

# The Evaluation of Cultural Influences On Church Structure

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## The Evaluation of Cultural Influences On Church Structure

### I. The Influence of Culture on Church Structure

#### A. Luther and the Confessions do not Look Back for an Ideal Form of Church Polity in the Early Church

##### 1. There is no Form of Church Government Commanded in Scripture

- 1 A Swedish Lutheran in the north of Sweden brings his family by sleigh through the snow to the great Cathedral Church. His church is organized in the historical episcopal manner. The leaders of his church are bishops and the archbishop at Uppsala. A man from Stettin in traditional *pommersche Tracht* attends the great Jakobikirche. The head of his church is the general superintendent in Stettin. In Pennsylvania in the middle of the 18th century pastors establish a ministerium to govern their church. In the 1860's the Norwegian churches around Decorah, Iowa have a congregational type of church polity, complete with a president of their Norwegian Synod.
- 2 All these Lutherans living in various areas and at different time periods subscribed to the historic Confessions of the Lutheran Church as they are compiled in the *Book of Concord*. Their pastors promised to be faithful to these Confessions in their ordination vows. Yet, from their church polity, one would have had a difficult time affirming they were all part of the Church of the Augsburg Confession. They contended for unity in doctrine and confession, but a particular church polity was not essential as it was in so many other denominations.
- 3 The Lutheran Reformation never intended to establish a church in opposition to the Western Church as it existed in the sixteenth century. It desired a reformation of the same and no more. Therefore, the reformers initially asked only that the bishops should provide for the unhindered preaching of the Gospel and the proper administration of the Sacraments. In all other respects they declared their willingness to obey the bishops as far as God and conscience would allow.<sup>1</sup> When the majority of the bishops rejected this suggestion as contradicting their understanding of the church as a hierarchical institution, the reformers had no choice but to establish a polity of their own.
- 4 In organizing a new polity, the reformers did not look back for an ideal form of church polity in the Early Church. Such an ideal form of church government never existed. They did not single out any particular polity as divinely instituted. Luther points out that the basic tenets of the Roman hierarchy are not based on Scripture:

It is pure invention that pope, bishop, priests, and monks are called the spiritual estate while princes, lords, artisans, and farmers are called the temporal estate. This is indeed a piece of deceit and hypocrisy. Yet no one need be intimidated by it, and for this reason: all Christians are truly of the spiritual estate, and there is

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<sup>1</sup> AC XV, pp. 36-37, AC XXVIII, pp. 53-56 (Tappert Edition used throughout the paper), pp. 89-90.

no difference among them except that of office.<sup>2</sup> If the bishops were true bishops and were concerned about the church and the Gospel, they might be permitted (for the sake of love and unity, but not of necessity) to ordain and confirm us and our preachers, ... However, they neither are nor wish to be true bishops. ... Accordingly, as we are taught by the examples of the ancient churches and Fathers, we shall and ought ourselves ordain suitable persons to the office.<sup>3</sup>

- 5 The Scripture does give certain directives concerning the church and its ministry. The one holy Christian Church is the body of Christ, the whole number of believers, gathered around the means of grace (I Corinthians 12:12-13). Here new members are given birth in the watery womb of baptism and incorporated into the body of Christ (Titus 3:5, Ephesians 5:26-27). Members of the body are nourished and sustained with the pure milk of the Word (I Peter 2:2), and the life-giving body and blood of Christ (Matthew 26:26-28). To Christ's body, the church, and to each member individually, the keys have been given (I Corinthians 3:21-23) with the responsibility to proclaim the Gospel to every creature (Mark 16:15). So that the body of Christ may be nourished and new members born into the body through the means of grace, God instituted the public ministry (Acts 20:28-30, Ephesians 4:11-12, Titus 1:5-9). It is God's will that Christians choose one or more to administer the keys publicly in the place of Christ and on their behalf. The public ministry in its various forms will nourish and build up the body of Christ through the means of grace.
- 6 The Scripture does give directives concerning the church and its ministry, but it does not command a particular form of church polity. There appears to be a difference between the organizational patterns of the Palestinian congregations and the Gentile congregations in the New Testament. Even the organization of the Pauline congregations was not uniform. The lists of offices in the congregations differ in number and nomenclature indicating the various forms of the public ministry in the Early Church.
- 7 The common terms used for the office in the New Testament, "presbyter" (πρεσβύτερος) and "bishop" (ἐπίσκοπος) were used interchangeably. In Acts 20:17 St. Paul called together the presbyters or elders of the Ephesian congregation to give them his farewell address, and yet in that same address he named them "bishops" shepherding the church of God. (Acts 20:28) This interchange of terms continued in use to the close of the first century as is seen from the *Epistle of Clement* (42-44) and the *Didache* (15).

## 2. Episcopal Polity has its Origin in the Early Church

- 8 With Ignatius of Antioch at the beginning of the second century, the two terms "presbyter" and "bishop" were distinguished and designated as two offices. The bishop was regarded first as the head of a congregation surrounded by a council of presbyters, and afterward as the head of the diocese and successor of the apostles. Formerly all of the presbyters were equally bishops with one of them chosen to lead and conduct the liturgy. In Ignatius' time the leader received special power and prestige, and thus evolved the monarchical bishopric. The bishops began to dominate the presbyters and the congregation. The bishops' power and influence increased as they stood firm against Gnosticism. Ignatius and other fathers viewed the monarchical

<sup>2</sup> *To the Christian Nobility*, LW 44:127.

<sup>3</sup> SA III X 1-3, p. 314.

episcopate as the safeguard of orthodoxy. Because the bishops preserved the doctrine of the apostles, they were honored and obeyed.

