

WHAT THE BIBLE TEACHES ABOUT THE CHURCH -
ESPECIALLY ABOUT THE LOCAL CONGREGATION, ITS GODLY
CHARACTER AND ITS RELATIONSHIP TO A
SYNOD AND OTHER CHRISTIAN GROUPS

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THE HOLY CHRISTIAN CHURCH (Una Sancta)

There has, to our knowledge, been no disagreement concerning the doctrine of the Holy Christian Church among confessional Lutherans. The discussion among the churches has rather concerned the public use of the power of the Keys. Nevertheless it is necessary to emphasize that the doctrine of the Holy Christian Church and its marks has a fundamental significance when it comes to the public use of the Keys. This doctrine also has a significance in the relationship that exists between the local congregation and larger church associations or temporary gatherings of Christians. In order that agreement might be achieved, it is necessary briefly to examine whether we all have the same starting point.

The Holy Christian Church is that blessed group of God's children whom the Holy Ghost has called by the Gospel from lost and condemned mankind, creating in their hearts faith in Christ, the Savior of the world, the Son of God and the Son of Man. True believers (vere credentes) are the Church - all the true believers and only the true believers. The righteousness that makes them acceptable to God is not their own, but Christ's.

Christ is the Head of His Church and the Church is His body, which hears the voice of its Shepherd and follows it. In matters of faith Christians are not bound by any human decrees - only by the will of God as it is revealed in the Bible.

Christ's Church is one, holy, universal, invisible, Apostolic-Prophetic, and truly in existence or in other words a reality. We can be sure that it exists where the faith-creating and faith-sustaining means of grace (the Word, Baptism, and the Lord's Supper) are in continuous use. The temporary use of the means of grace does not yet assure us, that there are true believers among the hearers. If for example a pastor preaches one sermon to an unconverted group of hearers who are not members of a congregation, he cannot, on the basis of this one sermon, be sure that someone has come to faith (Stephen's sermon to those who stoned him.)

Christ's Church fulfills the Savior's mission command (Matt. 28 etc.) as a royal priesthood. As such a priesthood it continuously has the means of grace to offer. Believers are also kings and rule with God's Word (Matt. 4:4; 28:20; Acts 24:14). The weapons of Christ's Church are not fleshly, but spiritual (2 Cor. 10:4). It confirms earthly government as God's arrangement for this life, but does not interfere with its activity nor does it use its methods in its own work.

The above does not alter the fact among believers there are those, who along with the genuine faith of their hearts, may also cling to some false doctrines - those which do not destroy the foundation of their faith. They are, however, not members of Christ's Church on the basis of their false doctrine, but despite it, on the basis of the faith that adheres to the Truth (2 Tim. 2:19). This type of error is sin (which, however, is forgiven). For this reason it is wrong to make conclusions that have to do with the Church on the basis of the weaknesses or errors of believers, or to consider the error as belonging to the essence of the holy Church.

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Especially About the local congregation, its Godly
Character and its Relationship to a
Synod and Other Christian Groups

In presenting Christ's Church, and in our desire to adhere to it, we must always adhere to the pure marks of Christ's Church (*notae ecclesiae purae*), which are the pure teaching of God's Word and the right administration of the Sacraments. In doing this we follow Christ, and where Christ is, there His Church is also. Adhering to impure marks is contrary to the nature of Christ's Church.

LOCAL CONGREGATIONS (EKKLESIAI)

The New Testament speaks not only about the Holy Christian Church (*Una Sancta*), but also of churches in the plural (for example: 2 Cor. 11:28; Gal. 1:2). of "every church" (1 Cor. 4:17), churches in certain communities (the seven churches of Asia Minor, Rev. 1:20; 2:1, etc.) and of the "whole church" (1 Cor. 14:23). To differentiate between the Holy Christian Church and these churches we call these churches local congregations.

