintaining the ministry of the Word in their midst (Rom. 1:7; I Cor. 1:2; I Cor. 16:19; Acts 14:23; Titus 1:5f; Matt. 18:17; I Cor. 11:20ff); and, b) That the congregation is the only divinely designated body or unit of the visible Church (I Cor. 16:19; Matt. 18:17; Acts 20:28).

To take up the first point, it may be quickly discerned that the terms "invisible" and "visible" are not used in the Book of Concord, but they are found among the later dogmaticians. It is the position of this paper that the dogmaticians, the Book of Concord, and the Luther are in doctrinal agreement on this point despite differing terminology. In this case, at least, that which we call a rose will smell as sweet as by any other name. But one wishes that especially the Latin dogmaticians had used more of the terminology that Luther used in presenting his doctrine of the church and not have confined themselves so completely to the terms "invisible" and "visible." We note, first, that in the Lutheran Confessions the true church is described as hidden under the cross (Ap. VII, 18) rather than being something external (SD XI, 50). But the key words for understanding that Luther's exegetical point regarding the synecdochical use was accepted into the Confessions is found in the two key phrases, *ecclesia proprie dicta* (Ap. VII, 16, 28), "precisely speaking" or "in the proper sense," and the term *ecclesia large dicta*, or *late dicta*, as also the Latin dogmaticians use the expression (Ap. VII, 10), that is, "broadly speaking." This is simply saying what Luther said when he answered Jerome's question by asserting that Paul is employing synecdoche when he calls the churches of Galatia "churches." Luther knew that the synecdochical use of a term is not as precise as it otherwise could be, but it still conveys the essential meaning, "that it is there, and is contained in it," as he said of the cup in the Lord's Supper. And in this use the Confessions agree with Luther that when it comes to defining the church precisely, "we must define that which is the living body of Christ and is the church in fact as well as in name" (Ap. VII, 12).

Now it is, indeed, true that the Scriptures, Luther, and the Confessions must use *ekklesia* broadly-speaking because they are dealing with the church militant here on earth. The church is hidden under the *larvae* of specific people, as Luther writes to Amsdorf (1542), such as people in the marriage state, in political or domestic life, John, Peter, Luther, Amsdorf, etc., "but none of these are the church," which is neither Jew nor Greek but Christ alone.¹⁸ Those in whom the Lord dwells by faith are neither ubiquitous nor illocal and, therefore, must be in a certain place. Hence, given its core meaning of "God's people," *ekklesia* has many applications in the New Testament

(see Part I). The term is likewise used in various broad ways in the Confessions. As previously noted, some have asserted that the Book of Concord knows only two meanings of *ekklesia*, the totality of the elect and the local congregation. Even, a cursory glance through the Confessions, however, will disprove this point of view. Hermann Sasse bluntly says, indeed, that local congregations did not exist at the time of the Reformation.¹⁹ He means that self-contained, self-governing units as we know them did not exist at that time, since the division of the work of administering the Means of Grace, shepherding, exhorting, confessing, and condemning was administered through larger units. More recently Robert Preus has analyzed the use of *ekklesia* in the Confessions and has come to the conclusion that *ekklesia*, when used in the broad sense, refers to "territorial churches or groups of congregations."²⁰ The array of references to such phrases as "our churches teach with great unanimity" and "our churches condemn" which President Preus adduces it compelling evidence that *ekklesia* in a synecdochical sense is used most often of regional churches. This fact, of course, does not preclude the possibility that *ekklesia* may refer to other external units. For example, in the phrase appropriated by New Orleans Resolution 3-09, "the opinions of the erring party cannot be tolerated in the church of God" (SD, Rule and Norm, 9), it is evident that the "church" cannot refer to the church triumphant, which is beyond the travails of this life, nor even to the church militant *stricte dicta*, since that is also always without spot and wrinkle. The Confessions must be thinking of any and all external churches in the world that want to claim allegiance to Jesus Christ; never may they tolerate anything contrary to the Word of God. Similarly, in the summary of the Epitome the confessors speak of the "Ancient Church" (*primitiva ecclesia*) which formulated the first symbol, which "Church" included both the Eastern and the Western churches. When the confessors say that the "community of God" in every locality and every age has authority to change such ceremonies according to circumstances (Ep. X,4), they may be referring either to what we call a local congregation or to a regional church. The interesting thing here, however, is that the German has the singular (*die Gemein Gottes*) while the Latin has the plural (*ecclesiae Dei*), which would indicate that the singular and the plural are used interchangeable without any essential change in meaning, when *ekklesia* is used synecdochically. One cannot play off the singular against the plural as portraying an essential difference in meaning.

