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The Church as the People of God United in the Word of God

By JAMES W. MAYER

(This article was originally delivered at The General Conference of the India Evangelical Lutheran Church as a discussion paper. It is printed in our journal in the hope that it may serve the same purpose in pastoral conferences and other groups.)

THE word "church" has come to mean so many things that it is difficult to think of church with any ontological precision. Our present study is an examination of the nature of the reality that is *ekklesia*, and the bearing that the unique quality of its being has on certain problems of fellowship. Although we at times use terms borrowed from the philosophers, we have nonetheless set ourselves the task of thinking in strictly Biblical categories, wherein reality cannot be contemplated apart from the personal Lord, by whom and in whom the reality exists; where being cannot be abstracted from becoming, or nature thought of relevantly apart from function.

I

Except for three references in Acts 19 (vv. 32 and 40 of the gathering of a mob; v. 39 of a civic assembly) and two references to the assembly of Israel in the Old Testament (Acts 7:38 and Heb. 2:12), *ekklesia* in the New Testament is always one and the same reality. This is true in spite of the many different ways in which the N.T. speaks of *ekklesia*. New Testament usage is in fact so varied that definition in ordinary philosophical or even religious terms is almost impossible. Our definition of *ekklesia* must provide room

for church as one and indivisible (Col. 1:18; Eph. 1:22; 3:10, 21; 5:23-32), as local in the singular (Rom. 16:1; 1 Cor. 1:2; 2 Cor. 1:1; 1 Thess. 1:1; 2 Thess. 1:1, etc.), or local but with the plural (Acts 15:41; 1 Cor. 7:17; Rom. 16:16), as plural extended throughout one territory (Gal. 1:22; compare also singular in a distributive sense, Acts 14:23), but also singular over several provinces (Acts 9:31). If our definition must be broad enough to account for all of these, it must at the same time be pregnant enough to convey the New Testament truth that the *ekklesia*, plurally or singularly, locally or extensively considered, is never less than fully *ekklesia*.

Said differently, *ekklesia* is a reality that transcends the bounds of time and space—a spiritual reality. But merely to say that the church is a spiritual reality can be misleading. *Ekklesia* also has its being within the bounds of time and space. The first sentence of this paragraph, while true, is therefore inadequate as a definition and should be rephrased. *Ekklesia* is a transcendent reality which is also immanent, existent and operational in the three-dimensional world of people.

Luther's definition of church is perhaps most helpful at this point: "The church is the people of God united in the Word of God." The latter clause of this sentence we shall take up in part two. The phrase "the people of God" has direct bearing on our argument here. The church is people, flesh-and-blood people; people who have to do with the tasks and problems of this

world; people in relation to one another — with all the blessings and all the frictions that this implies. As a definition, however, "the church is people" would be a mere caricature unless the subjective genitive "of God" were always understood. The people of God — called saints, set apart, made alive, in unique community with one another precisely because they are in community with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.

"The people of God." The phrase itself implies a tension, because it speaks of the activity of infinite and holy God on and among finite and sinful men. This tension is not merely the tension of God's people being pulled now by God's power, now by the forces of this world, as though the *ekklesia* were a neutral mass controlled by forces external to it — and therefore a people only really church when responding to the call of God; something less than church when succumbing to the pull of the world and the forces of Satan. While this is also, in a sense, true, it is inadequate for describing the unique nature of spiritual being that is *ekklesia*. The unique being of the church lies more specifically in a dynamic of both / and, rather than a state of either / or. We are dealing here with a tension of "already" and "not yet," which is the same miracle corporately in the *ekklesia* that is described individually by the phrase *simul justus et peccator*.