THE CHARACTERISTICS OF THE LOCAL CONGREGATION

1. The local congregation is born and exists through the use of the Word and the Sacraments. The Corinthian congregation is an example of this. "I (Paul) have begotten you through the Gospel." (1 Cor. 4:15). They were baptized. (1 Cor 1:14-16) The congregation was served by Apollos and others (1 Cor. 3:5-9). The congregation used the Word and partook of the Lord's Supper (1 Cor. 11:17-34).
2. The local congregation is by nature lasting and continuous, but not in such a way that it cannot cease to exist, as did the church at Jerusalem. The local congregation is not a temporary group gathered around the Word of God. It is not a church only when it is assembled for worship, but it is a church by night and day. Only very seldom is the entire local congregation gathered together in one place at one time. The phrase "if therefore the whole church be come together" (1 Cor. 14:23) indicates that the local congregation consists of all its members and not just of those who are assembled together. When the local congregation has been defined as a group of believers gathered around the Word and Sacraments in a certain community (for example Fr. Pieper), this definition does not mean to say that the congregation consists only of those who have assembled for worship at a certain time, but it also consists of the sick, the weak, the aged and those temporarily absent. They too are gathered around the Word and the Sacraments on the basis of their membership and especially for the reason, that they too live by the Word and the Sacraments and adhere to them. When the pastor of a congregation, for example, administers spiritual care to the aged, who no longer are able to attend the meetings of the congregation, these aged members do not constitute a new congregation, but are still full members of the congregation to which they have belonged and receive their spiritual care from it. The lasting character of the local congregation is also apparent from the fact that the membership of the congregation can be counted, (in the Jerusalem congregation at one time there were 5000 men besides the women and children. Acts 4:4), the membership could grow (Acts 6:1,7). Some of the hearers could be non-members (1 Cor. 14:23). Among the hearers there may be those who continue to hear the Word at worship services, but do not accept and confess all the teachings of the congregation. They may also attend services in churches of other denominations. The local congregation is not necessarily the same as the group assembled to hear the Word.

3. The members of the local congregation receive continuous spiritual care in the congregation. For this purpose the office of the ministry has been established. The local congregation is fully responsible for the public use of the office of the keys in its midst. The congregation at Colossae was to exhort its pastor, Archippus: "Take heed to the ministry which thou has received in the Lord, that thou fulfil it." (Col. 4:17). The work of the ministry is not merely the performing of certain functions such as conducting worship services, preaching, baptizing, administering the Lord's Supper, but it is shepherding a definite flock, caring for souls (Acts 20:28) and it is also this when the above-mentioned functions are being performed. Pastors "watch for your souls, as they that must give account" (Heb. 13:17). Each member of the congregation continuously has a shepherd for his soul (except when a congregation temporarily does not have a pastor). The pastor is responsible for the flock entrusted to his care 24 hours a day as long as he has his office. In calling a pastor, the congregation uses the power of the keys. The use of this power, however, is not limited to such a call, as if the pastor now took care of everything and the congregation no longer had anything to do. The congregation retains the keys and is responsible for them. When a member of the Corinthian congregation "had his father's wife", the apostle admonished the entire congregation (1 Cor. 5). Not only the erring member himself, his pastor and those closely connected to him are responsible for his spiritual welfare, but also the entire congregation. It was the responsibility of the congregation to handle the matter and make a decision concerning it. The Apostle Paul writes (1 Cor. 5:3-5): "For I verily, as absent in body, but present in spirit, have judged already, as though I were present, concerning him that hath so done this deed, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, when ye are gathered and my spirit, with the power of our Lord Jesus Christ, to deliver such as one unto Satan." The Apostle proclaimed the Word of God to them, telling them how they were to proceed in the matter, and personally supported the decision made on this basis. But the handling of the matter and the excommunication of the manifest and impenitent sinner belonged to the congregation, which was to assemble for this purpose. The individual members of the congregation as well as the members of other congregations are all bound to the decision that a congregation makes on the basis of God's Word. That which is valid and certain in heaven, is also valid and certain as far as all Christians are concerned here on earth. The matter does not have to be acted upon again by each individual congregation or member. This is what Jesus means when He says: "If he neglect to hear the church, let him be unto thee as an heathen man and a publican. (Matt. 18:17). More concerning Matt. 18 at the close of this presentation.
4. The members of the local congregation must remain faithful to their orthodox congregation and its office of the ministry. "Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is. "(Heb. 10:25). Likewise each member must be faithful to his own shepherd nor can he by-pass or reject him. This follows directly from the fact that the flock has been entrusted to the care of the shepherd, who is to care for it and give an account of how he has taken care of it. God has given each member of the congregation his own shepherd. The shepherds of other congregations have their own flocks and are not to interfere in matters that do not concern them. "Let the elders that rule well be counted worthy of double honour, especially they who labour in the word and doctrine." (1 Tim. 5:17).