In the course of the history of Christianity, two theories regarding the church have developed; one we can conveniently call the macrocosmic theory and the other the microcosmic. The

first is the Roman Catholic and Anglican way of thinking, which holds that the Holy Catholic Church is a visible society with an unbroken line of institutionalized officers, regulations, and powers. The other theory, which we could term "Congregational-Baptist," asserts that the church is the local and visible congregation, united by a voluntary covenant and completely autonomous. Thinking big, or macrocosmically, as also the general ecumenical movement seems to do is to think of a great universal external church. Thinking small, or microcosmically, is to think of the church as a small external community, such as what we call a "local congregation."

But neither one of these theories is open to Lutherans, and this for two reasons. First, every definition of the *ekklesia tou theou* in the Confessions declares that the church is comprised of those who have been grafted into Christ by faith but are hidden from man's sight and are known only to the Lord. Secondly, since the presence of the church can be known only by its pure marks because the church is created only through the Gospel of God and not "any other gospel" (Gal. 1:8), it is recognized only by the "pure teaching of the teaching of the Gospel and the administration of the sacraments in harmony with the Gospel of Christ" (Ap. VII,2). God gathers His eternal church out of the human race through His Holy Word (SD II, 50). We can see where the church is only by the use of and adherence to the "pure marks," and such adherence occurs both in what we call local congregations and in larger ecclesiastical bodies.

It is contrary to the Lutheran Confessions, therefore, to assert that a local congregation, or a regional church, or any other visible or external form, is the only divinely designated body or unit in the visible church. It is, of course, true that the temptation to do something like this is always strong. We all know how in Europe the territorial churches and the state churches with their consistories and their machinery tended to look upon themselves as divinely instituted external entities, when it was only *jure humano* that they existed to carry out the mutual work which, Christ had commanded in teaching and in applying the Law and the Gospel. But when the chips were down the Lutherans clearly confessed the truth of the Book of Concord. A famous example is the antithesis of Quenstedt against Bellarmine's Roman Catholic proposition that the church as the assembly of men is as visible and tangible as the assembly of Roman people, or the kingdom of Gaul, or the Republic of Venice.²¹

One also remembers that, in keeping straight the synecdochical use of *ekklesia*, the Latin dogmatists not only operated with the terms *ecclesia stricte* and *late dicta*, but they

used such other terms as "particular church." With what we might call a pedantic meticulousity they define a "particular church" as "an assembly, not of all, but of some believers, called in a certain place to partake of salvation, and perserving in inner spiritual communion. A church is said to be particular in a two-fold sense, (a) with respect to time; (b) with respect to place. With respect to time, the church of the Old Testament is one, and the church of the New Testament another. With respect to place, one is collected by God throughout an entire kingdom; another, in a city, or even in a house."²² The passages examined are in general those listed in Part I of this paper. But dogmaticians were careful not to say that any one kind of particular church is divinely instituted as the only designated body or unit of the visible church. And Lutherans will always have to let it go at that. As we get older and wiser we may hit on more effective ways to carry out the work of the church, but in every case we must remember that Christ alone rules His church, and He rules it through His Word alone. Whatever arrangements we make for administering the Means of Grace in all its aspects and under particular circumstances are *jure humano* in keeping with whatever rules the Lord has laid down for us in His Word. U. V. Koren, President of old Norwegian Synod, who was second to none in asserting the freedom of the general priesthood of believers and upholding the rights of the local congregation, said, "We must not make a mistake of what is God's institution. He has not directly instituted the local congregation. What God has instituted is what stands in the Third Article, that we believe 'a holy Christian church'. . . . It is of the highest importance that one recognizes the local congregation as a manifestation of the holy Christian church".²³ *To that surely we all can say "Amen."*