- 9 Slowly all congregations accepted episcopal polity. Many new parishes received a bishop of their own after having been subjected to the bishop of their mother church. In most cases the mother church continued to supervise the filial parish. This may be seen as the beginning of diocesan church government.

### **3. Episcopal Polity was Influenced by Secular Government**

- 10 When Constantine granted freedom of religion, Christianity expanded rapidly and soon became the dominant religion in the empire. At the same time, the Roman government entered into a closer relationship with the church for the purpose of furthering its own political purposes. The church in the eastern part of the empire was organized to coincide with the political divisions of the state. This was done officially at the Council of Nicaea (325) when metropolitan groups were formed. Thus, for better or for worse, the historic episcopal form of church government was heavily influenced by the secular Roman government.
- 11 The churches outside of the Roman Empire such as the Assyrian or Nestorian churches were not as strongly influenced by Roman government organization and developed many variations of their own. A case in point was the Celtic Church of Ireland. Its order was neither hierarchial nor was it disordered. Orthodox in doctrine and evangelistic in spirit, the Celtic Church consisted of a federation of monastic and congregational communities under the governance of an abbot. The bishops lived within monastic communities and conducted, along with the presbyters, the liturgy. They, however, did not exercise control in a diocesan sense, and they belonged to the same order as the priests or pastors.

## **B. Proper Lutheran Church Polity**

### **1. Proper Lutheran Polity is Based on the Pure Marks of the Church and Promotes the Same**

- 12 The Scripture mandates no particular form of church government. Nor is an ideal form of church polity to be found in the Early Church. Therefore, the church and its unity do not rest on a uniform organization, nor upon the universal acceptance of the head of the hierarchy, but only on the marks of the church. The marks of the church are the Word of God taught in its truth and purity, and the Sacraments rightly administered. If the marks are pure, differences in church organization and church government will not affect the unity of the church. Likewise different church rites, liturgies, and hymnbooks will not hinder the fellowship. These things are in the realm of Christian liberty and adiaphora. In these areas Christians will bear with one another in love. This is the doctrine of our Lutheran Confessions:

For it is sufficient for the true unity of the Christian church that the Gospel be preached in conformity with a pure understanding of it, and that the sacraments be administered in accordance with the divine Word. It is not necessary for the true unity of the Christian church that ceremonies, instituted by men, should be observed uniformly in all places. It is as Paul says in Ephesians 4:4-5, "There is

one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call, one Lord, one faith, one baptism."<sup>4</sup>

- 13 According to Lutheran thinking, all matters of external church polity are subject to human insight and decisions. Any polity is satisfactory as long as the two important marks of the church are present, and as long as it serves to promote these marks, the means of grace. Every form of church government that infringes on the use of these means is not only suspect, it is detrimental to the life of the church. Those forms of church polity which promote the means of grace are right and proper.

## 2. Lutheran Polity has Taken Various Forms

- 14 The Lutheran churches of Scandinavia have, to a greater or lesser degree, continued the historic episcopal polity of the Western Church. Had it been possible, this was probably Luther's ideal for all Lutheran lands.<sup>5</sup> These churches, however, did not consider their historic episcopacy to be of the essence of the church, as is the case with the Anglican Church according to the *Lambeth Quadrilateral* of 1888.<sup>6</sup> As was noted above, the historic episcopacy has the strong imprint of the ancient Roman government. It was certainly influenced by the society in which it was formed.
- 15 In Germany, a consistory (Oberkirchenrat) form of church government with a superintendent prevailed. Luther viewed the participation of the princes in the reconstituting of the organization of church as a service of love, and not as a rightful function of the government. He considered the princes to be merely emergency bishops. However, already in the *Electors Guidelines* of 1527 for the visitation of his lands, spiritual and secular authority are not clearly differentiated. Rather, the beginning of the development was inaugurated, which later led to the rule of the church by the princes.<sup>7</sup> The consistory was appointed by the territorial ruler. The prince, who hopefully had the best interests of the church in mind, cared for the church in his lands. Often the consistory became little more than another department of the state. Church polity was easily influenced by the government of the particular German state.
- 16 When Lutheranism was planted in colonial America the ministerium, or association of pastors, governed the early immigrant churches. According to a Philadelphia congregational constitution of 1762, the communicant members of a congregation were assured of the right and freedom to elect by majority vote the officers and employees of the congregation. Such elections

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<sup>4</sup> AC VII, p. 32.

<sup>5</sup> SA III X 1-3, p. 314.

<sup>6</sup> The four principles of the Quadrilateral are the minimum basis on which Anglican churches anywhere in the world could join with or reunite with other Christian bodies. The four principles, which were first adopted by the American House of Bishops in Chicago in 1886 before being passed at Lambeth, are as follows:

- (a) *The Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments as "containing all things necessary to salvation" and as being the rule and ultimate standard of faith.*
- (b) *The Apostles' Creed, as the Baptismal Symbol, and the Nicene Creed, as the sufficient statement of the Christian faith.*
- (c) *The two Sacraments ordained by Christ Himself--Baptism and the Supper of the Lord--ministered with unfailing use of Christ's words of Institution, and of the elements ordained by Him.*
- (d) *The Historic Episcopate, locally adapted in the methods of its administration to the varying needs of the nations and peoples called of God into the Unity of His Church.*

(Peter Toon, *Proclaiming the Gospel through the Liturgy*, p. 50)

<sup>7</sup> I. Asheim and V. Gold, *Episcopacy in the Lutheran Church?*, p. 55-56.

were reported to be “in keeping with the liberty of country.”<sup>8</sup> Occasionally the pastors attempted to appoint officers on their own authority and they were sternly resisted by the congregation. The statement “in keeping with the liberty of the country” indicates the cultural influence of the democratic American frontier.

