

THE RIGHT PRINCIPLES OF CHURCH GOVERNMENT¹

By Dr. U. Vilhelm Koren, 1899

As we direct our attention to the consideration of this subject, I should like to call out to you: *Sursum corda!* Lift up your hearts! Whither shall we turn our hearts? Thither, where Jesus Christ sits at the right hand of the Father. From there He reigns, according to His human nature, over all things forever. From there He defends His Church against its enemies, prays for us and sends us His Holy Spirit.

What is the purpose of His government? To gather us to Himself, to lead us through the great tribulation here in this world into the Church triumphant, in order that we *there*, and in the company of the holy angels, may praise God in eternal joy.

The fact that Jesus Christ Himself governs His Church is, then, the first thing we must be sure that we recognize. He has Himself said, "All power is given unto Me in heaven and in earth," and He calls Himself a king, the king of the kingdom of truth (John 18). How does He govern His kingdom? In such a way that He, by His government as well as by His person, reminds us that the first name the prophet gives Him is "Wonderful" (Is. 9:6). We understand but little of His government which seems to us quite different from what we would expect it to be. Whereby does He govern His kingdom? Everyone who rules does so by his word; so also does Christ. By His Word He reveals His will. In order that His will may become known and be obeyed, He has commanded that His Word shall be preached to all nations, and that it shall dwell in them richly. This began with the apostles, whom He appointed as His witnesses for all succeeding ages. He had promised them the Holy Spirit, who should guide them into all truth; for He should bear witness of Christ who is the Truth. But the apostles themselves should bear witness also. If their witness was to be correct, it would accordingly have to harmonize with the witness of the Holy Spirit. Therefore, they also spoke "as the Spirit gave them utterance" [Acts 2:4]. Their word is the same as that of the Holy Spirit; and since the Spirit, as Jesus says, shall not speak of Himself, but shall "receive of" the words of Jesus ("of mine", He says) and shall "show it unto" them [John 16:14], so the words of the apostles are also the words of Christ, as Christ Himself, too, has said: "He that heareth you, heareth Me" (Luke 10, 16). But the words of Christ are also the words of the Father. In his High-priestly prayer to the Father, he says: "I have given unto them the words which Thou gavest Me; and they have received them" (John 17:8).

Accordingly, in the words of the apostles we have the words of the Triune God, or, which is the same thing, the words of Christ; for "in Him dwelleth all the fulness of the Godhead bodily" (Col. 2:9). By this word He bears children for Himself as "dew from the womb of the morning" (Ps. 110:3). Therefore this word must ever sound forth; for we become the sons of God by faith (John 1:12); but "faith cometh by hearing" the word (Rom. 10:17). He established

¹ [Editor's note:] This doctrinal article is printed in *Faith of Our Fathers* (Mankato: Lutheran Synod Book Company, 1953), pp. 115-138. Previously, it was printed in the *Clergy Bulletin*, Oct. 1951-Jan. 1952, in three sections (V. 11:2, pp. 13-16; V. 11:3, pp. 37-40; V. 11:5, pp. 61-65) as translated by George O. Lillegard. In the first section, the *CB* editor included this note: "The following article was delivered by Koren as a Synodical essay at the Synod Meeting at Spring Grove, Minn., June 15-22, 1899. The article is found in Koren's *Samlede Skrifter*, Vol. II, pp. 48-76. It is also to be found in the *Synodical Beretning* for 1899, where the reader will find also some very interesting speeches in discussion of the essay on the Synod floor by various pastors."

His kingdom by this word, when He said: "Go ye therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost, teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you alway, even unto the end of the world" (Matt. 28:18-20). And He governs His kingdom by His word. Therefore He is called by the apostles, "the head of the church" (Ephes. 4:15; Col. 1:18), "head over all things to the church," in that "all things are put under His feet" (Ephes. 1:22).

Now we readily recognize that Christ is the real Lord and King, but we are tempted to think that He in the interim, until He comes again, has appointed His servants, the apostles and their successors, to rule and govern in the Church in His name. But no! Christ has done the very opposite: He has forbidden them to do so. He not only said to the apostles that they had but one Guide, namely Christ, and that they were all brethren and that the greatest among them should be their servant (Matt. 23:8-11), but He has furthermore spoken the following clear words concerning this matter: "Ye know that the princes of the Gentiles exercise dominion over them, and they that are great exercise authority upon them. But it shall not be so among you; but whosoever will be great among you, let him be your minister; and whosoever will be chief among you, let him be your servant; even as the Son of man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give His life a ransom for many" (Matt. 20:25-28). And in Luke 22:25-26 we read: "The kings of the Gentiles exercise lordship over them; and they that exercise authority upon them are called benefactors. But ye shall not be so. But he that is greatest among you, let him be as the younger; and he that is chief as he that doth serve."

The apostles made careful note of this. We see that from their epistles. They not only *call* themselves servants, stewards, brethren. If it were only a matter of words, then the Pope in Rome would be the most humble one, he who calls himself *Servus Servorum Dei*, "The Servant of the Servants of God." But the apostles expressly reject all over-lordship in the Church: "Not for that have we dominion over your faith," says St. Paul to the Corinthians, "but we are helpers of your joy," (II Cor. 1:24). "For we preach not ourselves, but Christ Jesus the Lord; and ourselves your servants for Christ's sake" (II Cor. 4:5); and St. Peter therefore admonishes the elders, i. e. the pastors, in these words: "Feed the flock of God which is among you...neither as being lords over God's heritage, but being ensamples to the flock" (I Pet. 5:2-3)

But how can the Church stand, how can it be maintained, how can it escape being dissolved in anarchy and in parties, when there is no external authority which holds it together and governs it?