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5. In essence the local congregation is made up only of true believers. Paul addressed his letter to the Corinthians in the following manner: "Unto the church of God which is at Corinth, to them that are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints." (1 Cor. 1:2) In the visible membership of the congregation there was a manifest sinner, whom we mentioned earlier. The unbelievers, nevertheless, are not actually a part of the local congregation, but they are in it (admixti) as dirt on the wheels of an automobile. It is to be noted that the power of the keys has not been given to the local congregation in so far as all its members form a corporate body, but only in so far as it is made up of true believers. The local congregation has the right to make only such decisions that are in keeping with true doctrine and the true faith. When false doctrine and unbelief appear in its midst, they must be dealt with according to the Word of God. The congregation must not permit false doctrine and unbelief to be its guide when it makes decisions. The fact that the power of the keys has not been given to the congregation as a corporate body, but as a communion of believers, gives Christ and the Word of God the highest authority and places everything in subjection to Christ. This makes reformation possible in the congregation, and when this is not possible because of those who cling to false doctrine, the Christians faithful to the Word can separate from the Heterodox congregation and establish orthodox congregations. When Christians act in this way, they truly seek the marks of the Holy Christian Church and follow the voice of Christ.

6. As stated earlier, it is possible for the local congregation to have hypocrites and, temporarily, even manifest sinners, among its members. The Apostle John mentions the following incident: "I wrote unto the church; but Diotrephes, who loveth to have the pre-eminence among them, receiveth us not. Wherefore, if I come, I will remember his deeds which he doeth, prating against us with malicious words: and not content therewith, neither doth he himself receive the brethren, and forbiddeth them that would, and casteth them out of the church." (3 John 9,10) The word church is here used of the local congregation according to its outward appearance. John wrote to it. Diotrephes drove out or expelled from the congregation those, who had works of faith. Diotrephes himself had the works of unbelief. John here cannot with the word church mean the Holy Christian Church, nor even the local congregation insofar as it is made up of true believers, but he means the local congregation as a visible body as it appeared there at that time. This manner of speaking confirms the truth, that the local congregation on the basis of its outward appearance and activity is a group that can be recognized, a group that continually uses the keys, and not just an accidental or temporary group of Christians. The local congregation can be approached (for example, one can write to it), it can deal with matters, it can have good and bad features (Rev. 2 and 3), its members are known.

7. In so far as the local congregation is examined according to its essence, or from the point of view that it is made up only of true believers, its existence too is a matter of faith as is the existence of the Holy Christian Church. Examined from this standpoint the local congregation also is invisible (The kingdom of God cometh not with observation). The presence of the true church in the local congregation is believed because of the confession of the local congregation and because it has the marks of the Church (Word and Sacraments). These, as well as the people who adhere to them, as well as their activity as a local congregation can be seen and recognized.

8. On the basis of whether or not a local congregations have the marks of the Church in their truth and purity, they are either orthodox or heterodox congregations. Christians must, according to the will of God, belong to an orthodox congregation.
9. Every local congregation possesses the full authority to make decisions concerning its own internal and external matters. However, it does not have the right before God to make decisions contrary to the Word of God and Christian love (the nature of Christian love is determined by the Word of God! John 14:21-24. The local congregation is an autonomous church, which is subject only to Christ, the Head of the Church. In relation to other congregations the local congregation is in a position of equality. This follows directly from the fact that the local congregation is fully responsible for the public use of the power of the keys, including the ministry of the Word and church discipline. The example of the apostolic congregations confirms this.
10. For Christians to belong to a local congregation is a divine arrangement (göttliche Ordnung) for the following reasons: a) God wants Christians in a certain locality to fellowship with one another, hear the public proclamation of the Word, to that end establish the public ministry among themselves, and where such an office of the ministry has been established, to make use of it, b) the entire local congregation has been commanded to exercise Christian discipline in respect to its members (Matt. 18:17; 1 Cor. 5:13; 2 Cor. 2:8), c) God has instituted the Sacrament of the Altar for the purpose of exercising brotherly communion. (1 Cor. 10:17; 11:17-21; 33).

The early Christians gathered together as local congregations for the above-mentioned purposes. The Bible confirms the God-pleasing character of this activity by calling these congregations "the churches of God" (1 Cor. 11:16. note the plural!) and "the churches of Christ" (Rom. 16:16, note the plural!).

11. The local congregation is not merely a form of activity, in the stead of which or along side of, we could think of some other group, for instance a synod or some organization. The God-given duties of a local congregation determine its nature to be such that a Christian cannot at the same time belong to two local congregations, nor can he independently of his own local congregation participate in the activities of some other Christian group, which engages in the above-listed duties of a local congregation. (Paragraph 10, points a-c.)

The local congregation is the only Christian communion to which a Christian, according to God's will, is to belong.

12. The Bible has not prescribed the outward organization that a local congregation must follow in carrying out its God-given duties. The organization of the congregation and its ceremonies are adiaphora, as long as they do not transgress against the order of creation or do not include features that militate against wholesome doctrine and Christian love. (Luther: The Gospel confirms the order of creation and ceremonies give way to love.)