- 17 In the nineteenth century the synod, with more democratic and congregational forms of government, became the norm in America. A case in point is the founding of the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (LCMS) in 1847. Individuals such as Dr. Carl S. Mundinger have rejected the idea that the Missourian church polity was influenced by American culture. Rather, he believed that their church government had its source in the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers in Scripture, Luther, and the seventeenth century dogmaticians. In addition to this, there was a strong reaction to the episcopal hierarchy of the Stephanism.<sup>9</sup>
- 18 Dr. Walther’s church polity was certainly influenced by the doctrine of the universal priesthood, and rightly so. Luther taught that the congregations had the right to call and appoint teachers.<sup>10</sup> The Lutheran Confessions mandated no one particular form of church government. Any form of polity was allowable which promoted the means of grace. Therefore, Dr. Walther and the other Missouri fathers had the right to develop a form of church government on the basis of the Scripture which best met the needs of the American frontier. However, to say that the Missouri fathers were not influenced by the culture around them goes too far. This is to be seen in the critique of the Missouri Synod constitution by Pfarrer Loehe of Neuendettelsau, Bavaria, who believed that a more hierarchial polity was needed to preserve confessional Lutheranism in America. In his *Kirchliche Mittheilungen aus und ueber Nordamerika* he writes:

Finally we do not wish to keep you in ignorance concerning something which has cut us to the quick and which also is of importance for the seminary at Fort Wayne. We notice with growing concern (“mit herzlichem Bedauern”) that your synodical constitution, as it has now been adopted, does not follow the example of the first Christian congregation. We have good reason to fear that the strong admixture of democratic, independent, and congregational principles in your constitution will do greater damage than the interference of princes and governmental agencies in the church of our homeland.<sup>11</sup>

- 19 Among the Norwegian Lutheran churches in the Midwest, the most representative of the Church of Norway was the Norwegian Synod founded in 1853. The members of the synod insisted on retaining as much of the liturgy and vestments of the homeland as possible. However, they ascribed no importance to the episcopacy, in spite of the fact that this was the church government of Norway. Rather, they adopted church structures similar to that of the LCMS. This was the case because of the Norwegian immigrants’ dislike for anything that had the smell of aristocracy, their close relationship with the Missourians, the influence of American democracy, and most important there was no divine institutional form of church structure. Dr. U.V. Koren (known in some circles as the Norwegian Walther), the leading theologian of the synod, writes concerning church structure:

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<sup>8</sup> I. Asheim and V. Gold, *Episcopacy in the Lutheran Church?*, p. 158.

<sup>9</sup> Carl Mundinger, *Government in the Missouri Synod*, pp. 199-219.

<sup>10</sup> LW 39:309.

<sup>11</sup> Wilhelm Loehe, *Kirchliche Mittheilungen aus und ueber Nordamerika*, 6 (September 8, 1847):44.

Since the Church has been given no other rules with regard to all those things than that all things be done decently and in order, it becomes the task of the church body to learn how all such matters can best be arranged. And since there is no authority established by God to command in such matters, it follows that the church body cannot command or force anything upon the congregation either. ... Just for the reason that God has not commanded us anything with regard to the arrangement of all such matters, we must here, as it were, feel our way and try as best we can to learn what will benefit the kingdom of God most, e.g. we must not think that all the regulations in the constitution which we have prepared are so good that they dare not be changed or could not be improved upon. However, it is important here to remember that a passion for novelty must not be allowed to rule; that we do not seek our own but what is to the benefit of all;<sup>12</sup>

The Norwegian fathers established a church polity which best served their people in the American situation.

## II. The Inherent Danger of Cultural Influences on Church Structures

### A. The Historic Episcopal Form

#### 1. The Hazards of an Oppressive Hierarchy

20 Every form of church government has been influenced to a greater or lesser degree by the culture and environment in which it exists. The historic episcopal polity was formed in the Roman Empire and influenced by secular Roman government. This polity has served the church well and continues to do so, but not without its hazards. There is always the danger of an oppressive hierarchial rule of a few or one. This structure was seen at its worst at the time of the Reformation when the hierarchy not only hindered the free course of the Gospel, but it persecuted the Angel of Revelation 14:6 proclaiming the everlasting Gospel that a man is justified or declared righteous by nothing we do or accomplish, but alone by faith in the Savior.

21 In this country the perils of an oppressive hierarchy were seen in the demise of Stephanism, in Grabau's Buffalo Synod, and to a lesser degree in Loehe. As the Saxons were sailing to America,

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<sup>12</sup> *Faith of Our Fathers*, pp. 136-137. See also H.A. Preus, *Vivacious Daughter*, pp. 33-55.

The Swedish Augustana Synod also maintained that there was no divinely instituted form of church polity; that they had the right to develop a form of church government on the basis of the Scriptures which best met the needs of the American society.

The Lutheran Church does not consider any one type of polity to be essential. She has existed and does exist under many different forms of government. She has functioned with an episcopal type of government and also with a congregational type. The Lutheran Church has been a state church and a church independent of the state. In the United States a synodical type of government has developed. The attitude of the Lutheran Church to this question is well illustrated by the seventh article of the Augsburg Confessions, where we read: "And to the true unity of the Church, it is enough to agree concerning the doctrine of the Gospel and the administration of the sacraments." In this respect the Lutheran Church stands on a Biblical basis because no one type is declared to be essential by the New Testament, either by direct command or example. The form of government may vary, but it ought never to violate the spirit of the New Testament. (A.D. Mattson, *The Polity of the Augustana Synod*, p. 8)

Martin Stephan was officially declared to be their bishop. On February 16, 1839 aboard the riverboat Selma traveling to St. Louis, a pledge of subjection to Stephan was endorsed. This document gave the bishop control over the ecclesiastical and temporal affairs of the immigrants. It took the rumor of a few illicit affairs on the part of the bishop to overthrow the hierarchy and install Walther's church polity.