The people of God are saints in Christ and saints "at Colossae" (Col. 1:2). They are holy (1 Cor. 1:2), yet capable of the grossest immorality (1 Cor. 5:1). They are one in Christ (1 Cor. 1:2; 12:12, 13), yet factious and divided (1 Cor. 1:10-13). They have believed the Word of truth, the Gospel (Col. 1:5), yet have been led

astray, deceived, and are in danger of falling from the truth (Col. 2:8, 20-22). They are God's own people (1 Peter 2:9), saints (Rom. 1:7; 1 Cor. 14:33 b), the *ekklesia* of God (Acts 20:28 and 11 other refs.), the *ekklesia* of Christ (Rom. 16:16), or the *ekklesia* in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ (1 Thess. 1:1); while also the *ekklesia* in Jerusalem (Acts 8:1), in the house of Lydia and Priscilla (Rom. 16:5), and in dispersion (Acts 8:1 with 8:3; cp. 1 Peter 1:1, 2)!

The mystery of *ekklesia* as a God-reality existing in the everyday world of time and space defies neat systematic analysis. The history of dogma is full of examples of the pitfalls that have confronted systematists in their attempts to define *ekklesia* in dogmatic propositions. For example, one can attempt to resolve the problem of the nature of the *ekklesia* by spiritualizing it completely. But to do so is to usher it into heaven, so that any talk of *ekklesia* in time is purely platonic. Or one can settle on the visible company of those that go by the name of Christian. But then the church is hardly unique — little different from other organizations, communities or fraternities that come into existence by the mutual desire and decision of their members. Or we can posit two modes of existence, referring to the gathered assembly now as visible (and divided), otherwise as invisible (and therefore undivided). Whatever usefulness such an analysis might have as an attempt to do justice to the *ekklesia* as a God-reality empiric in the world, it is hardly Biblical, and leads too easily to the assumption that there are in fact two churches. Once this presupposition becomes (consciously or unconsciously) a part of our thinking about church, we can

hardly avoid treating one church as "our church," the other as God's.

To say simply that the church is the people of God united in the Word of God may seem inadequate to those requiring a more systematic explanation. As a definition, however, it has the advantage of including unimpaired the God-reality and the empiric existence of *ekklesia*. More, by the second half of the statement, to which we now turn, it says a great deal about the way that the church is and becomes — the means whereby it is constituted and has its being — in the world of men.

II

If *ekklesia* is a spiritual reality, and so much at least should be obvious, the question immediately arises, "How is this spiritual reality constituted in the three-dimensional world?" The church is God's church, brought into being by God, sustained by God, linked inseparably with God through Jesus Christ, her Head (Eph. 4:16; Col. 2:19). How then can *ekklesia* also be a dimensional reality, real and experienced in this world? However we answer this question, we must answer in such a way that we do not make of *ekklesia* merely a suprahistorical article of faith to be believed apart from this complicated world of denominations and their sometimes rather mundane programs.

Being a Spirit-reality, *ekklesia* can be constituted in the world of men only by the Spirit. The Spirit of Christ, the Holy Spirit, is both the Creator and the Guarantor of *ekklesia*. We can "have" *ekklesia* only in the vehicles and means provided by God Himself. If, then, a transcendent reality is to be mediated to men so as to be real to men in the world of men, we are confronted with a great miracle of love —

the miracle of infinite and holy God coming down to and dealing with finite and sinful men.

Here again the genius of Luther becomes evident. "The church," he says, "is the people of God, *united in the Word of God*." "Word" here means Christ and the external Word that bears witness to and conveys Christ. God speaks to men in man's language. And the ultimate speech of God to man is the Word, Christ, incarnate in the flesh. Here is the mystery hidden for ages, but now made known to us in Christ: heaven touches earth; God's Son becomes Son of Man and our elder Brother — the Firstborn of a new community of many brethren in Christ.

Wherever this Word is preached, the Holy Spirit engenders faith and the church comes into being; wherever two or three gather in His name, there He is and therefore there is the church. The church is not constituted, sustained or guaranteed by the form of the ministry that preaches the Word, nor by the polity of the gathered; but by an act of God working through the Word — which is both Christ and the means which bring Christ.

This does not say that we become church, or that the church is in existence, only when assembled to hear the preaching of His Word or when participating in the Sacrament. The church is the people of God, and God's Word is a Word for people that demands a response of faith and creates a relationship between God and man and between man and man that is spiritual and earthly: spiritual because it exists only by God's dynamic — the dynamic of the Word; earthly because it works itself out in the spatial everyday world of men and their personal relationships.

