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### The Essential Elements of a Christian Congregation

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**THE ESSENTIAL ELEMENTS OF  
A CHRISTIAN CONGREGATION**

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**A Thesis Presented to  
The Faculty of Concordia Seminary  
Department of Systematic Theology**

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**In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Bachelor of Divinity**

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**by  
William K. Schuster**

**May 1944**

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THE ESSENTIAL ELEMENTS OF  
A CHRISTIAN CONGREGATION

(Outline)

- I. The Christian congregation is a local association lasting for a period of time.
  - A. Local.
  - B. Lasting for a period of time.
  - C. An association or organizational entity.
  - D. Outward organization not essential
  - E. Wisconsin Synod - The presence of two or more Christians at one place.
- II. The relation of the local congregation to the invisible Church.
  - A. There is only one Church. Congregation consists essentially of Christians.
  - B. Unbelievers may be externally connected with the congregation.
- III. Institution, purpose, and marks.
  - A. Instituted by God.
    1. Public joint worship.
    2. Lord's Supper.
    3. Church Discipline.
  - B. Public Ministry instituted for care of congregation and public administration of Means of Grace.
  - C. The purpose of receiving Means of Grace through a called minister makes a group of Christians a congregation.
  - D. The use of the Means of Grace marks them as Christians who have united as a congregation.

THE ESSENTIAL ELEMENTS OF  
A CHRISTIAN CONGREGATION

Christ died for the salvation of all men. He sent the Holy Ghost to apply that salvation to individuals through the Means of grace. Those who are saved by faith in the atoning sacrifice of Christ are Christians, members of the holy Christian Church. The members of this Church are united with Christ in the mystical union. The Church is called the Body of Christ, the Branches of the Vine. Through Christ the members are united with each other in the communion of saints. The only criterion for membership in the holy Christian Church is faith in Christ. No man can see the faith of another; only God knows them that are His. Hence the Church is invisible.

Yet the members of the Church are visible human beings. And Christ has given to them certain rights and duties which they are to carry out as visible beings in cooperation with other visible persons. Not being able to look into their hearts I cannot say, "John Jones and Mary Smith and Joe Brown

are members of the invisible Church. Therefore I will join them in the worship of our Savior. Therefore I will celebrate the Lord's Supper with them." For the carrying out of these purposes God has instituted visible churches.

Scripture uses the one term ekklesia, since the membership is the same; there is really only one Church. Yet Scripture clearly distinguishes between the universal Church and the particular churches or congregations.

Our purpose in this paper shall be to determine according to Scripture the essential elements of the particular church. We shall attempt to answer the question, What is the local Christian congregation.

I. The Christian congregation is a local association lasting for a period of time.

In forty-four passages of the New Testament the congregation is associated with a definite locality. Twenty-seven of these passages definitely locate the congregations in specific cities.

The Church at Jerusalem: Acts 8,1; 11,22; 15,4.  
 The Church at Antioch: Acts 11,26; 13,1.  
 The Church at Caesarea: Acts 18,22.  
 The Church at Ephesus: Acts 20,17; Rev. 1,11; 2,1.  
 The Church at Cenchrea: Rom. 16,1.  
 The Church at Corinth: 1 Cor. 1,2; 2 Cor. 1,1.  
 The Church at Laodicea: Rev. 1,11; 3,14.  
 The Church of the Laodiceans: Col. 4,16.  
 The Church of the Thessalonians: 1 Thess. 1,1;  
 2 Thess. 1,1.  
 The Church of Smyrna: Rev. 1,11; 2,8.  
 The Church in Pergamos: Rev. 1,11; 2,14.  
 The Church in Thyatira: Rev. 1,11; 2,18.24.  
 The Church in Sardis: Rev. 1,11; 3,1.  
 The Church in Philadelphia: Rev. 1,11; 3,7.

Four passages refer to local churches which met in the houses of individual Christians.

The church in the house of Aquila and Priscilla:  
 Rom. 16,3; 1 Cor. 16,19.  
 The church in the house of Nymphas: Col. 4,15.  
 The church in the house of Philemon: Philemon 2.

Other passages speak of the churches of various countries.

Scripture never speaks of the church of a certain country, but by the use of the plural always distinguishes the various congregations within that country.

The churches through all Judea and Galilee and  
 Samaria: Acts 9,31.  
 The churches in Galatia: Acts 14,23; 1 Cor. 16,1;  
 Gal. 1,2.  
 The churches in Syria and Cilicia: Acts 15,40.  
 The churches of Asia: 1 Cor. 16,19; Rev. 1,4.11.  
 The churches of Macedonia: 2 Cor. 8,1.  
 The churches of Judea: Gal. 1,22; 1 Thess. 2,14.

There can be no doubt about it that the churches of the New Testament were local congregations. But is this 'being at one place' an essential element of a Christian congregation, or is this just the way it worked out at that time? We answer: It is essential that the congregation be a group located at one place in order to carry out the purposes of the congregation. It is necessary that the members be able to come together in order to hear the Word of God preached, to celebrate the Lord's Supper, to worship and pray to God jointly, to practice Christian fellowship, to exercise brotherly admonition and church discipline.

The Christian congregation is not an assembly, i.e., any temporary, occasional or fortuitous gathering of a group of Christians. But it is a definite association, an organization, lasting for a longer period of time. Scripture speaks of over twenty particular congregations. Not one of these is a temporary assembly, but each is a permanent congregation lasting for a period of time.

The congregation at Jerusalem was founded on Pentecost in the year 30 A.D. It was not a temporary meeting lasting only for that day, but "they continued stedfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, and in the breaking of bread, and in prayers.... And all that believed were together, and had all things common; And sold their possessions and goods, and parted them to all men, as every man had need.