- 22 Around the same time that the Saxons were settling in Missouri, a group of Prussians, Pomeranians, and Silesians under the leadership of Pastor Johann Andreas Grabau immigrated to the United States in reaction to the Prussian Union. They settled in Buffalo, New York and in the Freistadt area north of Milwaukee, Wisconsin. While the Freistadt parish was vacant and no confessional Lutheran pastor was available, the congregation asked permission to elect a layman who would temporarily conduct services and administer the Sacraments. Grabau gave a negative response in the form of his *Hirtenbrief* (Pastoral Letter) of December 1840. This letter was sent to various other German Lutheran immigrants for their inspection and approval, including the Saxons of Missouri.
- 23 In his *Hirtenbrief* Grabau rejected the request of the Pomeranians in Wisconsin, defending his position with his own interpretation of Article XIV of the *Augsburg Confession*. "Our churches teach that nobody should preach publicly in the church or administer the sacraments unless he is regularly (rite vocatus) called."<sup>13</sup> Grabau stressed the word "regularly" (rite) in the phrase "regularly called." Grabau claimed that this meant a person must not only be called, but also installed according to old Lutheran customs and practices. He further quoted the *Apology* where the Confessors expressed their wish to maintain the church polity and various ranks of the ecclesiastical hierarchy.<sup>14</sup> Here he appears to be maintaining that only an episcopal form of polity was proper for the church according to the old, accepted *Kirchenordnungen* of Germany. Only one so called and installed was *Rite Vocatus*.
- 24 Grabau's understanding of *Rite Vocatus* and his stress on old church polity (which the Confessions state is by human authority) tends to call into question the Lutheran doctrine of the efficacious Word. Grabau wrote in his *Hirtenbrief*:

Hence the church has since the earliest time maintained that the proper administration of the holy sacraments and the bestowal of Absolution, require *not only the words of institution, but also the regular, divine call and command*. The church further held that even if the minister should be an evil person, the words of institution would still be valid because of the office which the Lord acknowledges. For in the office we have the witness of Christ that whenever the words of institution are used He will again and again realize and grant on earth the blessings of His sacred ordinances, absolution and the sacraments.... *Consequently, we are convinced that a man arbitrarily appointed can neither grant absolution nor distribute the body and blood of Christ, but that such a man distributes mere bread and wine.*<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> AC XIV, p. 36.

<sup>14</sup> Ap XIV 1, p. 214; R.C. Lang, *The History of the Buffalo Synod up to 1866*, p. 71.

<sup>15</sup> R.C. Lang, *The History of the Buffalo Synod up to 1866*, pp. 76-77.

Following Grabau's line of thought, it is not the Word of God alone which makes a Sacrament, but also the proper office. This is contrary to the Scriptures and the Confessions which state that it is the Word that makes a Sacrament.<sup>16</sup> It is the Word that imparts forgiveness in absolution. It is the Word that works faith and strengthens it.

- 25 It wasn't long before conflict arose between the Saxons and the Prussians on church and ministry and church polity. Not only did they disagree on church and ministry, but Grabau, and later Loehe, did not separate the doctrine of the church from church polity whereas Walther did. For Walther, the doctrine of the church was non-negotiable, while church polity was a matter of Christian freedom. Loehe took a mediating position between Grabau and Walther, but still believed that the Missourian polity was far too democratic. His followers later formed the Iowa Synod. Grabau continued in his hierarchical tendencies resulting in a number of schisms to the detriment of the Buffalo Synod.

## 2. Episcopacy and the Universal Priesthood

- 26 The historic episcopacy is a valid form of church polity for Lutheran churches. The danger inherent in it, as is evident in Grabau's doctrine, is the blurring of the priesthood of all believers. Because all Christians are priests (I Peter 2:9), they are the possessors of all heavenly treasures. They are, therefore, possessors of the keys of the kingdom of heaven. The authority of the keys is the right and responsibility to preach the Gospel, administer the Sacraments, and to forgive or not forgive sins. St. Paul reminds us that all things belong to the believers (I Corinthians 3:21-23). The keys have been committed by God to the entire church, which is Christ's body and, therefore, to each Christian which is His member individually. Luther says, "The Keys belong to the whole church and to each of its members, both as regards their authority and their various uses."<sup>17</sup> The authority of administering the keys publicly, that is, on behalf of Christ and His body the church, is conferred by God to the public ministry through the church. Those in the public ministry function on behalf of Christ and His church. Whoever, therefore, hears Christ's ministers hears Christ speaking to them (Luke 10:16).

- 27 In a hierarchical structure, there is the tendency to view the keys not as the possession of the church, but as the property of the ministerium which is used for the good of the church. The authority of administering the keys publicly is not conferred by God through the church. Rather, it is handed down by the ministerium through proper ordination and installation. This probably explains Grabau's stress on proper ordination and installation according to old Lutheran customs and practices.

## 3. Episcopacy and ELCA-Anglican Dialogue

- 28 The historic episcopacy developed in the Roman world and has that cultural imprint. It is a legitimate form of church polity for Lutheran Christians. Those Lutheran churches which have used this church government, however, have never considered the historic episcopacy to be of the essence of the church. It is not a mark of the church without which the church cannot exist. On the other hand, the Anglican church does consider the episcopacy essential. It is one of the

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<sup>16</sup> LC V 10-11, p. 448.