WHAT IS THE CHURCH?

Here we must again let ourselves be taught by the word of God, both with regard to that which establishes the Church and that which maintains it; and to understand this, we must learn to perceive the true essence of the Church, what it really is.

The Church is established by the word of God in accordance with the command of Christ: "Go and make disciples of all nations", etc. For that which makes us Christians is faith, and faith comes by the word of God. Therefore the Lutheran Church confesses in the Augsburg Confession, Article 5, as follows: "That we may obtain this faith, the office of teaching the Gospel and administering the Sacraments was instituted. For, through the Word and the

Sacraments, as through instruments, the Holy Ghost is given, who worketh faith where and when it pleaseth God in them that hear the Gospel." There is no reference in this article to the work of the public ministry, but which the office of the word shall be performed in the congregation by certain persons who have been called to it. That is discussed later in the 14th Article. Here the reference is to the essence, power, and effectual working of the means of grace. What is this effectual working? It is that which we confess in our Sunday Collect, when we give thanks that God "has given us His holy and blessed word," and then add: "by which Thou dost also among us gather Thy Christian Church."

For the Church, the kingdom of Christ, is "not of this world" (John 18:36). It is a kingdom of the Spirit; it consists of people who are indeed, "in" the world but who are not "of" the world, all of whom have the Spirit of Christ (Rom. 8:9), and are born again of water and of the Spirit. It is a kingdom which owns spiritual treasures. It is a real kingdom, just as real as the external kingdom whose citizens we are in this world; but it is a spiritual and invisible kingdom and cannot be seen or observed (Luke 17:20-21), as we also confess in the Third Article when we say that we *believe* the holy Christian Church. If we could *see* it, it would not be an object of *faith* [Heb. 11:1]. Therefore we confess in the 8th Article of the Augsburg Confession that "the Church is the congregation of saints and true believers". Not those who *say* they believe, but those who actually do so, are in truth—that is, before God—the members of the Church. No hypocrite belongs to it. We cannot say or determine who the true members of the church are. There are, indeed, many marks of them given in holy Scripture: They are all converted, i. e. they repent of their sins and believe on Jesus as their Savior. They live in daily contrition and repentance. They hunger and thirst after righteousness. They feel their sin and imperfection with sorrow and recognize that they deserve punishment. They believe that Jesus has saved them, and that they shall enter into eternal bliss. They gladly thank God for their salvation and for all other blessings. Therefore they strive to please God in all their life. They love the word of God, gladly hear it and read it. They love the brethren. The promises of God are indispensable to them, since they seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness. They turn daily to God with their prayers and petitions. All their longings, all their trust, all their hope and expectation are centered in Jesus. They do not despise the temporal gifts and blessings of God. They rejoice in them and thank God for them and do not think that it belongs to spirituality to despise them, much less to act as if they did so. They do not make their Christianity something of which to boast, nor consider themselves better than others; and they are not prone to judge others. Some of them have made great progress in knowledge and in faith. Others are weaker. All are honest.

These and many other marks of the children of God are given in the Holy Scripture, but they are all of such nature that no man can with certainty determine who possesses them. Only He who knows the hearts can determine that, although there are many of whom we feel obliged to hope and believe that they, in accordance with their confession and conduct in life, are in truth the children of God. It is much easier, in many cases, to see who does not belong to them. That can be determined at times even with certainty, although we here, too, we must be careful in our judgment and must above all not set up rules in accordance with our own thoughts and opinions. There is, however, as great a difference between believers and hypocrites as between light and darkness. "The Lord knoweth them that are His" [II Tim. 2:19].

But though we cannot point out true members of the Church, we can still, according to the word of God, know where this holy Church is to be found. Concerning this we confess in

the 7th Article of the Augsburg Confession, that the Church is there where “the Gospel is rightly taught and the sacraments rightly administered.” So, as the word and the sacraments are things which can be heard and seen, and around which a larger or smaller group of people gather, an assembly is produced thereby, which is also called “church”, namely, the so-called visible church, to which all those belong who confess the word that is preached, whether they are truly believers or not.

Before God, however, only the believers are true members of the Church, and it is only for their sake and because they are in the visible church, that it receives all the glorious names with which it is adorned in Scripture and all the rights which will be discussed in the following. For their sake the Church is called the bride of Christ, the body of Christ, the flock of Christ, heirs of God, joint-heirs with Christ, a temple of the Holy Ghost, the household of God, fellow-citizens with the saints, etc. None of this fits those who belong only outwardly to the Church, until they by the grace of God are converted. But there is this great blessing also for these people in possessing the word and sacraments of God, that the invitation is continually being issued to them, so that they also may “come to themselves” [Luke 15:17] and return to their heavenly Father, become reconciled with God and become true disciples of Christ. Sometimes we also see in Scripture that God calls those His people concerning whom He in accordance with His omniscience knows that they will come to the faith. Thus He says to Paul upon his arrival in Corinth: “Be not afraid, but speak, and hold not thy peace! For I am with thee...for I have much people in this city” (Acts 18:9-10).²

EXAMPLES OF TRUE BELIEVERS

Everything that pertains to Christianity is practical; for Christianity and Christian faith are life. Thus it is also with the things we have discussed here concerning the Church and its essence. But everything that pertains to our Christian faith can also be taken in vain, so that it becomes only philosophizing or academic development of doctrine. In order to avoid this here, let us try to make clear how these children of God, the true members of the Church of whom we have spoken, fare in the world, in what conditions and circumstances they are found. That can, of course, be done only by some examples. According to Scripture, we can only say that the great majority, as a general rule, are but little regarded and esteemed in the world. There are exceptions, as Scripture also shows us, but most of them live in the same circumstances in this respect as the Lord Himself and His apostles.