And they continued daily with one accord in the temple.... And the Lord added to the church daily such as should be saved." (Acts 2, 42-47). Later, after the punishment of Ananias and Sapphira, "great fear came upon all the church" (Acts 5,11). "And believers were the more added to the Lord" (Acts 5,14). Among the activities of this congregation was the daily care for the needy widows (Acts 6,1). To take care of this and leave the apostles free for the service of The Word, seven deacons were elected (Acts 6,1-8). Later, "there was a great persecution against the church which was at Jerusalem" (Acts 8,1). When the church in Jerusalem heard that a congregation had been established in Antioch, they sent Barnabas to Antioch (Acts 11,22). "Now about that time Herod the king stretched forth his hands to vex certain of the church" (Acts 12,1). When Peter was imprisoned, "prayer was made without ceasing of the church unto God for him" (Acts 12,5). In A.D. 48 or 49 delegates were sent from Antioch to the congregation at Jerusalem and the so-called Apostolic Council was held (Acts 15). On a later visit Paul was received by the brethren in Jerusalem (Acts 21,17). Thus the New Testament records the history of the congregation at Jerusalem during the first twenty years of its existence.

During the persecution in which Stephen was stoned, many Christians fled from Jerusalem. Some of them came to

Antioch in Syria where they preached the Gospel and founded a congregation. Hearing of this the congregation at Jerusalem sent Barnabas to Antioch, where he preached, "and much people was added unto the Lord" (Acts 11,24). The congregation grew so rapidly that Barnabas soon found that he needed assistance. Therefore he went to Tarsus and brought Paul to Antioch about 43 A.D. About a year later Agabus came to Antioch. According to the command of the Holy Ghost the congregation at Antioch sent Paul and Barnabas on the first missionary journey. When they returned a year and a half later they found that there was still a congregation in Antioch. Soon after their return Paul and Barnabas were sent to Jerusalem for the Apostolic Council. They returned and reported the results of the council to the congregation at Antioch. "Paul also and Barnabas continued in Antioch, teaching and preaching the word of the Lord, with many others also" (Acts 15,35). While Paul and Barnabas came and went, the congregation at Antioch remained.

The congregation at Caesarea was founded by Philip the evangelist, who made his residence there (Acts 8,40; 21,8). Peter went there to preach to Cornelius. Later Peter took refuge there from the persecution of Herod. On the way to Jerusalem Paul stopped by and saluted the church at Caesarea, (Acts 18,22). Later certain of the disciples of Caesarea went with him to Jerusalem (Acts 21,16).

The congregation in Rome may have existed in 49 A.D. At that time Claudius drove all Jews out of the city (Acts 18,2), possibly because there were Christians among them. Aquila and Priscilla were among those who left Rome at this time. In 56 A.D.<sup>1</sup> Paul wrote from Corinth to the congregation in Rome telling the Christians there that he hoped to visit them soon. This desire was fulfilled when Paul was taken to Rome in 59 A.D. There he was kept in a custodia libera for two years.

The congregation at Corinth was founded by Paul on his first missionary journey, about 47 A.D. In the spring of 55 A.D. a delegation, consisting of Stephanas, Fortunatus, and Achaicus, came to Paul in Ephesus, bringing him news of the difficulties in Corinth and asking his advice. In answer Paul wrote his First Epistle to the Corinthians, which was delivered to Corinth by the delegation. In the summer or fall of the same year, Titus met Paul somewhere in Macedonia, probably Philipp<sup>2</sup>, and told him of the effect which his first letter had had in Corinth. Paul took this opportunity to send a Second Epistle by Titus. In the fall or winter of 55 A.D. Paul again came to Corinth and stayed for three months.

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1. Isagogical material in this section is taken from Dr. Arndt, New Testament Introduction, Concordia Mimeo Co., St. Louis. We realize that there is much disagreement, especially concerning the dates of the Epistles. However, the use of a different chronology would not affect the point we wish to make, i.e., that these congregations lasted for a number of years.

The four congregations of Southern Galatia - Antioch in Pisidia, Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe - were founded by Paul on the first journey. Later when he was in Antioch in Syria news had somehow come to him concerning the Judaizers. Therefore Paul wrote the Epistle to the Galatians. Paul visited these congregations on his second missionary journey and again on the third journey.

The congregation at Ephesus was founded by Paul on the first missionary journey about 49 A.D. Again on the third journey in 52 A.D. Paul visited Ephesus and worked there for two years. The Epistle to the Ephesians was written from Ephesus in 54 A.D. (or from Rome in 62 or 63 A.D.). At the time of the writing of the Pastoral Epistles, 60 or 61 A.D., Timothy was pastor of the congregation in Ephesus.

The congregation in Philipp<sup>s</sup> was founded by Paul on the second missionary journey. While Paul was in prison (in Ephesus 54 A.D. or in Rome 62 A.D.), Epaphroditus brought him the collection sent by the Christians in Philippi. Paul wrote the Epistle to the Philippians to thank them for the gift and at the same time to send personal information and to warn against false teachers.

The origin of the congregation at Colossae is uncertain. It seems quite possible that Epaphras had come to Ephesus and was there converted and instructed by Paul. Epaphras then returned to his home in Colossae and founded a

congregation and became their first pastor. When Epaphras came to Paul in prison, Paul wrote the Epistle to the Colossians to warn and instruct them. When Epaphras left Colossae Archippus became pastor.

The congregation in Thessalonica was founded by Paul on the first missionary journey. After preaching there for three Sabbaths, he made many converts. While Paul was in Corinth early in 50 A.D. Silas and Timothy came to him with news from the congregations at Thessalonica, and Paul wrote First Thessalonians to comfort them in tribulation, instruct them concerning sanctification, and teach them concerning the last things. In the summer of the same year, more news came to Paul in Corinth and he wrote Second Thessalonians.