Yet it is hardly correct to say that this

relationship between God and man and between man and man works itself out. God works it out. The Spirit of God is the motive, creative force in the church. It seems impossible to confess one holy, apostolic church when the stench of division, the scandal of her many denials of her Lord in the world, and her preoccupation with non-apostolic tasks are so evident. It is impossible, indeed, if the church must guarantee her own unity, her own holiness, or her apostolic foundation by utilizing various adjuncts of her life in the three-dimensional world (organization, constitutions, doctrinal statements). The One, Holy and Apostolic Church is both possibility and accomplished reality only because God's dynamic, the Spirit through the Word, has made it so, must continually be making it so, and will ever make it so.

Synods and constitutions, parochial loyalties, doctrinal affirmations and agreed statements are all necessary "containers" in which men "hold" spiritual reality in the world of men; but they are not constitutive of the reality itself. The word "container" however, is not sufficiently precise. Synods, synodical programs, doctrinal affirmations, etc., are not, and can never be "containers." For the realities *ekklesia* and Word are not static realities that can be contained or held as a possession. They are God-dimensional, and therefore always in becoming. Synods, synodical programs, alliances, and cooperative efforts, etc., are circuits through which the dynamic flows.

It is precisely at this point that the whole problem of the nature of the church's reality as a reality in the world is most frequently misunderstood. Finite man sees the God-dimensional in terms of his three-dimensional world. He is therefore con-

stantly in danger of mistaking the activated circuits for the current. He so quickly makes the transfer from people to the organizations that people form, from Word to words about the Word, and from Truth to the truths that are used in expressing the Truth. Such transfers are necessary to us in this world of time and space, and are not of necessity fatal. The danger is ever present, however, that we substitute for or equate with God's activity among men man's response to God's activity, and thus distort the image of the church.

This is only one way of expressing the difficulty of being and functioning as *ekklesia* in the world. More has to be said. If *ekklesia* is truly existential in the world, a God-dimension among men, then the circuits or earthly cells through which the creative Word of God is coursing, are themselves also *ekklesia*! They are changed by a creative act of God, and are continually being changed. There is therefore a sense in which church organization can be *ekklesia*;^{*} a point at which words are Word, and an undoubted validity in equating truths with Truth. The Spirit-reality comes to men and is existential among men in the structures of man's experience. Just as the Incarnation is the supreme example of the union of the Infinite with the finite, so the *ekklesia*, we might say, is "incarnated" in man's relationships; God's dialog with men is in man's language; God's Truth can be explored and partially explicated in man's formulations.

The danger of misunderstanding the nature of *ekklesia*'s being then is not only one of mistaking the vehicle for the reality; it

* An organization viewed thus from its dynamic aspect is, however, more properly designated "organism," not "organization."

is also the danger of "staticising" what is essentially dynamic. Man cannot resist the temptation to resolve the heaven-and-earth tension of life in Christ, or of the life that is *ekklesia*-in-world. He wants to manage it; control it; secure it so that it is good and safe! Like the first man he wants to escape from his creatureliness, and to be God. The tension-in-motion induced by the pulsing of spiritual reality in the world therefore makes him nervous. It implies a ceaseless wrestling with God and a striving with his fellow man that demand constant awareness of himself as a creature. He has constantly to be reminded that having God's realities at all implies dying to himself, giving himself over again and again to the creative current of God's regenerative might; it means obedience in humility before the Word, and awesome seeking for God's Truth—never forgetting, in the search, that he is not, and can never be, God.

In no area of our life as *ekklesia* is it harder to keep vehicle and reality, static and dynamic, in their proper relationships than in the area of fellowship. We daily confess that *ekklesia* is one, yet find ourselves in a world of many churches. *Ekklesia* is people, yet large groups of people generally express their unity and are dealt with in organizational structures. *Ekklesia* is people united in the Word, yet agreement in words is difficult to come by. Can there possibly be a solution to these problems?