We ask, then, what kind of members of the true (but invisible) Church we will find in the visible churches or congregations in which we live. By way of example, I will answer: We will here or there in the congregation find a whole family which long has held fast to the word of God in true faith, and with whom this blessed faith has become like an inheritance in the family. The grandmother held fast to the word of God, the mother likewise, and now it lights the son on his way.

² Where the word and the sacraments are no longer preserved in their truth and purity, but where doctrines of men have more or less crept in, we believe, according to Scripture, that members of the true, holy Church may be found there also, if only enough of the word is preserved to bring souls to faith in Christ. (See Gal. and Rev. 2, 24). However, it is easy to see that the man who, for the reason just stated above, considers it an indifferent matter *where* he seeks the word and sacraments, cannot be a true member of the Church, since he is not concerned about the truth.

Or we find a married couple, ordinary laborers, who have become the servants of God by hearing and believing the Gospel. They do not neglect their work, but they have used the Word of God so diligently that they can also, if necessary, help others to the right way. They are the pastor's best support in the congregation.

Again we find a group of brothers and sisters of the same mind. They are well supplied with worldly goods, but are richer in their inner communion with the Savior.

Not far away from these there is an ordinary-appearing old man, who does not like to miss church; for there he has in spirit that which can help him to end his days in peace. The same is true of an old widow who also is never missing from her accustomed place in church, so long as she is able get there. In their company you will find a pious girl, whose quiet walk and diligence in good works has been a source of joy to all who know her.

And there is a young man in the congregation whose proved faithfulness and constant helpfulness his pastor cannot praise and commend too much.

In another place, in an out of the way corner of the congregation, you will find a needy patient whom few know and fewer inquire after, but from whose lips you will not hear lamentation and complaint but only willing resignation to the will of God, because he knows from the word of God about the glory in which he shall share.

Again there is a man who surprises many. He is so changed. He always meant well, indeed, and both knew and loved the word; but he had the habit of pushing himself forward, thought he knew best in everything, and he was confident that he would stand where others might fall. Now things are different. He has had occasion to look deeper into his own heart, and being humbled himself, he can now be an example of humility to others.

Or we find people at whom both we and others looked with concern, because we thought there was no prospect that the church of God could get any joy from them. There is, for example, a very wealthy man who has justly had the reputation of not having gained his riches by the right means. He has now become an entirely different person. When Jesus came in, Satan and sins had to leave. We can see from his whole life and conduct that he is serious and honest about it.

The same is true of a woman whose foolish and pitiable way of life was only too well known. But look at her now! Humbled and bowed down, pure both in heart and conduct through the love of Him who came to save that which was lost.

Finally I shall call to mind a man whom one or the other of you perhaps has met, who was long a terror to the congregation, who both ridiculed and hated and persecuted it as much as he could, but who still was conquered at last by the mercy of God.

Believers of such types and in such circumstances as I have indicated here may be found, more or less, around in our congregations. There are also many other similar types of Christians whom the older ones of us especially have met on the way. But I have named these as a help toward enabling us to perceive more readily the basis and the import of the principles

of church government that Scripture gives us. For who are the church members or Christian types that I have had in mind by the examples I have named? You have, no doubt, already guessed it. Those I have had in mind are: Lois, Eunice, and Timothy, Aquila and Priscilla, Martha, Mary and Lazurus, Simeon and Anna, Dorcas, Epaphroditus, the beggar Lazarus, Simon Peter, Zaccheus, the woman which was a sinner (Luke 7) and finally Paul.

If we want to see examples of people who belong, indeed, to the visible church, but do not belong to the true Church, we can find enough descriptions of them also in the apostolic writings. "In a great house there are not only vessels of gold and of silver, but also of wood and of earth; and some to honour and some to dishonour" (II Tim. 2:20).

But as the Church in its essence is a gathering of such holy people, then it is evident to us that there can be no thought that men should rule over them. They are, says St. Peter (I Pet. 2:9): "a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, an holy nation, a peculiar people; that they should show forth the praises of him who called them out of darkness into His marvelous light."³ They have no other Lord than Him to whom they belong. He rules "over" them and "in" them, and He has delivered them from all other lords. The law no longer rules over them (Gal. 5:18; Rom. 8:2,6,14). They are delivered both from the curse of the law and from its dominion.

They are free from all the regulations of the old covenant. The commandments of God are written in their hearts, but they are free from all the commandments of men. They are not perfect. They are not yet only spirit. They stand in need of the word of God, both Law and Gospel, to bring in subjection the old man and to grow in grace. But the Law does not come to them with threats and punishments, but as exhortation "by the mercies of God" (Rom. 12:1).