The congregation of the Laodiceans was probably founded by Epaphras, who was pastor of the neighboring congregation at Colossae. It was probably founded about 52 to 54 A.D. Paul sends greetings and asks that the Epistle to the Colossians be read in Laodicea also. Although Laodicea, Colossae, and Hierapolis were destroyed by an earthquake in 65 A.D., Laodicea was rebuilt and the congregation was still in existence when John wrote the Revelation near the end of the first century.

Little is known of the origin and history of the rest of the seven churches of the Apocalypse - Smyrna, Pergamos, Thyatira, Sardis, and Philadelphia (besides Ephesus and

Laodicea). However it is quite clear from their characterization in the letters that they were lasting congregations, not mere temporary assemblies.

When the New Testament speaks of the *ekklesia* as the Christian congregation, it always refers to a local group existing for a longer period of time. This local congregation is always spoken of as an organizational entity.

In this connection we must consider first the meaning of the word *ekklesia*.

In Acts 19, 39f. it clearly has the meaning which it also has in classical Greek, for it is used of the called meeting of the citizens of a Greek city. In all other passages in which it occurs it refers to the congregation, or church, of believers in some sense, and herein lies the challenge of the term. It appears at once that the connotation of the classical usage must be assumed in every instance, namely, that of an organization unity or entity, never of a random assembly, of a group which just happened to be in a certain place by some coincidence. The strength of the verb *kalein* has evidently not been lost in forming the noun.<sup>2</sup>

Throughout the New Testament the term *ekklesia* never refers to a temporary or chance meeting, but to a definite association of persons. The congregation was, and is, an entity not only during the time of its meeting or meetings, but it continues also as a definite group between meetings. All the members of the congregation are known and considered as members also between meetings. Such passages as Acts 11,26 (Paul and Barnabas...assembled themselves with the church);

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2. Graebner and Kretzmann, Toward Lutheran Union, p.87.

Acts 14,27 (they gathered together the church at Antioch); and 1 Cor. 11,18 (ye come together in church) do not mean that a church came into existence when they came together. But the congregation exists also unassembled.

Six passages of the New Testament speak of the persecution of the churches (Acts 8,1.3; 12,1; 1 Cor. 15,9; Gal. 1,13; Phil. 3,6). The congregations were not assembled throughout the time of the persecution, yet they are called churches. Saul made havock of the church, entering into the homes of the Christians and taking individual church members to prison.

The very fact that letters and greetings could be sent to a congregation shows that it must have been a definite group, not a random assembly.

The congregation in Jerusalem provided for the needy widows who were members of the congregation whether assembled with the rest of the congregation or not.

The entire picture given us in the New Testament of the congregations of that time shows that they were definite associations of Christians who came together regularly over a period of time.

Dr. Walther, addressing a group of persons who had just become members of his congregation in St. Louis, told them, "By affixing your names to the constitution of our congregation, you have become members of our congregation."<sup>3</sup>

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3. C.F.W. Walther, Church Membership, p.28.

He did not, of course, mean to imply that the outward act of signing a written constitution is essential to the congregation or to church membership. However, it is essential that there be some form of organization that all things may be done decently and in order.

On the other hand, we must avoid the danger of making the outward organization the most important thing in the church. "When speaking of the Christian congregation, or the local church, as being a divine institution, we have not in mind the organized congregation ( constitution, officers) nor the legally incorporated congregation."<sup>4</sup>

Dass zu einer wahrhaft lutherischen Gemeinde nicht eine bestimmte Verfassung, oder bestimmte von Menschen eingesetzte Ceremonien gehoeren, bezeugt die Augsb. Conf. im 7. Artikel, wo es heisst: "Denn dieses ist genug zu wahrer Einigkeit der christlichen Kirchen, dass da eintraechtlich, nach reinem Verstand des Evangelium gepredigt und die Sacramente dem goettlichen Wort gemaess gereicht werden. Und ist nicht noth zu wahrer Einigkeit der christlichen Kirchen, dass allenthalben gleichfoermige Ceremonien, vom den Menschen eingesetzt, gehalten werden, wie Paulus spricht Ephes. 4: Ein Leib, Ein Geist, wie ihr berufen seid zu einerlei Hoffnung eures Berufs, Ein Herr, Ein Glaube, Eine Taufe."<sup>5</sup>

All matter pertaining to the formal, external organization of the congregation - constitution, membership lists, business meetings, ceremonies, etc. - are a matter of Christian liberty to be determined according to the needs of each local Christian congregation.

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4. J.H.C.Fritz, Pastoral Theology, p. 24.

5. C.F.W.Walther, Die rechte Gestalt einer vom Staate unabhangigen Evangelisch-Lutherischen Ortsgemeinde, p. 2.

We have seen in the preceding sections that the Christian congregation is an association of persons at one place for a longer period of time. Some, however, deny that the Christian congregation is a lasting organization. They hold that the presence of two or more Christians at a place constitutes a congregation, though it be but a temporary, fortuitous meeting.