A pat solution in this world is hardly possible. We feel, however, that a *modus operandi* can be found. It lies in properly understanding (a) the nature of *ekklesia* as a God-dimensional reality given and becoming in the world of time and space;

(b) that transcendent reality can only be given, and hence experienced by men, in vehicles chosen by God Himself; and (c) that therefore these vehicles or means, while reaching the world of men and operative among them, are *essentially* dynamic, always in becoming.

All three of the above propositions are implied in the phrase "The people of God united in the Word of God." The first two propositions have been touched on above. About the third more remains to be said.

The key to the proper understanding of the word "united" lies in a proper understanding of the phrase "in the Word of God." Men (have been and therefore) *are* united in the Word, Christ; and their unity—the relationship between men and men who have been incorporated into Christ—is activated and sustained by the external Word, the means and vehicle of Christ's presence. "United in the Word of God" therefore implies a tension of "already" and "not yet"; it is at one and the same time an accomplished fact *and* a process, an experience of completion and an anticipation of fulfillment.

It follows from this that "united in the Word of God" is both more and less than a state of agreement on doctrinal propositions. It is more, because it is a given unity in Christ that comprises the whole sphere of Christian life and activity in the world; and more, because this given unity cannot be "staticized" in theological propositions (or otherwise); it is a process. It is in the very process of "truthing it in love,"* in

* The transfer from verb to noun required for a proper rendering of *aletheuontes* in English illustrates how subtle the "staticising process" can be. Cf. Eph. 4:15. "Truthing it" is a rather clumsy way of rendering *aletheuontes*, which in this context means more than "speak-

the process of mutual seeking, in the process of joining in our Lord's mission to the world that unity is possible at all in this world. When we stop the process, when we no longer *live* in the Word with one another, we are in danger of losing the unity also, because we have prevented exposure to the means whereby the unity is given, and are ignoring the process by which it is experienced and expressed.

"United in the Word of God" also implies *less* than full doctrinal agreement. When two people (or two groups of people) find themselves facing in the same direction with respect to the given realities—the objective acts of God's mercy—they are united in the Word in a uniquely Biblical and Lutheran sense. "United in the Word" is then, simply, an attitude. It is a response of openness and obedience to the Word brought about by the Holy Spirit Himself. Where this attitude obtains, the conviction that it does actually exist is also given by the Spirit. Because "united in the Word of God" is a dynamic reality, the Holy Spirit, working through the Word, is its sole Guarantor. We do not guarantee nor create unity by our doctrinal formulations; we bear witness to it. Doctrinal affirmations are a necessary factor in determining the "attitude" spoken of above; but they are not the sole factor to be taken into consideration. It is in the process of their formation that we learn to know that we are one; not in the result.

ing the truth" (cf. v. 25). It implies here the idea of being possessed by truth and giving expression to it not only with the lips but with the whole life. The Latin version renders: *veritatem autem facientes*. J. Armitage Robinson, *St. Paul's Epistle to the Ephesians* (London: James Clarke & Co., Second Edition, 1961), p. 185, suggests the rendering, "maintaining the truth."

But is it not *Schwärmerei* to assume that you can know that you are one unless you *first* agree on all points of doctrine? In the context of the history of fellowship dealings in our Synod, this is a valid question; and its answer can serve to illustrate the practical implications of viewing "united in the Word of God" as "already" and "not yet." Our answer must be both a Yes and a No.

We must answer Yes to the above question, if by "oneness" we are thinking of oneness manifested at synodical levels. Two synods can hardly deal with each other in the Word except they deal in propositions that reflect, as best they can, the response of their members to the Word. This agreement in doctrinal statements, however, can only be thought of as "united in the Word of God" insofar as synods are people. To the extent that synods are organizational structures, the oneness thus arrived at reflects only a condition favorable to "people united in the Word of God," but is not that unity itself. Agreement by synodical decree says in effect, "We have the same basic outlook; our epistemology, our common confessions, and our respective theological histories bring us a long way on the road of 'truthing it in love' in the Word."