WHY BELIEVERS FORM CONGREGATIONS

They cannot live isolated, separated from one another; for they love one another, and they know that it is the will of God that they shall be one in Christ (John 17:20-23). Nor shall this love be so hidden in the heart that it does not manifest itself; for Jesus says: (John 13:35) "By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another." Therefore the believers did not stand each one alone by himself at the Pentecost festival. There was a congregation at once, and we read about this congregation that "the multitude of them that believed were of one heart and one soul" [Acts 4:32]; and that "they continued daily with one accord in the temple" [Acts 2:46]. About what were they gathered? About the word and sacraments, the Lord's institutions, and they knew that He himself had promised to be in the midst of them with His powerful though invisible presence.

And thus it is still wherever there are souls that have received "the same precious faith" [II Pet. 1:1] "which was once delivered unto the saints" [Jude 1:3]. They must and they will join together and precisely about the word and sacraments. How do they do this? By establishing the office of the word in their midst and calling a minister of the word.

³ This passage was, as is well known, the motto of our dear Dr. Walther.

But could they not dispense with that? If the Christians are a people of “kings and priests” [Rev. 1:6; 5:10] and have the spiritual priesthood, why should it then be necessary to establish the preaching office and call pastors? Is it not, at least, a matter of liberty which they can arrange for themselves as they please? No, it is not a human ordinance. God wants it be so. In the same connection in which St. Paul explains that the believers all together form one body and one spirit, although the different members of the body do not have the same office, he says (I Cor. 12:27 ff.): “Ye are the body of Christ, and members in particular. And God hath set some in the church, first apostles, secondarily prophets, thirdly teachers, after that miracles, then gifts of healings, helps, governments, diversities of tongues.” And then he asks: “Are all apostles? are all prophets? are all teachers?” The ministers of the word are, accordingly, “set in the church by God.” Therefore St. Paul says to the pastors of the church in Ephesus (Acts 20:28): “Take heed therefore unto yourselves, and to all the flock over which the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers, to feed the church of God, which he hath purchased with his own blood.”

In another place he describes these teachers and overseers as the gifts of the ascended Savior to the congregation and shows what the Savior’s purpose with this gift is, saying: (Eph. 4:11 ff). “And he gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers” ...for what purpose?...“for the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ; till we all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ.” ...and what is to be prevented thereby?...he says: “That we henceforth be no more children, tossed to and fro, and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the sleight of men, and cunning craftiness, whereby they lie in wait to deceive;” ...for the goal is, he says,...that we, “speaking the truth in love may grow up into him in all things, which is the head, even Christ” [Eph. 4:15]. This glorious goal being the purpose of the institution of the ministry of preaching, we can also understand why Christ himself has said that we shall “pray the Lord of the harvest, that he will send forth labourers into His harvest” (Matt. 9:38).

But does not this conflict with what was said above about the liberty of the congregation? No, certainly not, if we would hold fast what is also said above about how the apostles and their successors shall regard their work. The congregation has received from Christ all the gifts of the Spirit and all rights, and it will, in accordance with the words of God that have been quoted, also regard the preaching office and its ministers as a gift from God and as one of the ways in which He governs His Church,—though not in such a way that the congregation thereby forfeits any of its rights or transfers its obligations to others. In the course of time this misunderstanding of the status of the office of preaching has indeed, asserted itself almost everywhere in various forms, and there is always danger that this may occur. (That is one of the reasons why this matter is brought forth for discussion among us). But when we become intimately acquainted with the essence of the Church and give heed to the words of Jesus to the apostles and to their successors in the office, we will escape this danger. In the first place, the congregation, as said, possesses all the gifts of the Spirit. St. Paul says in the well-known passage in I Cor. 3, 21-23: “All things are yours; whether Paul, or Apollos, or Cephas, or the world, or life, or death, or things present, or things to come; all are yours; and ye are Christ’s; and Christ is God’s.”

So the office also belongs to the congregation. But Christ has given the congregation the command and the explanation concerning the public execution of the office, which has just been

mentioned and which our church confesses in the 14th Article of the Augsburg Confession.⁴ Therefore it is also the congregation which calls its preachers and teachers and which has to see to it that these do the work they are called to do. The pastors are not, according to God's word, to be lords over the congregation. They are to be the servants of the congregation, and at the same time they are to be the servants of God.⁵ Just in this way, by being the servants of God, do they become the servants of the congregation. God has placed them in the congregation, but He has done so by the congregation. The congregation has called them, but in accordance with the ordinance of God. They are the ambassadors of God to the congregation, and they speak in Christ's stead. St. Paul says: "Now then we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God did beseech you by us; we pray you in Christ's stead, be ye reconciled to God" (II Cor. 5:20). But the congregation shall prove the message that they bring; for it has the command to "beware of false prophets" [Matt. 7:15]. Yes, even a Paul says to the congregation in Corinth: "Judge ye what I say" (I Cor. 10:15).