Es gibt verschiedene Formen der Kirche: Hausgemeinde, Ortsgemeinde, Anstaltsgemeinde (Lehrer und Schueler), das Konzil oder die Synode, auch Konferenzen und viele andere.... Das Wesen der Ortsgemeinde ist, wie unser Bekenntnis oft wiederholt, vom Herrn selbst in Mt. 18,20: "Wo zwei oder drei versammelt sind in meinem Name", angegeben.... Wo immer also zwei oder drei auf Christi Namen versammelt sind, da ist die sichtbare Kirche, da ist Christus mitten unter ihnen, da ist absolut alle Kirchengewalt, auch alle Gewalt zur Ausuebung derselben, heisse diese Kirche Orts- oder Hausgemeinde, Konzil oder Synode, Konferenz oder Anstalt, sei sie mobil oder stationaer."<sup>6</sup>

Der Herr definiert hier (in Matt. 18,20) die Gemeinde (die aeussere Ortsgemeinde), der er eben vorher die oeffentliche Zucht, den Bann befohlen, von deren Bann er eben gesagt hat, er sei im Himmel gueltig, und faehrt dann fort, die himmlische Geltung des Ortsgemeindebannes damit zu bekraeftigen, dass schon das blosses Gebet von zwei oder drei Christen im Himmel kraeftig sei, also auch oder viel mehr ihr Bann, - um schliesslich die Kraft ihres Bannes und ihres Gebets darauf zu stuetzen: "Denn wo zwei oder drei versammelt sind in meinem Namen, da bin ich mitten unter ihnen." Ist damit nicht so klar, dass jedes Kind es verstehen kann, gesagt: Wo zwei oder drei Menschen auf seinen Namen hin beisammen sind, da ist Christus selbst mit aller, auch seiner Bann- gewalt, unter ihnen, dass also zwei oder drei so

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6. Aug. Pieper, "Gibt es im Neuen Testament gesetzliche Verordnungen," Theologische Quartalschrift, XIII,3 (Juli 1916), p. 177.

irgendwo versammelte Christen die Banngewalt haben<sup>7</sup> -- Das zwei oder drei in Christi Namen Versammelte Kirche oder Gemeinde sind, steht doch wohl unter Christen fest. Aber auch das ist klar, dass zwei oder drei "wo" in Christi Namen Versammelte eine Ortsgemeinde ausmachen. Denn in allen Sprachen ist doch das Indefinitum "wo" Bezeichnung eines Orts. "Wo" heisst doch hier klar: "An welchem Ort". Und der Herr limitiert doch hier den Ort, das "wo" nicht. Es heisst doch wo immer auf Erden, an irgend einem Ort, wo es auch sein moege. Ist das sonnenklar, so ist es nicht minder der Ausdruck, "in meinem Name" -, oder wie es im Griechischen bestimmter heisst: "Auf meinen Namen" versammelt sein! An dem "versammelt sein" als einem "auesserlich beisammen sein" kann doch nur die Verlegenheit ruettern; und auf Christi Namen versammelt sein kann, da des Herrn Name (das alttestamentliche "schem J'hovah") nichts anders ist also seine Gnadenherrlichkeit, nichts anderes heissen als entweder im Vertrauen auf, zum Genuss seiner Gnadenherrlichkeit, oder zur Verherrlichung, d. h., zum Bekenntnis, zur Verkeuendigung, zur Predigt derselben versammelt sein. Beides aber, der Genuss der Gnadenherrlichkeit Christi und die Predigt derselben kann auesserlich nur geschehen durch Handhabung des Worts und der Sakramente. So haben wir hier die, auch ohne alle Exegese an sich klare, unmissverstaendliche Aussage Christi, dass er mit all seiner Gnade und Gewalt mitten unter jeder Anzahl von Menschen sein wolle, die irgendwo auf Erden beisammen sein sein Wort und Sakrament zu treiben, kurz bei jeder, auch der kleinsten Christengemeinde irgendwelchen Orts. Zwei oder drei Christen irgendwo versammelt, sind eine Ortsgemeinde, und dass sie es sind, geht daraus hervor, dass sie Gottes Wort lehren und hoeren und irgendwo beisammen sind. So gehoeren also zum Begriff Ortsgemeinde nur zwei wesentliche Momente: 1. Zwei oder mehr Christ,

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7. Footnote: "Man darf uns hieraus nicht unterscheiden, wir lehrten, dass schon je zwei oder drei Christen innerhalb einer bestehenden Ortsgemeinde das Recht haetten, ohne die anderen Glieder die Banngewalt auszuueben. Das hiesse Unordnung und Rotterei lehren."

Yet the definition given includes also such an ecclesiola in ecclesia. Is it any more "Unordnung" to ascribe such power to a group within the local congregation than to the Synod or any other temporary or occasional meeting?

2. ein Ort. Oder um es ganz aeusserlich zu fassen:  
1. Zwei oder mehr Menschen, die gemeinschaftlich Gottes Wort betrachten, und 2. irgend ein Ort.

Kurz, jede irgenwo und wann auf Erden zu gemeinschaftlicher Anrufung, Betrachtung, Predigt des gnadenreichen Namens Christi versammelte Schar von mindestens zwei oder drei Christen ist nach dem SinnerChristi in der ganzen Heiligen Schrift eine Ortsgemeinde im strengen, d.h. wahren Sinne des Worts und hat die Gewalt der Schluessel so unveraeusserlich zu eigen, wie jede eigentlich so genannte Pfarrgemeinde mit zwanzig Pfarrern.<sup>8</sup>

This discussion was brought about by the so-called "Cincinnati-fall" or "von Schlichten Fall". A certain pastor von Schlichten had excommunicated all of his members who refused to send their children to the Lutheran school. He was censured by his conference and suspended by Synod. Some leaders of the Wisconsin Synod held that this synodical suspension was equivalent to excommunication. They held that the Synod, being a group of Christians at one place, is properly a congregation with the right to exercise church discipline.

We have shown in the first part of this paper that the term ekklesia is never used in the New Testament for the mere presence of a number of Christians at one place, but an organizational entity, whether assembled or not, which can and does assemble regularly over a longer period of time.

To consider the Synod a congregation leads one into a

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8. Aug. Pieper, "Zur Bestaendigung in der gegenwaertigen Diskussion ueber Kirche und Amt," Theologische Quartalschrift, IX, 3 (Juli 1912), pp. 192-197.

dilemma. If the membership of the congregation called Synod consists of all the Christians in the local congregations belonging to Synod,<sup>9</sup> it is indeed an organizational entity existing over a longer period of time. But it is not a local congregation, which can assemble for the purpose of having the Gospel preached and the Sacraments administered. It has never happened and probably never will happen that the entire membership of Synod will assemble at one place. Then what becomes of the "wo zwei oder drei versammelt sind"? Synod is not a group of Christians "an einem Ort".