<sup>17</sup> LW 40:27.

four principles which are the minimum basis on which Anglican churches can join with or reunite with other Christian bodies.

- 29 It appears that the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) and the Episcopal Church will soon reach an agreement in which the ELCA will accept the historic episcopacy as it is understood by the Episcopal Church. An Episcopal bishop, or bishops, will always be present at the consecrating of a Lutheran bishop so that apostolic succession may be revived in the ELCA.<sup>18</sup> Only bishops will ordain pastors. Lutheran bishops will be bishops for life; once a bishop, always a bishop. It appears the ELCA is at least tacitly agreeing that the episcopacy is necessary. Such an understanding of episcopacy is foreign to the Lutheran Confessions. Even a tacit acceptance of such an agreement certainly militates against the freedom in church polity which has been one of the hallmarks of Lutheranism.
- 30 The traditional Lutheran freedom in church polity is blurred by the recent ELCA-Anglican dialogue. Since this is the case, the present would not be an advantageous time for confessional Lutherans to innovate the historic episcopacy. This does not mean that the episcopacy is an improper form of church government. However, its innovation today could be interpreted as an acceptance of episcopal polity as essential to the existence of the church, and not as an *adiaphoron*. A similar situation can be found in the Lutheran attitude toward immersion baptism. Immersion is a legitimate form of Baptism. Still, Lutherans normally do not use this method of Baptism as a confessional stand against those who demand immersion as the only form of Baptism.

## B. Democratic Forms of Church Polity

### 1. Democracy and Extreme Individualism

- 31 Democratic forms of church structure have predominated in American Lutheranism. These structures were created in American society and were influenced by them. This is a proper form of church polity and has been used with benefit in America and elsewhere. The inherent danger in this form of government is rugged American individualism. The church is perceived as a freewill association we join, much like joining the Lions, Jaycees, Kiwanis or any other civic organization. It is an organization that one decides to join or leave at will. Many see little difference between belonging to church or the local country club, and they probably expect a country club Christianity, rather than the theology of the cross.
- 32 This conception obscures the true nature of the church. The church is not a volunteer organization, a freewill association. It is the body of Christ (Romans 12:4-5) into which we were engrafted and incorporated in Baptism and are nourished and sustained through Word and Supper. The church is born into by the power of the Spirit, not joined by free will, for no one can say that Jesus is Lord but by the Holy Ghost (I Corinthians 12:3). The church is not optional like membership in a civic group. It is essential to our faith-life because here the forgiveness of sin is dispensed and faith in the Savior is strengthened and preserved. One is the church and one is a member thereof, not through a sociological adherence, but precisely through incorporation into this body of the Lord through the means of grace.

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<sup>18</sup> *Concordat of Agreement Between the Episcopal Church and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America*, p. 5.

33 Denominational loyalty is at an all time low in this country. People no longer feel bound to adhere to the official confession of their church body. They have the right to believe (and teach) what they want, when they want; after all that is the American way. Isn't this at least partially the influence of our American democratic rugged individualism? I can join the club that I want to join and I can join the church that I want to join. If this church does not fulfill my perceived felt-needs, if it doesn't satisfy my longing for community and isn't user-friendly, then I can join one of those nice churches which offer all this and more, regardless of their confessional stand. "Mark those that cause divisions" etc. (Romans 16:17) is probably not commonly memorized in confirmation classes.

## 2. Democracy and Patriarchy

34 Patriarchy is defined as a social organization marked by the supremacy of the father in the clan or family. Patriarchy has become a pejorative or abusive term for many today. However, within the church there is a proper patriarchy. The Scriptures teach that there is to be an ordered relationship within the family, as well as in the church. As it is God's will that the husband be the head of his house (Ephesians 5:21-33), so it is God's will that men have leadership in the household of faith, the church (I Corinthians 14:34-35; I Timothy 2:11-15). This scriptural concept does not imply a superiority/inferiority structure, but presents this headship structure as an ordering process. There is a perfect equality of all Christians, for all are equally the children of God by faith in Christ Jesus. Headship in the home and in the church is to mirror the fatherhood of God. This divine order can be erased when democratic church polity is pushed to its logical conclusion. As a result, there is no distinction whatever on the basis of gender or age. One cannot defend the requirement that the children obey their parents or superiors (Ephesians 6:1-3), if he will not also teach that the wife is to obey her husband and that men are to have headship in the church (Ephesians 5:22). Then there is no divinely ordered headship in either the church or the home.

35 The excesses of democratic polity reach even further. When the divine order for the church and the home is rejected, then the divine truth that it mirrors is also slowly erased. Alexis de Tocqueville in his famous book, *Democracy in America*, saw a connection between the great experiment of democracy in the new world and the seductive power of pantheism within the American nation. In chapter 7 of his book "What Causes Democratic Nations to Incline toward Pantheism," de Tocqueville comments:

If there is a philosophical system which teaches that all things material and immaterial, visible and invisible, which the world contains are to be considered only as the several parts of an immense Being, who alone remains eternal amidst the continual change and ceaseless transformation of all that constitutes him, we may readily infer that such a system, although it destroy the individuality of man, or rather because it destroys that individuality, will have secret charms for men living in democracies. All their habits of thought prepare them to conceive it and predispose them to adopt it. It naturally attracts and fixes their imagination; it fosters the pride while it soothes the indolence of their minds.