THE POWER OF THE KEYS

Accordingly, it is the congregation that has the power of the keys, i. e. the management in the house as the bride of Christ. In the very place where Christ gives to his apostles, and through them to the Church, the keys of heaven, i. e. the administration of the Gospel to loose and to bind, he says that the congregation shall be the final and supreme resort (Matt. 18:17 ff). Nobody is the lord of the congregation except Christ. But Christ governs by His word, and the public preaching of the word is carried out by the congregation in accordance with Christ's ordinance through the office of preaching. Those who are in this office shall be guides by declaring the word of God. So long as they do this, the congregation obeys Christ in that it obeys its guides. Where the word of God speaks, there it is not the pastor who commands, but God Himself. Where the word of God does not speak, there the pastor has nothing to command; for he shall only declare what God has said.

In the tract, "The Babylonian Captivity of the Church", we find the following mighty words of Luther: "Therefore I say, that neither pope nor bishop nor any man has the authority to rule by a single syllable over a Christian, except it is done with his consent; and whatever else is done, that is done out of a tyrannical spirit" (L.W.W. XIX, 83).

Here, I suppose, someone will say: Yes, we see, indeed, that in the things which concern the consciences, sin and grace, etc., there Christ governs by His word; but otherwise, there are, to be sure, many other things that must be arranged and done in a congregation. There are the external arrangements with the use of the means of grace, rites and ceremonies, buildings, money matters, etc., – how does Christ govern there, or does He not concern Himself with such things? Yes, certainly. He has said to His believers that they shall do all things (then also such things) as before God and not as before men; and He has given them the law of love which also embraces all things; but otherwise He has given them only one rule: "Let all things be done decently and in order!" (I Cor. 14:40). Yes, but who shall decide these things? That, the

⁴ It is a sad sign that this part of the Lutheran Confessions, which is so clearly based on the word of God, should be so despised, yes, hated in the greater part of the Norwegian-Lutheran Church.

⁵ If anyone should object at this point, that the pastors in this way would be trying to "serve two masters," then the objection would show that he had forgotten the real essence of the Church, as described above. The true congregation has no other will than the will of God.

congregation shall do. The pastor who, of course, is a member of the congregation shall also be along, but the decision rests with the congregation. The pastor is to remind them that all things must be done decently and in order, but he has no other command from God with regard to all external arrangements.

Now if the visible church were made up of only true believers, matters would not be difficult. The fact that Christ governs the Church by His word would then become manifest in all matters, also in all external things; for in these love would reign. But since there are both believers and hypocrites or nominal Christians in the visible church, dangers appear, which we notice even in the apostolic congregations. Therefore these dangers are pointed out also in the New Testament and admonitions are added, so that we may learn to beware of them. The dangers are that men want the power and wish to follow their own ideas. Christ is always the almighty Lord and Governor, but He governs wonderfully also in this respect that He tolerates the intervention of men in the proper governance of the congregation and sometimes lets the tyrants reign through long periods. Consider how in the first centuries in the time of the martyrs He let His church to be persecuted; and in the succeeding periods He let the emperor, the pope and the priests and, after the Reformation, the State-Church system, usurp the power.

In the individual congregations, the danger now is that either the pastor or other individuals will forget that Christ is the only Lord, and how He wants to have His Church governed. There are many temptations for the pastor in this regard. He is put in a special and respected position in the congregation by God through the call of the congregation. According to the names which are ascribed to his office in Scripture, he shall be the elder (I Tim. 5:17), overseer, guide, shepherd, teacher, etc., and yet he himself shall not, as we have heard, want to rule, shall not use authority, shall not demand anything, but shall be satisfied with requiring obedience and submission to Christ, i. e. the word of God in Scripture. He dare not surrender the word of God, whether people like it or not; but where the word of God has not commanded anything, there he has no right to command. Nor is the word of God given him to deal with as he likes. Children of God are in the congregation. They, too have the Spirit of God and have both the right and the duty to prove and to judge whether it is the word of God that is proclaimed to them. Concerning external arrangements, the pastor shall only, as said, see to it and emphasize that this command of God be followed which says that all things shall be done decently and in order. If he is a true, evangelical elder and shepherd, he will strive to make the congregation capable of fulfilling the duties resting upon it and will to that end make use of the gifts and talents which God has distributed among the members of the church. He will not try to keep the congregation in leading strings. He will not be afraid of losing his influence in the congregation by letting the congregation have its way in matters which God has put into its hands. He will rather have the opposite experience, that his influence as a minister of the word of God will increase according as he is satisfied with this service. He will be most likely be asked for advice regarding the external affairs of the congregation, and his words will have the desired weight also in these matters, then when it can be seen that he does not want to assume an authority and power which God has not given him.

On the other hand, there are often temptations also for other members in the congregation to want to have the power and to get their own way. Sometimes it may be enthusiasts who have pushed themselves into the church, and who have found a few restless characters or misguided souls that are willing to help them. Sometimes it may be one or the

other individual who is hostile to the pastor and who now seeks to form a faction to pick a quarrel with him. Sometimes an occasion for this may have been given by bitterness resulting from failure to get a certain external matter through in the congregation, as e. g., that the place they wanted was not chosen for the church lot, that money is not collected in this or that manner as they wish, etc.... Those who like to get the power into their own hands will then sometimes go from house to house, with lists for signatures, to gain a majority for their side. They make note of how people sometimes act in order to get political plans or elections carried out, and then transfer this procedure to the Church of Christ.