IV

This leads over to the doctrine of the Public Ministry, which is beyond the scope of this paper. Suffice it to say here that the author accepts without equivocation the statement of the Apology, "The church has the command to appoint ministers; to this we must subscribe wholeheartedly, for we know that God approves this ministry and is present in it" (Ap. XIII, 12). The Office of the Keys belongs to all Christians, and they are all to use this office as Christ's priests. But the Lord did set up an orderly way in which preaching and teaching was to take place. In other words, he set up the Office of the Public Ministry. Luther illustrates this truth in his sermon on the first Sunday after Easter (John 20:19-31): "Here the power of absolution is given to all Christians, although some, like the Pope, bishops, priests, and monks, have appropriated it to

themselves alone. They say publicly and shamelessly that this power is given to them alone and not to the laymen as well. But Christ is speaking here neither of priests nor monks. On the contrary, he says: 'Receive ye the Holy Ghost.' This power is given to him who has the Holy Ghost, that is, to him who is a Christian. But who is a Christian? He who believes. He who believes has the Holy Ghost. Therefore every Christian has the power to retain or to remit sins. Now perhaps I shall hear the question: I may, then, hear confession, baptize, preach, administer the sacrament of the altar? No, St. Paul says: 'Let all things be done decently and in order' (I Cor. 14:40). If everybody wanted to hear confession, to baptize, to administer the sacraments, how unseemly that would be! Again, if everybody desired to preach, who would listen? If we were all to preach at the same time, what a confused chattering that would be, such as you now hear among the frogs. Therefore it should be thus: The congregation chooses a suitable person who administers the sacrament, preaches, hears confession, and baptizes. To be sure, all of us possess this power; but no one except him who was chosen by the congregation to do so should presume to practice it publicly. In private, I certainly may use this power. If, for instance, my neighbor comes and says: My friend, I am burdened in conscience, speak a word of absolution to me; then I am at liberty to do so. But *in private*, I say, this must be done. If he wanted to sit in the church, another man too, and we all wanted to hear confession, what rhyme or reason would there be in such conduct?"²⁴ I Corinthians 14:40 is evidently an important directive in Luther's thinking, although surely this passage is not the only one that treats of the doctrine of the public ministry.

Just as it is evident from the Scripture and the Lutheran Confessions that there is nowhere a special word of institution for the local congregation, so also there is nothing in Scripture to indicate that only the office of the local pastor is to be identified with the Office of the Public Ministry, and that other offices are merely "branchings off" from the local pastorate. It is, indeed, God's will that Christians jointly use the Means of Grace, spread the Gospel, and exhort and help one another by admonition from the Law and exhortation from the Gospel (Col. 3:16; Luke 11:28; Heb. 10:25; Matt. 28:18-20), but there is no divine command for any visible or external form of the *ekklesia tou theou*. Generally the most common way of carrying out most of the functions of the public ministry is through what we call the local congregation and its pastor. But it is clear that the Office of the Public Ministry can be carried out in various forms (Eph. 4:11f; I Cor. 12:28-30). There is the freedom here granted the church in I Corinthians 4:21-23.

But this is not to say that freedom can be turned to license, or that other divine mandates of the Lord can be disregarded. As a case in point, we may think of the celebration of the Lord's Supper at a pastoral conference. It is usually held in a local church, but it can take place in a college chapel or even at a summer camp. There surely is no dogmatic reason to say that the sacrament of the altar is being celebrated only by some power inherent in a local, visible congregation. What is demanded is that the work necessitated by the Office of the Public Ministry be not neglected; that there be true shepherding, true care of souls, and the acknowledgment that it is not our Supper but the Lord's Supper. The injunctions, especially of I Corinthians 10 and 11, dare not be set aside.