When, however, we come to the everyday level of people to people in concrete local situations, our "truthing it in love" is carried on in a fuller context of life than that implied by doctrinal agreement only. Here the pulse of "united in the Word" is quicker, more complex. At the local level it is, for example, quite possible to conceive of a situation where "A" constantly upholds the right doctrine, but by his loveless, supercilious attitude is more a canker

in the body than "B." "B" does not hold to the inerrancy of Scripture as defined by theologians; "A" does. Yet, "B" gives evident testimony in word and deed of being bound by Scripture and obedient to his Lord in a way that "A" is not.

Assuming that "A" and "B" are men in Christ, thrown together in everyday life, and dealing with each other as men in Christ, we have here a "unity in the Word" by an act of God quite apart from synodical affiliation. We would not deny the given reality here, even though the response of both "A" and "B" is, admittedly, imperfect. Nor would we say that "B"'s imperfect response is more divisive of fellowship than "A"'s. Both "A" and "B" are in need of renewal and growth by the Spirit through the Word; and the Holy Spirit is working in them, not through their synodical affiliations at this point, but through their dialog of life in the Word by which He is constantly perfecting that which is imperfect, no less in the understanding of faith-knowledge than in the obedience of faith-life.

This is only one illustration of our contention that the phrase "people of God united in the Word of God" always implies a God-given fact and a Spirit-guided becoming. Because *ekklesia* is always becoming in the world of men, there are stages, degrees, and levels of "united in the Word of God" that are each in their own way valid. Considerations of time and place undeniably have some bearing on the unity of people in the Word. Are not "A" and "B" above, for example, "united in the Word" in a way that is somehow more significant, more crucial than the fellowship either "A" or "B" has with his synodical brethren 300 miles away? This does not

mean that their synodical fellowship is not valid. In this case it is simply not the primary relationship in which God has placed either "A" or "B."

The process of "truthing it in love" in which "A" and "B" are engaged also has a validity for the environment—for the world—in which "A" and "B" live out their lives. To illustrate this point, I should like to leave "A" and "B" and give an illustration from our life on the mission field. The principles involved are not different on the mission field, but the context of life there makes what I say now more obvious than it would be in a nominally Christian culture.

I board a crowded bus in downtown Madras and sit down in the one remaining seat next to a young man. He looks me over; and I, for my part, also find something in his manner that suggests that he might be a fellow Christian. We strike up a conversation. On hearing that his name is George (a name used only by Christians), we shake hands at once. "I, too, am a Christian."

Two things are significant about this meeting. One pertains to George and myself, the other pertains to the rest of the people in the bus.

As soon as George and I find that we hold allegiance to a common Lord, we understand implicitly that there is a vast area of common ground between us in our belief, our customs, our outlook, and our life in a non-Christian populace. We also understand instinctively that this common allegiance at once binds us to each other even as it separates the two of us from the crowd of Hindus and Muslims in the bus. It would take George and me only a matter of minutes to find that there are also

differences in our respective response to the Lord who has called us both. George is a Syrian Christian, I am a Lutheran. But at this particular place we are brothers, united in Christ—a wee island in a non-Christian sea—and we need each other!

There is a second feature of this meeting that is equally, if not more, significant. The Brahman sitting opposite has been watching us. He saw us shake hands, and he tries to follow our animated conversation. He leans over and says, "Do you two come from the same town?" "No," we reply, "but we are both Christians." The unity in our common Lord which George and I have acknowledged has an inescapable significance with respect to the non-Christian crowd about us. That we hear witness to our unity under the broad confession "Kyrios Iesous" is, in this context, more important than the question of whether George and I could commune together at the same altar.