Among the different systems by whose aid philosophy endeavors to explain the universe, I believe pantheism to be one of those most fitted to seduce the human

mind in democratic times. Against it all who abide in their attachment to the true greatness of man should combine and struggle.<sup>19</sup>

- 36 With the increase of pantheistic and new age thinking everywhere in our society, the insights of de Tocqueville and others<sup>20</sup> raise the real possibility that the external rites and ceremonies of the liturgy can be objectively orthodox, while the mind-set of many of the participants is pantheistic or at least not Chalcedonian trinitarian. With this in mind, it is not surprising that untraditional modalistic sounding statements are being introduced such as "God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit," rather than the traditional trinitarian formula: "God, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost." These pantheistic concepts are the foundation for a stress on the horizontal emphasis of worship to the negation of the vertical, so that the high point of worship is coming together to pass the peace in self affirmation, rather than the presence of our incarnate Lord with all His blessings in the means of grace: holy Word and blessed Sacraments. Pantheism or panentheism<sup>21</sup> is the belief that we would expect of modern people, who feel the need to believe in God and who live in a culture where the belief in development, progress, and evolution is taken for granted. Here God is the *Zeitgeist* or Spirit or Mind of the evolving culture and universe. In this environment an individual may speak in trinitarian terms and really be pantheistic in thought.<sup>22</sup>

### C. The Influence of Feminism on Church Structure

#### 1. Feminism and Democratic Polity

- 37 The feminist movement has affected church polity in some of the same areas as the democratic movement. The feminist movement has brought many benefits to our society. It has greatly improved the status of women and underscored the role of women in our society. But the feminist movement has also gone beyond the God ordained limits. It has attacked divinely ordained headship in the home and the church. The headship of father in the home and men in the family of believers is perceived as a remnant of a bygone era intended to minimize the real potential of women. The Scriptures, on the other hand, present this truth as an ordering process for the good of God's people. As Christ loved the church so much that He gave His own life to ransom her from destruction, so the husband is to love his wife to such an extent that he will do all for her, even give his life for her. As the church is subject to Christ who redeemed her with His own blood, so wives will honor, love, and obey their husbands who love them so much that they will do all for them, even give their own life for them. (Ephesians 5:21-33) This headship of the man in the family is carried over to the family of believers, the church, by divine command. Men are to have headship in the church, that is, women are not to teach men or have authority over them (I Corinthians 14:34-35, I Timothy 2:11-15).
- 38 The feminist movement first influenced church polity in the areas of woman suffrage, the right to vote in the congregation and synodical organizations. Because voting is authority, Lutherans

<sup>19</sup> Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, p. 242.

<sup>20</sup> C.S. Lewis, *Miracles*, p. 101. In his book, *Miracles*, Lewis devotes chapter 11 to pantheism as popular religion. Here he states, "So far from being the final religious refinement, pantheism is in fact the permanent natural bent of the human mind; the permanent, ordinary level below which man sometimes sinks, under the influence of priestcraft and superstition, but above which his own unaided efforts can never raise him for very long."

<sup>21</sup> *Panentheism: The world is God but God is also above the world.*

<sup>22</sup> Peter Toon, *Our Triune God*, pp. 17-20.

traditionally, on the basis of the headship principle, have not allowed women to vote in the decision-making process of the church. Before the twentieth century no Lutheran constitution, that I am aware of, granted the franchise to women. A Philadelphia congregational constitution of 1762 considered only the male adult members of the congregation to be the voters.<sup>23</sup> This continued to be the norm throughout the nineteenth century. The position of Synodical Conference Lutherans, and American Lutherans in general, during the nineteenth century is summarized by Prof. Louis J. Sieck of Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, Missouri:

We find, then, that the woman occupies an equal position with man in the Church, in the offers of God's grace in the Gospel, equal privilege of service, the right to meet with the Church, the right quietly and unostentatiously to express her opinion, but that she is not granted suffrage or leadership in the congregation and is barred from the public ministry . . . Our Church follows apostolic practice when it uses women as teachers of children, grants them the right to express their opinion, hears them when they wish to voice their wishes or judgements in congregational matters, but reserves the right of suffrage and the public ministry to men.<sup>24</sup>

- 39 After the turn of the century, many of the Lutheran bodies outside of the Synodical Conference accepted woman suffrage first in their congregations, and then in their synodical organizations. In 1907 the Augustana Synod granted women the right to vote in the congregation. In 1908, *Der Lutheraner* condemned the decision of the Finnish Suomi Synod to allow woman suffrage in their congregations as "an unlutheran and unbiblical innovation" (*eine unlutherische und unbiblische Neuerung*) which could not be reconciled with the scriptural position on women in the church.<sup>25</sup> Nor was the granting of woman suffrage accepted without reservation outside the Synodical Conference. Dr. R.C.H. Lenski, the leading exegete of the Ohio Synod, quoted the following statement of the theological faculty of Capitol University:

How the granting of voice and vote to women in all congregational meetings can do anything but completely place women on a level with men in all such meetings and thus gravely interfere with their divinely ordered subjection and obedience, we are unable to see.<sup>26</sup>

- 40 Once woman suffrage was established in a church body, the next step was the opening of congregational offices to women. First women could hold only those positions in the congregation which were not considered to be directly involved in the Word and Sacrament ministry of the congregation. But, slowly women began to serve as elders of the congregation and as the chairperson.
- 41 The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod continued to maintain its traditional view which prohibited women from exercising the franchise in voters' assemblies. But after the culmination of seventeen years of discussion on the role of women in the church, the 1969 Denver Convention approved of woman suffrage. Thus its church polity became more "democratic"

<sup>23</sup> I. Asheim and V. Gold, *Episcopacy in the Lutheran Church?*, p. 158.

<sup>24</sup> Louis J. Sieck, "What Attitude Should Lutherans Take Toward Woman's Suffrage?" *Lutheran Witness*, 38:13, (May, 1919), p. 179.