I need not point out that such methods of governing the Church are neither honorable nor Christian. It is unnecessary to prove that those who use them are either Christians in name only or are ignorant, weak and gullible Christians. The apostolic epistles give us many examples of the manner in which factions are brought into the congregations and promoted in them. Diotrephes, of whom St. John speaks in his third epistle, stands as a warning example. We are not told whether he was a pastor or a layman, but he “loved to have the pre-eminence” [v. 9], and he has had many followers. We have examples enough of such a sorry business from the various doctrinal controversies. Those who make use of it understand little of the nature of the Christian Church, or of how the Lord wants it to be governed.

WHY CONGREGATIONS FORM SYNODS

Everything that has been said above concerns the church in general, or – which is the same thing – the individual local congregation.

But how about a whole church body, composed of many congregations? Is such a body instituted by God? Not directly. Wherever the apostles came and gathered souls by the word and sacraments, there a congregation was thus formed, the office of the word was established, and there was a church, such as has been described above. The fact that all believers in the various regions did not manifest themselves as a single church or congregation was due, not to the nature or essence of the Church, but to the external circumstances: that they lived in different places, spoke different languages, etc....

According to its essence the Church is one. When we ask our children: “How many such churches or communions exist?” we teach them to answer: “Only one, which is universal, i. e. it is in all parts of the world.” But since Christ, in accordance with His promise, is Himself present in every place where He by His word has gathered a congregation and is in their midst with His gifts, therefore each local congregation possesses everything that it needs, and it does not have to look anywhere else for help in that respect. It is self-existent. But the inner unity between such a congregation and other congregations which have the same faith is not broken thereby, for this follows from the nature of faith. Therefore we see also that there was such intimate union in faith and love between the apostolic congregations. Not any external compulsion, but the inner need, brought about their union.

It follows from the circumstances in which the Church exists here in this world that this inner need, in the course of time, will necessarily manifest itself through planned cooperation between the individual congregations. For if God’s commands concerning the preservation of the word, concerning the maintenance of the pastoral office, and concerning the qualifications

of those who are to be put into this office are to be followed,—if the instruction of the children and Christian discipline are to be promoted,—if the command Christ has given concerning the preaching of the Gospel to all nations is to be carried out, if the need that love feels to help other suffering Christians, poor congregations, orphaned children, and lonely old people is to be filled, then it is self-evident that the individual congregation would not be able to carry it all out, and that the congregations which are in a position to do so should join together and help each other in all these things. How would things go, if this duty were not recognized? And what could be the reason for a congregation's unwillingness to be along in such a union except this that it had not recognized those duties and the demands of love?

But if it, then, is a necessary consequence of faith and love that the inner unity of the Church manifests itself in external cooperation, how can this be done in a proper and God-pleasing way? Plainly only by joining together into one body and by adopting certain rules for cooperation.

But who shall govern and rule in such a church body? In the course of time, many answers have been given to this question. The control has been put at times in the hands of the pastors, at times in those of the secular government, at times in those of certain individuals.

Now since the word of God teaches us those things which we, in the foregoing, have learned about the government of the individual congregation, and it therefore is necessary to adhere to them, it becomes clear that it cannot be right to follow other principles when a union of congregations is at issue, or to set aside that word of God on which those principles are based.

It follows from this, in the first place, that the pastors are not the ones who are to rule. The pastors are but a part of the congregation, but it is the whole congregation which has received the power of the keys from Christ. What the results could be of such an overlordship of pastors, we can see in the Catholic Church in which that system is carried out to the extreme in a strongly and carefully integrated hierarchy, through the different ranks of priests and bishops, until the supreme power is centered in the pope, who calls himself the vice gerent of Christ upon earth. By such an overlordship the liberated children of God are enslaved under the yoke of men; and God has conferred no greater benefit upon His Church since the days of the apostles than when He by his mighty witness, Dr. Martin Luther, tore the mask off the Anti-Christ and by the Gospel delivered the consciences of the Christians from that shameful yoke of bondage.

THE STATE CHURCH SYSTEM

But although the true principles, thank God, were presented in the Lutheran confessional writings, it was not long before another power stole into the Church in Lutheran lands, namely the secular government, whereby the State Church system was established.

In the beginning, the power of the princes was used only as a temporary makeshift, reserving all the rights of the Church. The help of the princes was requested, not on account of their position in the world as if it gave them the right, or should make it their duty, to govern in the Church; but because they, "as the chief members of the Church" could get things done

which others found beyond their power (See the Smalcald Articles, Appendix, Trig. P. 519 [and 529]). This is not the place to show how this system degenerated, partly through the fault of the theologians, until it reached its climax in the famous phrase: *cujus regio, eius religio*, that is, he who has the power over the country has the power also over its religion. We know how the Lutheran State Churches now are governed by the secular government, in that the diet or parliament has the law-making power also in church matters, so that there is nothing to prevent Catholics, declared freethinkers, Jews, people of any or of no faith, from exercising the right to be along in governing the Lutheran Church "in the old countries".