A standard Lutheran dogmatics book will summarize the Scriptural factors that need to be taken into consideration.²⁵ There is a double pastoral duty here to be exercised. "Timid, perturbed Christians, weak in faith, who are heartily terrified because of their many and great sins" (SD VII, 69), are to be encouraged and consoled. At the same time, there are those with whom one does not celebrate the Lord's Supper, since, unlike the preaching of the Gospel, which is intended for all men, the Lord's Supper is designated only for some people who have already come to faith. Here one thinks not primarily of those too young or mentally incapacitated to examine themselves, or those living in gross offensive sin; but rather of the fact that since altar fellowship is confession of unity of doctrine (I Cor. 10:16, 17), it is a fellowship in faith or church fellowship. Close communion must always be observed. One's confession is to be in harmony with the pure marks of the church. Luther is surely right when he speaks in his "Brief Confession Concerning the Holy Sacrament": "For it is certain that whoever does not rightly believe in one article of faith, or does not want to believe (after he has been admonished and instructed), he surely believes no article with an earnest and true faith. . . . For this reason we say that everything is to be believed completely and without exception, or nothing is to be believed. The Holy Spirit does not let Himself be divided or cut up so that He should let one point be taught and believed as trustworthy and another as false—except in the case where there are weak believers who are willing to let themselves be instructed and are not stubbornly opposing His truths. . . . It is characteristic of all heretics that they start by denying one article of the faith; after that, all the articles must suffer the same fate and they must all be denied, just as the ring, when it gets a crack or a chink, is totally worthless. And if a bell cracks at one place, it does not chime any more and is completely useless" (LW 38,307f.).

While there are surely evil men who bear the name of Lutheran and pious Roman Catholics who belong to Christ's church hidden under the outward forms, nevertheless the mandate for us in His Word is to administer the outward marks of the church in conformity with His holy will as we can best judge by adherence to and confession of these marks. Hence the Augsburg Confession mentions with approval Chrysostom's statement "that the priest stands daily at the altar inviting some to Communion and keeping others away" (AC XXIV, 36). Furthermore, the Augustana asserts that one function of the office of the public ministry is that of exclusion: "According to divine right, therefore, it is the office of the bishop to preach the Gospel, forgive sins, judge doctrine and condemn doctrine that is contrary to the Gospel, and exclude from the Christian community the ungodly whose wicked conduct is manifest. All this is to be done not by human power but by God's Word alone. On this account parish ministers and churches are bound to be obedient to the bishops according to the saying of Christ in Luke 10:16, 'He who hears you hears me.'" (AC XXVIII, 21. 22).

These matters may seem onerous for a "now generation" who think that their freedom in Christ gives them liberty to do whatever they will and wherever and whenever they will. But not so for a confessional Lutheran. Luther surely must have been thinking of the Household of God in general, which includes all pastors and teachers, when he ended his Small Catechism with the words:

"Let each his lesson learn with care
And all the household well will fare."

FOOTNOTES

1. Ap. VII, 2, *The Book of Concord*, tr. by Theodore G. Tappert (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959). Unless otherwise noted, all references to the Lutheran Confessions will be to this edition.
2. LW 41, p. 211. *Luther's Works* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House). Unless otherwise noted, all references to Luther will be to this American edition.
3. F. J. A. Hort, *The Christian Ecclesia* (London: Macmillan, 1897), p. 113.
4. J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds* (New York: David McKay Co., 1973), pp. 155-160.
5. I am summarizing J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines* (New York: Harper and Row, 1960). pp. 400-417.
6. See Gordon Rupp, *The Righteousness of God, Luther Studies* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1953), p. 311.
7. Martin Luther, *Bondage of the Will*, trans. J. I. Packer and O. R. Johnson, (Westwood, New Jersey: Revell, 1958). p. 123.
8. WA 7, pp. 719, 720, "Quamquam Ecclesia in carne vivat, tamen non secundum vivat. Sicut enim Ecclesia sine esca et potu non est in hac vita, et tamen regum dei non est esca et potus. . . . Ita sine loco et corpore non