<sup>25</sup> L. White, *The Role of Women in the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod*, p. 11.

<sup>26</sup> R.C.H. Lenski, *I and II Corinthians*, p. 617.

and “inclusive.” Yet as late as 1970 a statement of the Exegetical Department of Concordia Theological Seminary in Fort Wayne questioned the validity of woman suffrage:

In conclusion, woman suffrage in the church is contrary to at least ten clear testimonies of the Word of God and to the Order of Creation established by God from the beginning and hallowed as the Order of Redemption by the atoning blood of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. For woman was created from man and for man, as an assistant to man, to live under man’s authority; and she is redeemed to fulfill this same role as fully as is possible in a world corrupted by sin. Man sins, therefore, when he gives woman an authority equal to or over him, and the woman who assumes such a role denies what she really is by nature and by grace.<sup>27</sup>

Both the Evangelical Lutheran Synod and the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod, together with the Church of the Lutheran Confession and a number of other smaller Lutheran bodies continue to teach that the franchise of women in the church is contrary to biblical divine order.

- 42 It is important to note that the democratic church polity of the synods formerly a part of the Synodical Conference is not in itself contrary to biblical divine order. It is a valid form of church government. But when feminism demands an inclusive structure which approves of woman suffrage in the church, then there exists a church polity which militates against the directives of the Lord. A form of church government is not valid if it does not uphold the headship principle.

## 2. The Results of Feminized Church Polity

- 43 There appears to be a direct correlation between woman suffrage in the church and female ordination into the pastoral office. Every Lutheran body in this country, with the exception of the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, which has approved of woman suffrage has eventually accepted female ordination. According to the ordered relationship of headship in Scripture women are not to teach men or have authority over them in the church (I Corinthians 14:34-35, I Timothy 2:11-15). If women are permitted to vote in the church, which is an exercise of authority, in spite of the fact that women are not to have authority over men according to Scripture, then there is no basis for deterring a woman from being in a teaching position over men in the church which is what is commonly referred to as the pastoral office. When the authority prohibition of I Timothy 2 is negated, the teaching prohibition is also negated, and there is no real basis to deny women’s ordination.
- 44 Feminism which has campaigned so that church polity would be more inclusive and has demanded the pastoral office results in the feminization of the deity. When the headship of father is rejected in the family and the church, then that which it mirrors is irradiated, the God which is the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost. First the Holy and blessed Trinity is characterized in modalistic terms as the Father-Son-Spirit God who merely has three names or expressions, rather than being three subsisting persons. There are three different manifestations or phases of the One. Then the invocation, “in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost” is made more inclusive so that it can be understood as male, female or neuter

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<sup>27</sup> The Exegetical Department of Concordia Theological Seminary, *The Opinion of the Exegetical Department of Concordia Theological Seminary Concerning Woman Suffrage*. January 18, 1982, p. 8.

reading “in the name of the Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier.” Finally, the Great Mother Goddess is worshipped, possibly Sophia, who with a touch of pantheism, gives birth to the universe so that we are all equally a part of the divinity in complete harmony with the new-age movement.

Process theology has also been utilized by the more academically oriented feminist theologians (e.g., Sally MacFague) as a way of developing panentheism (the world is in God and therefore God is appropriately thought of as the mother who births the world and expresses herself in the cycles of nature.)<sup>28</sup>

#### **D. Antiestablishment and Church Structure**

45 In the last decade there has been a growing distrust of those in authority. Watergate and Whitewater have caused people to second guess the leaders of our government. The evening news is not complete without the latest government scandal, ripoff, or scam. There is a general attitude that no one can be trusted in the government and other positions of authority. This antiestablishment attitude has carried over into all other walks of life, including the church.

46 As confessional Lutherans we have reasons for our distrust of church government. In virtually every church body where liberalism and revisionist thought are dominate, this new theology began with the authority figures in the church structure. Church leaders tolerated deviation in doctrine and practices and gradually deviation became the norm. Those who have had to fight liberalism in “high places” are bound to have an antiestablishment attitude.

47 There are valid reasons why confessional Lutherans have a distrust for the church establishment. Many confessional Lutheran pastors have suffered, and continue to suffer, at the hands of revisionist synodical officials. However, we should not react in the extreme and make antiestablishmentarianism a virtue. The continual critical media blitz has tarnished the presidency of our land and most of the leading government positions. The same is true in the church. Congregations are reading confessional Lutheran pastors as saying “nothing good can come from St. Louis, Milwaukee, or Mankato.” Such an attitude makes it impossible for our church structure to function properly. Church government is meant as a blessing to the church and should not be considered the enemy. With such distrust all internal organization disintegrates. We are indeed to guard against doctrinal deviation, but at the same time we are to have respect for our church leaders (Hebrews 13:12).

#### **E. Business Organization and Church Structure**

48 Business management and techniques continue to influence church structures. Synods are reorganizing to be more efficient. Old boards and committees are merging and new ones are being established. The number of management positions in most synods has increased considerably. Now there is even a call for down sizing. Nearly every organization has a carefully delineated list of responsibilities and a mission statement.

49 Congregations are concerned that they are properly organized. The congregation needs a board of stewardship, board of evangelism, shepherd’s circle, and an organization to meet the needs

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<sup>28</sup> Peter Toon, *The End of Liberal Theology*, p. 140.

of every age group in the congregation. A church cannot do without an alternative service (contemporary), a multicultural outreach and maybe a seeker service. Some are convinced that cell groups are absolutely necessary. The congregation needs to meet the felt needs of its community. The congregation is to be properly organized to grow.