We too often forget that God in Christ gives unity to His *ekklesia* not only as a gift to Christians, but as a gift to the world! We forget that the building up (*oikodomein*) of the body of Christ is a building up in two senses: in the sense of growing together into more perfect oneness and closer connection to the Head; and in the sense of growing in the world, creating and claiming ever new spheres for the reign of Christ the Head. Not only that, the two senses cannot be separated. They complement each other. "I do not pray for these only, but also for those who are to believe in Me through their word, that they may all be one; even as Thou, Father, art in Me and I in Thee, that they also may be in Us, so that the world may believe that Thou hast sent Me. The glory

which Thou hast given Me I have given to them, that they may be one, even as We are one, I in them and Thou in Me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that Thou hast sent Me and hast loved them even as Thou hast loved Me." (John 17:20-23 RSV)

Where the New Testament speaks of the growth of the body, or of the temple being built up, etc., we find this dual implication of growing "up" and "out." Sometimes the two are so closely intertwined as to escape us at first reading. In Ephesians 4, for example, Paul speaks eloquently of the body growing in the unity of the Spirit, in one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God "to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, so that we no longer be children tossed to and fro and carried about by every wind of doctrine." We think instinctively of our oneness together as *ekklesia*. But Paul has not for a moment forgotten the growth of the body in the world. "When He ascended on high, He led a host of captives, and He gave gifts to men." The gifts that He gave (to men? to church? or to men through church?), "He gave (simply *edooken*) . . . for the equipment of the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ." What is this ministry of the saints, except it be both a ministry for *ekklesia* in the world and a ministry of *ekklesia* to the world?

This building up (both in the sense of growing together in the Word and in the sense of growing extensively in the world) is always God's doing. The saints are builded up, and the *ekklesia* is building "out" by the Spirit through the proclamation of, life under, and dialog in the Word. The Word is always the vehicle and means

through which God does this. If we understand this very clearly, we will more easily see that it is not only possible, but mandatory for us to enter into this dialog in the Word with each other, and to manifest to the world the degree of unity God has given us in the Word at any given level of our ecclesiastical existence, wherever and insofar as we obediently can. The dialog must always be maintained. We must always speak the Word to each other, and we must always witness to the world the unity that we have.

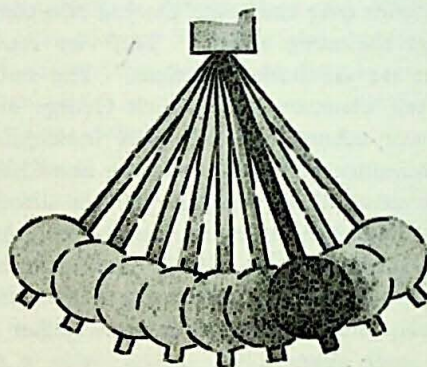
III

"*Ekklesia*," in the words of Luther, "is the people of God united in the Word of God." We have seen that *ekklesia* is a Spirit reality and therefore transcendent; that it is nevertheless existential in the world of men — constituted only and always by God through the Word of God. We have also seen that *ekklesia*, for that very reason, is always in becoming, that to be "united in the Word" is always God's doing; and that, in this world, this necessarily implies an "already" and a "not yet" — an accomplished fact and a process. We have also alluded to the validity and necessity of giving witness to the "already" before the world, while always, in obedience to Christ, confronting each other with the "not yet" of our imperfect, sinful response in doctrine and life.

We must now try to sum up the main points of the above thesis and at least try to indicate their bearing on our theology of fellowship.

The illustration (col. 2) is a pendulum in motion. The many "shadow pendulums" serve to indicate that it is in motion. Because we are dealing with realities that are *essentially* dynamic, we dare not contem-

plate the diagram of the pendulum apart from its motion. While not true of the pendulum, it is certainly the case with *ekklesia*: that the minute you "stop" it, you are in danger of losing it. The many shadow pendulums also serve to indicate the extent of the arc described by the pendulum. The disc on the shaft of the pendulum is capable of being moved up or down on the shaft, but is functionally inseparable from the shaft itself.