- est Ecclesia, et tamen corpus et locus non sunt Ecclesia neque ad eam pertinent. . . . Non est necesse certum locum certamque personam habere, licet sine loco personaque esse non queat. Sed omnia sunt indifferentia et libera. . . . Libertas enim spiritus hic regnat."
9. Luther's letter to Amsdorf (1542), WA Br. 9 p. 610: ". . . in larva, persona, testa, putamine, et vestitu aliquo, in quo possit audiri, videri, comprehendi . . . larvae maritus, politicus, domesticus, Johannes, Petrus, Lutherus, Amsdorffius, etc., cum nihil horum sit Ecclesis, quae nec est Judeus nec Graecus. . . . Sed unus Christus." This feature of Luther's doctrine of the church is discussed in Rupp's, *The Righteousness, etc.*, pp. 316-322; and in E. Thestrup Pedersen, *Luther Som Skriftfortolker—En Studie i Luther's Skriftsyn, Hermeneutik og Exegese* (Copenhagen: Nyt Nordisk Forlag, Arnold Busck, 1959), pp. 29-44.
 10. WA 25, P. 97, "Unica enim perpetua et infallibilis Ecclesiae nota semper fuit verbum." Cf. Ap. IV, 67, "One cannot deal with God or grasp Him except through the Word. Therefore justification takes place through the Word, as Paul says, Rom. 1:16 and Rom. 10:17."
 11. Kostlin summarizes Luther correctly when he says, "And, however earnestly the constitution of the office by the congregation and the cherishing of the proper respect for it are insisted upon, it is still, according to Luther, possible for souls to be incorporated into Christ and the common body of His saints merely through the private use of the Word. Where the public preaching of the Gospel is entirely prohibited, as among the Turks and heathen and even under papal tyrants, there this *Private use of the Word is sufficient* for all essential purposes. Even in such places the Christian church truly exists. (Julius Kostlin, *The Theology of Luther* (Philadelphia: Lutheran Publication Society, 1897), II, pp. 550-551).
 12. Note Walther's use of this quotation in his Pentecost sermon on John 14:23-31, "Die Wahre Kirche Jesus Christi Auf Erden, ein Werk des Heiligen Geistes, "Festklänge" (Concordia Publishing House, 1892), pp. 288-301.
 13. K. L. Schmidt arrives at the same conclusion that Luther did: "The decisive point is fellowship with Christ. Epigrammatically, a single individual could be—and would have to be—the *ekklesia* if he has fellowship with Christ." Gerhard Kittel, ed., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. and trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964-1976), 3, p. 512.
 14. See Hermann Sasse, *This Is My Body*, second ed. (Adelaide, Australia: Lutheran Publishing House, 1976), pp. 204 f., for Luther's explanation of synecdoche in the words of institution.
 15. WA 17, I, p. 19.
 16. Holsten Fagerberg, *A New Look At The Lutheran Confessions [1529-1537]*, tr. by Gene J. Lund (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House 1972), p. 258.
 17. *Proceedings of the Fortieth Convention of the Ev. Luther. Synodical Conference of North America* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1949), p. 136 f. The Majority Report of the Synodical Conference Interim Committee seems to be following the paradigm of Dean J. H. C. Fritz (*Pastoral Theology*, St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House: 1932, p. 24f.), who states that "the Christian congregation (*Ortsgemeinde*) by which and to which the pastor is called is a divine institution" (p. 24). By an *Ortsgemeinde* he has "in mind a body or an assembly or a congregation of Christians who have united for the purpose of having the Word of God preached and the Sacraments administered to them by a pastor, whom they have called" (p. 24). He assumes that it is a visible unit because he later speaks of it as "a body authorized to excommunicate" (p. 240). Dean Fritz then sets out to prove his position by asserting that the New

Testament *ekklesia* (exclusive of the classical usage, meaning an assembly of citizens) "refers either to the invisible Church [emphasis in the original text], consisting of all believers in Christ, 'the communion of saints' as the Creed says, . . .; or, in the majority of cases [emphasis in the original], to the visible local church (*Ortsgemeinde*)." For the latter meaning Matt. 18:17 is given, followed by an array of other passages (p.25). For Dean Fritz, Matt. 18:17 is the key text since he argues that "Tell it unto the church" must mean "the local church, of course, for it would be impossible either to tell all believers in the world or to get any action from them" (p. 25). What emerges from the general presentation of Dean Fritz is that on the basis of Matt. 18:17 an *Ortsgemeinde* is a divinely designated external unit which is the church's highest juridical authority, where the majority of the male members of the *Ortsgemeinde* have the final authority in the name of God to exercise God's rule and judgment.