50 Our church bodies and congregations should be as organized and efficient as possible. St. Paul urges that all things should be done decently and in order (I Corinthians 14:40). Disorganization and ineptitude should not be allowed to hinder the proclamation of the Gospel. In the Early Church the preaching of the Gospel was being hindered by the Apostles spending time serving tables. (Acts 6:2) Therefore, they reorganized so that they were more efficient. They selected seven deacons to carry out the charitable work of the church.

51 Confessional Lutheran congregations should make every effort to be well organized and to use proper managerial skills. However, all the latest techniques are not the new means of grace. Efficient organization and the latest technology will not bring one soul to faith in our Lord Jesus as the Savior. Only the Gospel is the power of God unto salvation (Romans 1:16). The Scripture declares that faith comes from hearing the Word (Romans 10:17), that Baptism saves us (I Peter 3:21), that whenever you forgive sins they are forgiven and whenever you do not forgive sins, they are not forgiven (John 20:23), and that the Lord's Supper gives the forgiveness of sins (Matthew 26:28). The Scriptures clearly state that God works through these means, as Luther taught:

For He wants to give no one the Spirit or faith outside of the outward Word and sign instituted by Him, as He says in Luke 16:29, "Let them hear Moses and the prophets." Accordingly Paul can call baptism a "washing of regeneration" wherein God "richly pours out the Holy Spirit" (Titus 3:5). And the oral Gospel "is the power of God for salvation to every one who has faith" (Romans 1:16).<sup>29</sup>

52 These means of grace do not merely remind us of Christ's forgiveness and His abundant blessings. Rather, they are a real impartation of the same.

We treat of the forgiveness of sins in two ways. *First, how it is achieved and won. Second, how it is distributed and given to us.* Christ has achieved it on the cross, it is true. But he has not distributed or given it on the cross. He has not won it in the supper or sacrament. There he has distributed and given it through the Word, as also in the gospel, where it is preached. He has won it once for all on the cross. But the distribution takes place continuously, before and after, from the beginning to the end of the world. For inasmuch as he had determined once to achieve it, it made no difference to him whether he distributed it before or after, through his Word, as can easily be proved from Scripture.<sup>30</sup>

He took upon Himself our sin, our death, and our hell so that we could have His righteousness, life, and heaven. This wonderful treasure is offered to us in the means of grace, the Word and the Sacraments, and is received by faith alone in Him as the Savior which faith is worked, strengthened, and preserved through these same means of grace.

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<sup>29</sup> LW 40:146.

<sup>30</sup> LW 40:213-214.

- 53 Efficient organization and the latest business techniques are so important to many that they are virtually a new means of grace. At a minimum they are necessary to make the Word and Sacraments more effective. The result is a general minimizing of the God given means of salvation. This should not be unexpected when our congregations exist in a general Reformed environment which has always rejected the biblical doctrine of the means of grace. Look at the appeal of the church growth movement in our society. This cultural influence has the potential of destroying this vital aspect of our Reformation heritage.
- 54 With this mindset, from organizing our church so that it will grow, to church growth principles, there is an incipient synergism at work. The implication is that salvation is not alone the work of God through Word and Sacrament, but it at least in part includes human efforts and activity. These influences of our culture are a direct attack on the central article of the faith, that we are declared righteous by nothing we do or accomplish, but alone by faith in the Savior.

#### **F. Conclusion**

- 55 The Scripture mandates no particular form of church government. The church and its unity do not rest on uniform organization, but only on the marks of the church, that is, the Word of God taught in its truth and purity, and the Sacraments rightly administered. If the marks are pure, differences in church organization and church government will not affect the unity of the church. Any polity is satisfactory as long as the two important marks of the church are present, and as long as it serves to promote those marks, the means of grace. Every form of church government that infringes on the use of these means is not only suspect, it is detrimental to the life of the church. Those forms of church polity which promote the means of grace are right and proper.
- 56 Every form of church government has been influenced to a greater or lesser degree by the culture and environment in which it exists. All matters of external church polity are subject to human insight and decisions. The historic episcopacy was formed in the Roman Empire and was influenced by secular Roman government. The more democratic forms of church polity which have predominated in American Lutheranism bear the stamp of American democracy and individualism.
- 57 Both the episcopal and the more democratic forms of polity have their advantages and also their inherent dangers. The historic episcopacy can be a deterrent to counterbalance the excesses of American democracy and rugged individualism. It is a safe guard of divine order, but there is always the danger of an oppressive hierarchial rule of a few or one. It seems especially disadvantageous today when the recent ELCA - Anglican dialogue appears to have blurred the traditional Lutheran freedom in church polity. The more democratic forms of polity illustrate the biblical and Lutheran doctrine of the universal priesthood. Also this polity is familiar to most people living in the Western world. However, it suffers from many of the same maladies that plague Western society: excessive individualism, a pantheistic worship of self, feminism, and a big business mentality.
- 58 What is the best form of church polity for confessional Lutherans today? Would a more hierarchial government better shield us from present day cultural influences? Such a polity might better counterbalance cultural influence, but the potential dangers in this polity outweigh

the benefits. When church bodies are implying that the episcopacy is necessary for the existence of the church, its acceptance can surely be understood as tacit approval of such teaching. It appears that the best form of government for confessional Lutherans in America is the more democratic polity established by the Missouri fathers and used in modified forms by the other members of the Synodical Conference. This polity definitely has its weakness, in that it is easily susceptible to the influence of our culture, and possibly should be modified in certain areas to rectify this weakness. Still, it is a polity which illustrates the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers and is familiar and useable in our society. It is a form of church government developed on the basis of Scripture which seems to best meet the needs of our society.

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