On the other hand it may be held that the Synod is a congregation consisting only of those Christians who come

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9. This is the view held in the Wisconsin Synod.

Die Synode besteht fort in allen Gemeinden, Pastoren, etc., die sich in ihr zu gemeinsamen Wirken zusammengetan haben, ob sie versammelt ist oder nicht.

Sie all tragen durch ihre oeffentlichen Gottesdienste oder Konferenzen zu Hause ununterbrochen die Kennzeichen der Kirche an sich. Sie besteht waehrend der Zeit, die zwischen ihren Versammlungen liegt, fort in den von ihr geschaffenen und beauftragten Angestellten als Verwaltungs- oder Lehrbeamten, die alle die Kennzeichen des Glaubens oeffentlich an sich tragen. Die Gemeinden der Synod sind unversammelt ebenso gut Kirche im eigentlichen Sinn des Worts wie die unversammelten Christen oder Gemeinden der Provinzen Judaea, Galilaea und Samaria in Akt. 9,31.

Aug. Pieper, "Die Lehre von der Kirche und ihren Kennzeichen in Anwendung auf die Synode," Theologische Quartalschrift, IX, 2 (April 1912), p.105.

together for the convention meetings, i.e., those who happen to be delegates to that one convention. Then it is merely a temporary gathering, not an organizational entity and not lasting for a period of time.

It is further argued that, because the Synod consists of Christians and has the marks of the Church, it must be church.

Wir fragen: Was macht einen Haufen Menschen zur Gemeinde Gottes, zur Gemeinde im eigentlichen Sinne des Wortes? - Antwort: Nicht die aeußere Organisation zu einer aeußeren Lokalgemeinde, sondern der Glaube oder das Geheiligtsein in Christo Jesu durch den Glauben. Eine gläubige Synodalversammlung ist Gemeinde im eigentlichen Sinne des Wortes.

Woran erkennt man mit gottgebotener Sicherheit eine Versammlung als gläubig, als Gläubige enthaltend, also als Kirche im strengsten Sinne? Antwort: Daran, dass sie das Evangelium treibt. Luther: "Wo du nun solch Wort hoerest oder siehest predigen, glauben, bekennen und darnach tun, da habe keinen Zweifel, dass gewisslich daselbst sein muss eine rechte Ecclesia sancta Catholica, und christlich heilig Volk (1 Pet. 2,9), wenn ihrer gleich sehr wenig sind. Denn Gottes Wort gehet nicht ledig ab (Jes. 55,11), sondern muss zum wenigsten ein Viertel oder Stueck von Acker haben (das Wort als Same der Kirche). Und wenn sonst kein Zeichen waere, denn dies allein, so waere es genugsam zu weisen, dass daselbst muesste sein ein christlich heilig Volk. Denn Gottes Volk kann nicht ohne Gottes Wort sein. Wer wollte es sonst predigen oder predigen hoeren, wo kein Volk Gottes da waere (das Predigen und Hoeren des Wortes als eigentuemliche Art der Kirche)." - "Auf dass wir lernen, dass daselbst die Kirche und Gemeinde Gottes sei, wo das Wort gehoeret und gelehrt wird, es sei gleich mitten in der Tuerkel, oder im Papsttum, oder auch in der Hoelle. Denn Gottes Wort ist es, das die Kirche machet; das ist der Herr ueber alle Certer; an welchem Ort nur dasselbe gehoert wird, da sollst du es gewiss davor halten, schliessen und sagen: Hier ist gewisslich Gottes Haus, hier stehet der Himmel offen." -

Hat denn nun unsere Synodalversammlung die Kennzeichen der wahren Kirche? Antwort: Ja! Denn dort herrscht das Wort stark, mit Gebet und öffentlicher Predigt und Referat und Gesang und Ernennung von Predigern, mit Absolution und Sakramentsverwaltung.<sup>10</sup>

All of this does not prove that the Synod is a congregation, having the power of excommunication. It merely proves "dass in einer Synodalversammlung... Christen, Gläubige sind."<sup>11</sup> That no one will deny. It seems to me that this whole concept rests on a failure to distinguish between the *una sancta ecclesia* and the *ecclesia particularis*. The relationship between the invisible church and the local congregation will be considered in the following chapter.

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10. Ibid., p.102.

11. Ibid., p.103.

## II. The Relation of the Local Congregation to the Invisible Church.

There is only one church, which consists of only Christians and all Christians.

The Church, in the proper sense of the term, is the communion of saints, that is, the sum total of all those who have been called by the Holy Spirit through the Gospel from out of the lost and condemned human race, who truly believe in Christ, and who have been sanctified by this faith and incorporated into Christ.<sup>12</sup>

The Church properly is the congregation of saints and true believers.<sup>13</sup>

When the Church is defined, it is necessary to define that which is the living body of Christ, and which is in name and in fact the Church (which is called the body of Christ, and has fellowship not alone in outward signs, but has gifts in the heart, namely, the Holy Ghost and faith.<sup>14</sup>

Wherefore we hold, according to the Scriptures, that the Church, properly so called, is the congregation of saints (of those here and there in the world), who truly believe the Gospel of Christ, and have the Holy Ghost.<sup>15</sup>

The local Christian congregation is essentially, i.e., in the sight of God, the local appearance of the one holy Christian Church. The real members of the local congregation are members of the invisible Church.

The New Testament throughout speaks of the members of the local congregations as being Christians, believers.