And yet it is clear that the Church as a kingdom of grace, and the Christians as such, neither shall nor can be subject to the State. They shall be that as citizens, and there the State has the right to demand that the Church do not hinder it; but its demands shall go no farther. In the Augsburg Confession, Article 28, sharp distinction is made, in accordance with the word of God, between State and Church. There it is shown that the work of the Church (the power of the keys) is carried out by means of the word and sacraments alone, and we read:

Therefore, since the power of the Church grants eternal things, and is exercised only by ministry of the Word, it does not interfere with civil government;...For civil government deals with other things than does the Gospel; the civil rulers defend not souls, but bodies and bodily things against manifest injuries, and restrain men with the sword and bodily punishments in order to preserve civil justice and peace. Therefore the power of the church and the civil power must not be confounded. The power of the Church has its own commission, to teach the Gospel and to administer the sacraments. Let it not break into the office of another; let it not transfer the kingdoms of this world; let it not abrogate the laws of civil rulers; let it not abolish lawful obedience; let it not interfere with judgments concerning civil ordinances or contracts; let it not prescribe laws to civil rulers concerning the form of the Commonwealth. As Christ says (John 18:36): 'My Kingdom is not of this world.'

When the civil government, by virtue of its office, wants to command in the church, then that is tyranny, and it puts itself in the place of God (Caesaro-papism). It enters into a sphere where it has no power, that is, in the consciences. Luther has made these matters more clear than anyone else that I know of, in numerous places in his writings. And he quotes, in his treatise on civil government, the words of St. Peter (I Pet. 2:13): "Submit yourselves to every ordinance of man for the Lord's sake;" and says concerning this:

The ordinances of man do not reach up to heaven or into the souls of men, but only to earth and the external conduct of men. There men can see, know, judge, pass sentence, punish and acquit. Christ Himself has carefully separated these things and summarized it all briefly in the words (Matt. 22:21): 'Render unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's and unto God the things which are God's.' If the power of Caesar reached into the kingdom and power of God and did not differ from it at all, Christ would not have made this distinction between them. For, as said, the soul is not in the power of the emperor; he can neither teach nor lead it; neither slay nor make it alive, neither bind nor loose it, neither judge or condemn it, neither retain it nor let it go, all of which would have to be the case,

if he had the power to command it and give it laws. But with our life, property and honor he has the right to do these things, for these are under his power. (L.W.W. X, 458)

Compare a letter from Luther to Melancthon, of 1530 (W. XIX, 1239).

One of the greatest blessings for which we owe God thanks here in this country is the complete independence of the Church from the State, or the separation of Church and State that has been actually carried through. However, it would be a mistake to think that Christians, because they live here in a free country, are thereby free from every kind of unjust power in the church. In most of the Protestant churches here in this country, the complete freedom and right of the congregations to govern themselves is not recognized, – neither among Episcopalians, nor among Methodists, nor among several others. We need not mention the Catholics.

While the State should have nothing to do with the government of the Church, it still has the right to ensure that nothing is done in the Church contrary to the laws of the State. The State may have the right to make a law concerning rest from work every seventh day for its citizens. But if the state makes a law, e. g. about rest on Sunday, it must not be with the idea of emphasizing the Third Commandment; for the State has nothing to do with that. If it makes such a law, it must be for civic reasons; and when the Christians obey it, they do it not for the sake of the third, but of the fourth commandment. On its part, the Church should require of the State only that it be not hindered in its Christian activities. We must be on guard against the probably well-meant, but not well-considered, efforts which sometimes have been made in this country to wipe out the sharp separation between State and Church. It appears so Christian and pious, but we Lutherans should not let ourselves be deceived thereby. One of Luther's great services is that he has made that distinction clear for us.

A TRUE FREE CHURCH

If we hold fast to what we have taught above, from the word of God, about the essence of the Church and the independence of each congregation, it will not be difficult to understand how a body of free congregations must be governed. Such a church body cannot have any government "by divine right." But that there must be some government follows from the fact that all things shall be done decently and in order, which is what God demands; but the government itself can only belong to the congregations, and it can be carried out only by the men who are sent and empowered by the different congregations for that very purpose. Some of these delegates are pastors and teachers, others not. The division that is often made of the accredited delegates of the congregations into pastors and laymen, as if they represented two different classes in the church, is not correct. A pastor is a member of the congregation just as much as anyone else who belongs to it, and there is no such thing as a special clergy class (as the Catholic Church teaches). All Christians are priests. Those whom we in ordinary speech call priests (pastors) have only a special office, an especially important ministry to which they are called by God, but they do not make up a special class.

Now when such an assembly gathered from all the congregations is to search out and carry out what will best serve the interest of the Church, it is clear that this can be accomplished only by conferring together; and that there first of all must be an agreement about the

composition of the whole body, about its aims, and about how it will arrange its affairs and carry out its resolutions. This agreement is the constitution of the body. This agreement or constitution must not conflict with the concept of the Church developed above nor with the liberty of each congregation under Christ.

The Synod, then, dare not have any authority over the individual congregation. It cannot impose anything upon it, cannot demand anything of it which God has not demanded, cannot levy taxes upon it. Since the basis on which the union into one body has been built is unity in the faith, the first point in the agreement must be that the individual congregation will not let its confession or its rules conflict with the word of God or Christ's will. This is not a power that the Synod assumes. It is God's demand and not men's, and this demand receives no more authority by the fact that the church body, the Synod, expresses it than if an individual presented it, although the common testimony might be a source of strengthening for one in need of it.

HOW A SYNOD FUNCTIONS

In order to preserve unity in faith and to make progress in Christian life, a body of orthodox congregations will, indeed, find it necessary to establish a special overseer's office for the pastors and congregations, such as has been the case from the earliest periods in the church. But at the same time the church body must take care to learn, from church history, how necessary it is that the execution of this office does not conflict with the principles given above. The bishops were not elected to rule. The Lutheran Church testifies to this in the Augsburg Confession, in the Apology, and in the Smalcald Articles. We elect these overseers or presidents, as we call them, not to rule but to remind us of our Savior's rule and His royal word, and, by supervision, admonition, encouragement, and advice to help us use and obey the word of God. They have no other power than that of the word.