Can Matt. 18:17 sustain such a heavy doctrinal burden? Fritz's argumentation here is specious for several reasons: (1) He overlooks the New Testament evidence the *ekklesia tou theou* here on earth has several applications, given its core meaning of God's people. (2) He overlooks the fact that when the New Testament refers to the *ekklesia tou theou* as an external visible unit or group, it always speaks synecdochically, so that the external *larvae* are never a part of God's church. (3) His seemingly plausible argument that *ekklesia* in Matt. 18:17 must mean a visible local church because it "would be impossible to tell all the believers in the world or get any action from them," needs to be closely scanned. He forgets that the entire body of Christ is represented in the part so that one Christian, two, three, or a thousand can be called the body of Christ. Besides this, Dean Fritz does not pretend to think that he is telling all the believers in a local congregation but rather that he is expecting action only from its "authorized representatives" (p. 240). What is wrong with assuming that some believers (or one believer) represent the *Una Santa*, who speak the Word of the Law and the Gospel in the name and person of Christ, the Head of the Church? (4) An examination of Matt. 18:17 in its context of the entire chapter reveals that a position such as the one propounded by Dean Fritz turns away from the context, and thereby the essential message of the text. The parable of the Unmerciful Servant, which follows Matt. 18:17, is directed to the individual, who is to forgive everyone his brother their trespasses (v. 35). Further, such an interpretation as Dean Fritz's also avoids the whole tenor of Matt. 18:15-20, which speaks of the individual, "thy brother," "thee," "him," and "let him be unto thee as a heather man and a publican." Further, there is Peter's question, "How oft shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him?" (v. 21). Luther deals with this text in the Large Catechism (LC II, 276-284), and he says that "all this refers to secret sins." In other places, too, Luther, the perceptive expositor, explains the text very precisely. But he does not find any divine institution of the local congregation in this text. He says, "But this office of the keys belongs to all of us who are Christians, as I have so often proved and shown in my books against the Pope. For the Word of Christ in Matt. 18 is addressed not only to the Apostles but certainly to all the brethren. . . . Christ gives the power and use of the keys to each Christian, when He says, 'Let him be to you as a Gentile' [Matt. 18:17]. For who is this 'you' to whom Christ refers when he says, 'Let him be to you'? . . . The keys belong to the whole church and to each of its members, both as regards their authority and their various uses. Otherwise we do violence to the Words of Christ, in which He speaks to all without qualification or limitation: 'Let him be to you,' and 'You will have gained your brother,' and 'Whatever you,' etc." (LW 40, p. 26,27). Compare also what Luther says in "Against Hanswurst": "We have been unable up to now to get the

Papists to willingly prove why they are the true church. But they insist that according to Matt. 18[:17] one must listen to the church or be lost. Yet Christ does not say there who, where, or what the church is; only that where it is it ought to be listened to. We confess and say that as well, but we ask where the church of Christ is, and who it is. We are concerned *non de nomine*, 'not with name of the church' but with its essence" (LIV 41, 194).

18. See note 9.
19. *This Is My Body*, p. 242, note 4.
20. Robert Preus, "The Basis For Concord, in Samuel Nafziger, ed., *Theologians Convocation: Formula of Concord Essays* (St. Louis: LC-MS Commission on Theology and Church Relations, 1977), p. 14.
21. C. R. W. Walther, ed., *Johanni Gulielmi Baieri Compendium Theologiae Positivae* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1879), 3, p. 651.
22. Heinrich Schmid, *The Doctrinal Theology of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, third ed., tr. by Charles A. Hay and Henry E. Jacobs (1899; reprint, Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1961), p. 591.
23. U. V. Koren, *Norwegian Synod Report, Minnesota District, 1904*, p. 41.
24. J. N. Lenker, tr., *The Precious and Sacred Writings of Martin Luther* (Minneapolis, 1904-1909) XI, pp. 375f.
25. See F. Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1953), III, pp. 381-391, "Who is to be admitted to the Lord's Supper?" For a history of Early Church practices see Werner Elert, *Eucharist and Church Fellowship in the First Four Centuries*, tr. by Norman E. Nagel (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1966), esp. pp. 75-124. See also Hans-Werner Gensichen, *We Condemn* tr. by H. J. A. Bouman (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1967), esp. pp. 189-211, "The Formula of Concord and the Damnamus."

Bjarne W. Teigen is president emeritus of Bethany Lutheran College and Seminary, Mankato, Minnesota.