12. Walther, Kirche und Amt, Thesis I, translated in Dallmann, Deu, and Engelder, Walther and the Church, p. 56.

13. Augsburg Confession, Art. VIII, Triglot, p. 47.

14. Apology, Art. VIII, Triglot, p. 231.

15. Ibid., p. 237.

"And the Lord added to the church daily such as should be saved" (Acts 2,47). "The churches... walking in the fear of the Lord, and in the comfort of the Holy Ghost, were multiplied" (Acts 9,31). "The churches were established in the faith" (Acts 16,5). "That ye receive Phebe in the Lord, as becometh saints" (Rom. 16,2). "Unto the church of God which is at Corinth, to them that are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints" (1 Cor. 1,2). "Churches of the saints" (1 Cor. 14,33). "Unto the church of God which is at Corinth, with all the saints which are in all Achaia" (2 Cor. 1,1). "The grace of God bestowed on the churches of Macedonia" (2 Cor. 8,1). "Churches of Judaea which were in Christ" (Gal. 1,22). "The Church of the Thessalonians which is in God the Father and in the Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Thess. 1,1). "The churches of God which in Judaea are in Christ Jesus" (1 Thess. 2,14). "Unto the church of the Thessalonians in God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ" (2 Thess. 1,1). Paul says to the members of the local congregation in Rome, "Ye also are the called of Jesus Christ: To all that be in Rome, beloved of God, called to be saints" (Rom. 1,6.7.). He writes to the "saints and faithful brethren in Christ which are at Colosse" (Col. 1,2). Peter writes to the "elect according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, through sanctification of the Spirit" (1 Pet. 1,2). "The church that is at Babylon, elected together with you, saluteth you" (1 Pet. 5,13). "To

them that have obtained like precious faith with us through the righteousness of God and our Saviour Jesus Christ" (2 Pet. 1,1). Jude writes to "them that are sanctified by God the Father, and preserved in Jesus Christ, and called" (Jude 1).

These words were all addressed to local Christian congregations, and the true members of the congregations are addressed as elect, saints, those who have been saved, churches of God, in Christ Jesus. Thus we see that the local Christian congregation consists essentially of saints, elect, believing Christians. Membership is determined solely by faith. But only God can see faith in the hearts of His children; "The Lord knoweth them that are His" (2 Tim. 2,19). And the local congregation is a visible organization, i.e., visible to men, who cannot see faith, but must judge by confession. As such a visible organization the local congregation may include also hypocrites or even manifest sinners.

In this life many hypocrites and evil persons are mingled with the Church.<sup>16</sup>

For we grant that in this life hypocrites and wicked men have been mingled with the Church, and that they are members of the Church according to the outward fellowship of the signs of the Church, i.e., of Word, profession, and Sacraments, especially if they have not been excommunicated.<sup>17</sup>

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16. Augsburg Confession, Art. VIII, Triglot, p. 47.

17. Apology, Art. VIII, Triglot, p. 227.

We confess that in this life many hypocrites and wicked men, mingled with these, have the fellowship of outward signs, who are members of the Church according to this fellowship of outward signs, and accordingly bear offices in the church (preach, administer the Sacraments, and bear the title and name of Christians)."<sup>18</sup>

Paul addressed the group at Corinth as a Christian congregation, although the man guilty of incest was still on the membership roll and, in the eyes of men, still considered a member of the congregation, (1 Cor. 5). Again, Paul writes to the "churches" of Galatia, although he testifies concerning some of the members: "ye are fallen from grace" (Gal. 5,4).

In the parables Jesus describes the kingdom of God in its appearance before men. In Matt. 13, 47-50, He likens the kingdom of God to a net containing both good and bad fishes. In the parable of the marriage of the king's son (Matt. 22,2-14), the man which had not on a wedding garment is pictured as a member of the corporate group. "Then shall the kingdom of heaven be likened unto ten virgins.... And five of them were wise, and five were foolish" (Matt. 25,1.2).

In this life hypocrites may be mingled with the true believers in the local congregation. "Nevertheless hypocrites and nominal Christians are, properly speaking, true members neither of the invisible nor of the visible Church. They are only outward adherents of the Church as, for instance,

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18. Ibid., p. 237.

to use a rather crude but striking illustration often employed by our sturdy fathers, mud attaches itself to the wheels of a wagon on heavy, wet roads."<sup>19</sup>

While we say that hypocrites may be found in the visible association of the local congregation, we ~~ought not go as~~ <sup>would not continue as an</sup> ~~far as Dr. Walther; ~~does~~ when he says,~~ <sup>absolute statement the nature of</sup>

There is no visible congregation that is composed of none but true Christians; hypocrites are certain to find their way into every Christian congregation.<sup>20</sup>

There is one holy Christian Church. The true believers in the local Christian congregations are, in the sight of God, part of the invisible Church. But the local Christian congregation is a group visible to men. As such it may include hypocrites and even manifest sinners. The figure of speech here used is synekdoche, the whole being named for the part, i. e., the believing part. The congregation is the vessel or receptacle containing a part of the invisible Church.

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19. J. Theodore Mueller, "The Christian Congregation: its rights and duties," Concordia Theological Monthly, X (May, 1939), p. 332.

20. C.F.W. Walther, Church Membership, p. 29.

### III. Institution, Purpose, and Marks.

All spiritual powers are included in the Office of the Keys which is given to the holy Christian Church.

The believing Christians are called "priests and kings before God, or "the royal priesthood" (1 Pet. 2,5.9; Rev. 1,6), "anointed" (1 John 2,20.27), Christ's affianced bride (2 Cor. 11,2), "the body of Christ," in and among whom Christ dwells (1 Cor. 12,27; Matt. 18,20); they are described as equal brethren (Matt. 23,8-11), as the possessors of all things (1 Cor. 3,21-23: "All things are yours").<sup>21</sup>

The treasures of the Word, the Sacraments and Absolution are given to Christians only. To grant these precious gifts to unbelievers would be casting pearls before swine. God would certainly not do that. To the royal priesthood Christ says, "All things are yours".