As the pendulum moves through its path, there can be no relationship between one of its positions and another (in the drawing, between one shadow and the next), unless the pendulum is fixed firmly at the top; for that is the pivot from which it depends and by which its movement is determined. The length of the arc that the pendulum describes, as well as the speed of its pulse, are variable. When the disc is far out from the pivot, the arc described by the pendulum is very broad, but the pulse is slow; when the disc is farther up on the shaft, the pendulum's arc is shortened, but its pulse is faster.

Might this not serve as a parable on *ekklesia*? We are united in Christ the Word, the pivot on which the shaft of the pendulum depends. Our life in Christ de-

pends on the external Word, that is, the shaft of the pendulum inseparable from its pivot. We are in relation to one another only as we are in relation to our common Lord through the Word, and therefore this relationship is always a dialog of life in the Word between those under the Word. That is, we are continually dependent on the Word, Christ; and activated by the Spirit through the external Word (Scripture, sacraments, preaching of the Word, fellowship in the Word, etc.). This dialog of life in the Word is indicated in the diagram by the motion of the pendulum moving through its arc—seen as though it were always moving into or out of the next position throughout the extent of the arc.

The disc might be used to indicate people "united in the Word." If we can think of the disc farther out or closer in, of the arc as broader or narrower, and of the pulse correspondingly slower or faster, we have an illustration of the bearing that factors of time and space have on our life-in-*ekklesia*.

As the people of God united in the Word of God, we are necessarily in the swing of this pendulum as it moves in the world. But the pulse of our dialog in the Word with one another is variable. The pulse of our life under the Word varies as our response to the Word is more obedient or less obedient, *and* as our relationship to each other in point of time and space is more closely confined or farther apart. Both of these variables must always be taken into consideration; they can never be ignored. Nevertheless, because these two variables are interrelated but not interdependent or proportional to each other, "truthing it in love" is a highly

complex, yet constantly necessary process. We have alluded to some of the difficulties on the individual level by our example of the unity in the Word of "A" and "B." Their association together is what we might consider a primary relationship. They are thrown together daily, and their fellowship together must of necessity be defined by more than "Kyrios Iesous." My chance meeting with George on the bus, on the other hand, was hardly what we would call a primary relationship—perhaps not even "secondary" * in the context of our respective Christian lives. Yet, in the context of our meeting on the bus, it was singularly important that we acknowledge each other as one in the Word under the broad confession "Kyrios Iesous." Had George and I struck up a closer association, however, the pulse of our dialog in the Word must necessarily have quickened, for "truthing it in love" under "Kyrios Iesous" lays upon us the obligation, even as it affords the opportunity for us, to go beyond "Kyrios Iesous" in our dialog of the Word with each other.

Is it any different on the corporate level? We ought to consider very seriously whether there is not a definite validity, for example, in belonging to an agency like the World Council of Churches—a validity that neither prejudices our unity nor compromises truth as publicly confessed at a "closer in" level. Because we acknowledge them as Christians, we do admit that there is some kind of unity here! It is unity on

* "Primary" and "secondary" as used here do not refer to specific levels of relationship, as though these levels could be delineated exactly and labeled. I use the terms only to indicate that there are varying degrees of fullness or intimacy in our relationships with people in the world.

a "far-out" level that covers a vast theological spectrum and a worldwide expanse, not a unity sufficiently defined or sufficiently "perfected" to sustain pulpit and altar fellowship without further progress in our dialog of the Word. The pulse is slower here. But the movement, that is, the dialog with each other *in the Word* and the witness of it before the world, must continue. Not to continue it, not to participate in it, is to neglect the one means God has given of fostering and maintaining growth in the body. The "united in the Word" here is deplorably imperfect and undefined. But we should also keep in mind that it is probably as defined as it can be at that level at this time; and must admit that the Holy Spirit is working toward a more perfect and more fully delineated response.