To reach all the common goals that have been named - schools and educational institutions, distribution of books, missions, charitable institutions, and everything that can serve the kingdom of God, - it is necessary that men and women who have the necessary qualifications are chosen and commissioned, and that the required funds are gathered and managed. Here we will be reminded of the words of the apostle Paul, when he in I Cor. 12 speaks about the different members of the body of Christ, and how one member needs the other, how the eye, the ear, the hand, the foot all have mutual need of each others' help, and that there must be no schism in the body, but that the members should have the same care one for another.

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. Even if a congregation has through its representatives taken part in one or another resolution about such matters, it does not necessarily follow that the congregation must approve the resolution. Love will, indeed, render it necessary for the individual congregation not to reject such resolutions, if they do not conflict with the conscience, but it must be a free matter, since love is free. No compulsory commandment can be given. From the fact that God has set the pastor to be the overseer and guide in the

congregation, it follows that a Christian congregation will also in such things want to hear its pastor's opinion and counsel. But the decision rests with the congregation.

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; that we do not consider ourselves wiser than others, so that we will want to force our way through or gain our end by stealth. We should not be blind to the danger that political arts and tricks may be brought over into our consultations and the resolutions of the Church, and then seek comfort in the fact that our end is good, while the means we use are objectionable. The situation is the same in the Synod as in the congregation,—everything would go well, if all were true believers; but as there are also nominal Christians and unconverted people in the visible church, many dangers arise. When the evil passions which are not entirely dead even in the children of God get an opportunity to come to life again and to make themselves felt; when suspicion, jealousy, backbiting, opinionatedness, vanity, ambition and lust for power get to rule more or less; and when restless characters who become angry because they do not get their own way work to sow discontent, suspicion and strife, then the dangers can readily result in distress and misery.

But, someone may say, what kind of government will that be when nobody has the right to command? Will not that become anarchy? Or: When all such things shall be decided by majority vote, will not that result in that the worst of all tyrannies, mob rule, where individual demagogues usurp the power, drawing the crowd after them?

No sensible man will deny that such dangers follow the church, as it manifests itself in the world. But what good would it do us to place human supports under the walls of God's Church to prevent its fall? It is written: "You shall not follow a crowd to do evil; nor shall you testify in a dispute so as to turn aside after many to pervert justice" (Ex. 23:2; [NKJV]).

So if there is a question of evil or good, of something which God has commanded or forbidden, there we do not ask either about majority or minority, there the conscience is concerned, and there we shall not be the slaves of men whether they be many or few. But where God has not settled the matter, there we shall submit and put up with what the majority agrees on, even if we do not get things as we would wish or as we believed would be to the benefit of the Church. There is one thing in which we shall seek our comfort and strength, and that is the truth that our Lord Jesus governs His Church. He does not need us. He often directs it wonderfully. But if we believe what He Himself has said, that all power is given unto Him in heaven and in earth, and that He is with us always, even unto the end of the world, and that He is the king in His kingdom, then we will become confident and hopeful, willing to obey Him and to serve Him according to His word and to "cast all our care upon Him; for he careth for us" (I Pet. 5:7).

Luther speaks very beautifully, I think, in a tract against the Antinomians (of 1539). After quoting the 8th verse of the chapter just mentioned: “Be sober, be vigilant, because your adversary, the devil, as a roaring lion walketh about, seeking whom he may devour,” he says:

May God help us, as He has helped our fathers and also will help our descendants, to the praise and honor of His divine name for ever. For we are not the ones who can preserve the Church. Our forefathers could not do it either. Nor will our descendants be able to do so. He it has been, He it still is, and He it will be, Who has said: ‘I am with you alway even unto the end of the world;’ as it is written in the epistle to the Hebrews: ‘Jesus Christ, the same yesterday, and today, and forever!’ and in Revelation: ‘He which is, and which was and which is to come!’ Yes, thus that Man is called, and thus no other man is called, and thus shall also no other be called....Many have thought that it was they who had to do it, as if the Church was built on them, – we have horrible examples of that – and yet God’s judgments have not been able to break their pride. (L.W.W. XX 20, 28 ff)

Therefore I should like to close this address with the same words with which I began it: *Sursum corda!* Lift up your hearts to where Jesus Christ sits at the right hand of the Father!⁶

⁶ [*Clergy Bulletin*, V. 11:5, p. 65:] “In the Synod Report for 1899 there appears at the end of the essay a list of theses which Koren drew up as a guide for the discussion of his essay. These theses are:

1. Christ has established no other government in His Church than that which is according to His Word.
2. This Word is entrusted to the congregation and not to any special rank in it, even though the public service of the Word, according to His own command, is to be carried out by persons called especially thereto.
3. In matters not decided by the Word of God the congregation is sovereign.
4. That government in the church which demands obedience to it because it is government, erects a hierarchy, or caesaropapism, or tyranny.
5. The form of a church body is not directly commanded by God, but is a product of the essence of faith and love.
6. A church body has no right to restrict the freedom of the individual congregation.
7. A church body is governed according to the same principles as the individual congregation.”