However these spiritual powers, given to each Christian as a spiritual priest, are to be carried on by the local Christian congregation. For the enjoyment of the rights and the performance of the duties given to Christians, God has instituted the local Christian congregation.

It is a divine ordinance that the Christians of a given locality meet for public, for joint worship and fellowship. "Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is; but exhorting one another" (Hebr. 10,25). The holy writer here distinctly commands that the Christians

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21. Dallmann, Dau, and Engelder, op. cit., p. 91.

assemble themselves for the purpose of Christian fellowship, i.e., to exhort one another to "hold fast the profession of our faith without wavering" and "to provoke one another unto love and to good works" (vv.23.24). Clearly this passage applies to the local congregation. Only a definite local group of Christians who meet regularly can assemble for mutual encouragement in faith and good works.

In Col. 3,16 the Apostle tells us the means to be used in mutual exhortation and admonition, "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom; teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord." If Christians are to teach and admonish one another according to the Word of God as it is applied in the psalms and hymns, it is essential that they be able to come together. The implication is that this should be continued regularly.

Although prayer is the right of every individual member of the Christian Church, prayer fellowship is specifically associated with the local congregation. Thus we read concerning the congregation at Jerusalem, "They lifted up their voice to God with one accord" (Acts 4,24); "And when they had prayed, the place was shaken where they were assembled together" (Acts 4,31); "Prayer was made without ceasing of the church unto God for Peter" (Acts 12,5); "Many were gathered together praying" (Acts 12,12).

Hence we are told of the first Christian congregation:

And they continued stedfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers. And fear came upon every soul: and many wonders and signs were done by the apostles. And all that believed were together, and had all things common;... And they, continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, did eat their meat with gladness and singleness of heart, Praising God, and having favour with all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily such as should be saved. (Acts 2,42-47).

The common celebration of the Lord's Supper is a divine ordinance, and the local congregation is placed in charge of the Lord's Supper.

For we being many are one bread, and one body; for we are all partakers of that one bread (1 Cor. 10,17).

For first of all, when ye come together in the church, I hear that there be divisions among you; and I partly believe it.... When ye come together therefore into one place, this is not to eat the Lord's Supper.... For I have received of the Lord that which also I delivered unto you, That the Lord Jesus, the same night in which He was betrayed, took bread.... (1 Cor. 11,18.20.23).

God has instituted the local Christian congregation that Christians may admonish and strengthen one another in faith and doctrine and life. To accomplish these purposes God has given to the use of the congregation His Word and Sacraments. To aid in this purpose God has also given another institution, namely, church discipline.

Thus says the Lord, Matt. 18,17: "Tell it unto the church; but if he neglect to hear the church, let him be unto thee as a heathen man and a publican".

No proof is needed to show that the Lord in this passage is speaking of a visible particular, local, church.<sup>22</sup>

In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, when ye are gathered together, and my spirit, with the power of our Lord Jesus Christ, To deliver such an one unto Satan.... Therefore put away from among yourselves that wicked person. (1 Cor. 5,6.7.13).

It is to be noted that the latter passage is addressed to a local congregation. It demands a more or less coherent group which can gather together.

God has ordained that groups of Christians come together regularly for joint worship, joint celebration of the Lord's Supper, and joint action in church discipline. Therefore we conclude that God has instituted the local Christian congregation.

As a correlative to the local Christian congregation God has instituted the public ministry, which is the authority conferred by God through the congregation, as holder of the priesthood and of all church power, to administer in public office the common rights of the spiritual priesthood in behalf of all.

The divine institution of the ministry of the New Testament appears from the call of the holy apostles to the ministry of teaching. Matt. 10,2-8; 28,18-20; Luke 9,1-10; Mark 16,15; John 20,21-23; 21,15-17. "As my Father hath sent me, even so send I you" (John 20,21).

22. Ibid., p. 64.

The apostles who had been directly called by Christ recognize as fellow-ministers all those who had been called by the congregation. "The elders which are among you I exhort, who am also an elder" (1 Pet. 5,1). John calls himself an elder (2 John 1; 3 John 1). Paul calls Tychicus fellow-servant (Col. 4,7) and he calls Epaphroditus his "companion in labor and fellow-soldier" (Phil. 2,25). Paul calls himself and Sosthenes "ministers of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God" (1 Cor. 1,1; 4,1). "Paul and Timotheus, the fellow-servants of Jesus Christ" (Phil. 1,1); "Timotheus, my workfellow" (Rom. 16,21). Although the apostles were directly called to that office which had been instituted by Christ, they consider those who have been indirectly called to be their equals.

Scripture tells us that all who have been rightly called to the ministry by the congregations have been placed there by God Himself.

Take heed therefore unto yourselves and to all the flock over 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).

And God hath set some in the Church, first apostles, secondarily prophets, thirdly teachers, after that miracles, then gifts of healings, helps, governments, diversities of tongues. Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Are all workers of miracles? (1 Cor. 12,28.29).

And He (Christ) gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers" (Eph. 4,11).

And say to Archippus, Take heed to the ministry which thou hast received in the Lord, that thou fulfill it" (Col. 4,17).

Such called ministers are called servants of God, 1 Cor. 4,1; 1 Thess. 3,2; Col. 1,7; 2 Cor. 5,20.

God Himself has laid down the requirements for the office of the public ministry, 1 Cor. 14,34.35; 1 Tim. 2,11.12; 1 Tim. 3,1-7; Titus 1,5-9.

Finally we have the example and direct command of the apostle to establish the public ministry in every congregation.

And when they had ordained them elders in every church, and prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord, on whom they believed (Acts 14,23).