When we come to fellowship matters among Lutherans, we are obviously "moving up" on the pendulum. Why? Here again, not because we have the label "Lutheran," or because we subscribe to common historical confessions, *per se*; but because our common historical confessions bring us a long way in our dialog with each other in the Word. We find not only that our attitude toward God's given realities is singularly similar, but also that our way of expressing ourselves, our church practice, etc., are very much alike. These are certainly conditions favorable to "truthing it in love" in a richer, fuller sense. Here the pulse of our dialog in the Word is quicker, more intimate. Yet neither here at the intersynodical level, nor for that matter on the intrasynodical level (that is, within Synod itself), can we ever lean back and say of our unity, "We have arrived." United in the Word is always both a God-given reality and a Spirit-directed process

in the lives of people in the Word. We ourselves, and our relationships with each other, must daily be renewed by the Spirit through the Word—God's Word to us, and His Word through us to each other.

Finally, three points in the above argument have particular relevance for our life here in India. These three points should be taken together and kept in mind against the background of our argument in Parts I and II. They are: (a) that "united in the Word" is a process, a dialog of life under the Word between people in Christ; (b) that the two variable factors (fuller or less adequate response *and* geographical proximity affording opportunity for "truthing it in love" in the whole context of life) are interrelated and must also be taken into consideration; and (c) that "united in the Word" has witness implications for the world.

When these three points are considered together, they imply that our unity in the Word at the "close in" level of pulpit and altar fellowship must be unity at the *congregational level*, where two groups of Christians "truth it in love" in a context that involves their total response of life in Christ. If two groups of Christians, that is, two congregations, deal with each other in Word and doctrine and find themselves of one heart and mind in doctrine and practice, they will desire to fellowship and ought to fellowship with each other in the Word — altar fellowship included; also, they will desire to manifest and they ought to manifest their oneness in the community in which God has placed them — whether that community is set in the context of a wholly non-Christian culture or in the context of a so-called Christian culture.

This is not our present practice. If one of our congregations and one of another synod, after frequent discussions and joint projects in their community, found themselves of one heart and mind, they would still have to "truth it in love" (if at all) on a "far-out," "slow-pulse" level, even though the unity given them by God's Spirit is an intimate one that extends to their whole life as Christ's people in that city. Why? Because we have become accustomed to draw the lines of fellowship organizationally rather than dynamically! We tend to equate God-given unity in the Word with agreement in doctrine arrived at by synods; and we have therefore found it difficult, if not impossible, either to acknowledge degrees of unity in the Word or to take into consideration degrees of proximity to each other. It is because of this organizational thinking that we do not consider it permissible for two congregations in one community to acknowledge their oneness in the Word by working together and fellowshiping together in their community, so long as their respective synods are not in the same agreement. Agreement in doctrine on the synodical level has a validity all its own, and the discipline in the Word that synodical organization fosters is a gift for which we are grateful to God. Nevertheless, synodical organization dare never attempt to limit or control the free working of the Holy Spirit through the dialog of its people in the Word.

If *ekklesia* is truly the people of God united in the Word of God, it ought to be the "closer in" situation that takes precedence over the "farther out" synodical situation. Said differently, when God has

granted one heart and mind in the Word to people whom He also has placed in close community with each other in this world, these people are united in the Word in a sense that is more meaningful to them and to the environment in which they live than the unity their respective synods enjoy. If they are to grow as *ekklesia* in the world and out to the world as God intended, they must live united in the Word, speaking the Word to each other and manifesting their unity in the Word to the world. The synod ought not make its synodical alignments prejudicial of an obedient dialog in the Word where it exists in primary relationships on the local level, provided the local congregation concerned also continues to "truth it in love" with its synod, and witnesses to the fact that its unity with a congregation of another synod at the local level is, in fact, a unity in the Word responsibly participated in. The synod, for its part, also no doubt has a responsibility to assure itself that in such a situation there is indeed a responsible dialog in the Word. The synod, however, cannot create or prevent, guarantee or deny unity given by the Spirit through the Word at this place.

We have used a phrase of Luther, "The Church is the people of God united in the Word of God," as a guide in rethinking some of the implications of the unique being of *ekklesia* in the world. Perhaps by this time the reader will have recalled another statement of Luther concerning the church: "Thank God any seven-year-old child knows what the church is!" (Smalcald Articles)

Vaniyambadi, India