For this cause left I thee in Crete, that thou shouldest set in order the things that are wanting, and ordain elders in every city, as I had appointed thee (Titus 1,5).

We may say that the divine institution of the congregation proves the institution of the public ministry, and that the divine institution of the ministry proves the institution of the congregation. The two are correlatives; each presupposes the other. The pastor or shepherd is one who cares for a flock; hence he must have a definite flock to care for. The existence of a flock (Acts 20,28; 1 Pet. 5,2) presupposes a shepherd to care for them.

God has instituted the local Christian congregation for the purpose of joint worship, joint celebration of the Lord's

Supper, and the exercise of church discipline, and He has instituted the public ministry for the care of the congregation and the administration of these purposes.

The Christian congregation is an association of Christians, with whom unbelievers may be externally connected, who have united for the definite and specific purpose of having the Word of God preached and the Sacraments administered by a minister whom they have called.

We note that it is the purpose for which the Christians have united which makes them a Christian congregation. Only the local Christian congregation has this inherent purpose. The local congregation is the only group of Christians whose primary purpose is the administration of the Means of Grace.

The primary purpose of the Synod is the cooperation of local congregations for the extension of the Kingdom of God. While the assembled delegates may hear the Word preached and receive the Sacraments, this is not their purpose in attending the convention. They have rather come for the express purpose of representing their congregations. Nor can it be said of the officers of Synod that they are, by virtue of their synodical office, "stewards of the mysteries of God".

Conferences, schools etc., are for educational purposes, not for the administration of the Means of Grace. Persons who are to be recognized as Christians by their confession

may meet to discuss civic problems, to study first-aid, to build a house, or to play cards. They may meet on a train, in a hotel lobby, a restaurant, or a movie theater. Yet the mere presence of a group of Christians without the essential purpose does not constitute a congregation. <sup>It is not arbitrary. It is not to be</sup> ~~We may not say,~~

Die eigentliche Ortsgemeinde ist niemand anders als die gläubigen Christen, die sich an dem Ort zusammengefunden haben, die sich zueinander und miteinander öffentlich zu Christo bekennen.<sup>23</sup>

We may say that the Means of Grace are the marks (notae, Kennzeichen) of the church in a twofold sense. The Means of Grace mark a group of persons as Christians and they mark the Christians as a group which has united for the purpose of functioning as a Christian congregation.

The individual Christian, desiring to join himself with other Christians, cannot look into the hearts of his fellowmen and determine who is a true Christian and who is not. Yet he can determine where other Christians are to be found.

He hears men confess the faith he has; he meets them as they gather about the preaching of the Gospel and the observance of the Sacraments; he sees them practise what they preach. He is sure that among them he will find those who inwardly are what they outwardly seem to be, living members in the body of Jesus Christ.<sup>23</sup>

Wherever the Word of God is preached and the Sacraments administered we may know that there are Christians.

Holy Scripture tells us: "So is the kingdom of God (that is, the Church) as if a man should cast seed into the ground and should sleep and rise night and day and the seed should spring and grow up he knoweth not how," Mark 4, 26-27. However, Scripture tells us likewise what this seed is; it says, "The Sower

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<sup>23</sup>. Karl Kretschmar, Mutual Obligations of the Ministry and the Congregation, p. 6.

soweth the Word", v.14. Hence, according to Scripture the Word of God is the seed from which the members of the Church, or, in the language of Scripture, "the children of the kingdom," Matt. 13,38, sprout forth and are generated. At the same time, however, God issues in Scripture the precious promise: "As the rain cometh down and the snow from heaven and returneth not thither but watereth the earth and maketh it bring forth and bud that it may give seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall My Word be that gceeth forth out of My mouth: it shall not return unto Me void, but it shall accomplish that which I please, and it shall prosper in the thing whereto I send it," Is. 55,10.11. We see from this, not only that the Word of God is the seed from which alone the members of the Church are born, but also that from it there certainly bud forth always, wheresoever this heavenly seed is sown, some "children of the kingdom," "without men's knowing how," in accordance with the divine, undeceivable, and infallible promise. Wherever, therefore, this seed is sown, there the Church indeed is not seen, but there we have an undeceivable mark (criterion) that the Church, that a group of true believers and saints in Christ Jesus, a congregation of children of God, exists.<sup>24</sup>

Since Baptism and the Lord's Supper are means by which the grace of God is conveyed and the portals of the invisible church are opened to men, we may know that wherever these Sacraments are are administered according to Christ's institution there are Christians present.

As the Means of Grace mark the Christians, they also mark the group of Christians which unites for the purpose of functioning as a Christian congregation, i.e., for the purpose of having the Means of Grace administered by a servant of the Word according to God's will and command.

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24. Dallmann, Dau, and Engelder, op. cit., pp. 60.61.

The Christian congregation is an association of true Christians (with whom, however, hypocrites and manifest sinners may be externally connected), living at one place, who are associated for a longer period of time for the purpose of having the Word of God preached and the Sacraments administered to them by a called pastor.

The congregation is not the mere presence of Christians at one place (Wisconsin Synod). The congregation is not the mere outward organization, including unbelievers in its essence (Roman Catholic Church). The congregation does not cease to be a true congregation if unbelievers, even unbelieving pastors, are mingled with the Christians in the visible corporate body (Donatism). The essential purpose of the Christian congregation is not the physical and social welfare of the community (Social Gospel), but the edifying of the Body of Christ through the Means of Grace.

The correct understanding of the essence of the local Christian congregation is necessary to a proper relationship toward our own congregation and other congregations, toward our Synod and other Lutheran bodies, toward other denominations and congregations. The knowledge of the essence of the Christian congregation is necessary to a proper understanding of the entire doctrine of the Church and the Ministry. May God lead us into a fuller and deeper insight into this fundamental doctrine.

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