Local congregations may, for instance, have more than one pastor, they may meet in one or more than one place, their members may be scattered over a large area or may be confined to a small area, they may have different types of worship services and forms of activity, etc.

In the beginning twelve apostles were responsible for the office of the ministry in the Jerusalem congregation, there were 3000 members, then 5000 men besides women and children. The congregation assembled daily in the temple area ("in the temple"), but they partook of Holy Communion in the homes. There were perhaps 10,000 communicants. The Communion services held in the homes demanded certain arrangements of which the Bible does not tell us (incidental matters). If the entire congregation was not able to gather together in the same home for Holy Communion at the same time, even then "the multitude of them that believed were of one heart and of one soul" (Acts 4:32). There were no independent divisions or separate little groups within the congregation. When the Grecians rebelled against the Hebrews, claiming that their widows were being neglected in the daily ministrations, the matter was taken care of. The apostles called a meeting of the congregation, which chose 7 men to serve tables. (Acts 6:1-7). The apostles gave themselves to the ministry of the Word.

In the great city of Rome the Christians assembled in homes in such a way that a particular part of the congregation gathered in each home. Paul mentions three such home congregations (Rom. 16:5,14,15). The term "church (in someone's) home" (hee kat' oikon autoon ekkleesia, Rom. 16:5) means one part of the local congregation, (thus also Stoeckhardt, Roemerbrief, pp. 638,640). In the Book of Romans there is no specific example of how the powers of the office of the keys, such as calling a pastor and church discipline, were carried out in practice.

One of the matters connected with the office of the keys appears as an example in the Epistle to the Romans. Paul recommends sister Phebe of Cenchrea to the entire Roman congregation (Rom. 16:1). How the congregation handled the recommendation the Bible does not say. The organization of some small congregation could have been very simple.

In the early congregations there were no such theoretical problems as have appeared now in the former Synodical Conference churches. The responsibility has in each case been assumed by those to whom it belonged, without involvement in matters that did not belong to them. When the Christians in Rome or in some other large city, for practical reasons, gathered in separate homes to nourish themselves with the Word and Sacrament, this was no more strange a solution, than the one arrived at today in congregations that have two pastors, the one conducting a worship service at 9 a.m., the other at 10:30 a.m. because there isn't room enough for all the members in the church at the same time.

13. The geographical boundaries of a congregation are not determined in the Bible. The New Testament tells us of congregations that were born (Note - not formed!) in localities. The Bible does not give any attention to the size of the area in which the members of a congregation lived. The members may live close together in smaller areas, or be scattered over larger areas. In the latter case it is difficult to determine the boundaries of localities. The essential thing is that Christians were jointly responsible for the use of the power of the keys and received their spiritual care from the congregation.

Earlier I referred to the fact that Christians in large cities met in homes. In this connection it is necessary to note that there are no signs of separate independent activity in connection with the use of the keys by these various parts of congregations. From the mere name "church" which is limited by the phrase Kat' oikon autoon (=that part of the congregation which assembled in their home) we do not have the right to conclude that such a church in a home, for example, called a pastor.

Much has been said about Acts 9:31. This is the only instance in the Bible, where the name church is given to Christians living in various communities. Some have seen in this support for their belief that a synod is a church exactly in the same sense as a local congregation. The passage in question reads: "Then had the church rest throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria, and was edified; and walking in the fear of the Lord, and in the comfort of the Holy Ghost, was multiplied. "(Acts 9:31) Peter served this congregation by passing throughout all quarters". (Acts 9:32). In order to validly conclude on the basis of this passage, as some have attempted to do, that a synod has the authority to use the power of the keys independently, two things should be proved. First, that already at this time in these communities local congregations had been born that had assumed the responsibility of the public use of the office of the keys. Secondly, it should be shown that these congregations formed a unit of activity, which independently used the power of the keys and which the Bible now calls a church. Neither of these can be shown to be true. The situation at that time was this - that Christians belonging to the congregation at Jerusalem, after the persecution following the slaying of Stephen had "scattered abroad throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria except the apostles" (Acts 8:1). In this unusual situation the Christians naturally did not at once organize into local congregations, but remained members of the congregation at Jerusalem. When the Persecution ended, local congregations surely were born in these communities. Paul indeed mentions in Gal. 1:22 that churches of Judea in the plural. This reference is to conditions which existed more than three years after the situation of Acts 9:31 (where ecclesia is in the singular).

Members moving away from a community or falling from faith may bring about a situation where only one or two families in a certain locality belong to a congregation. In such a case it may be practical, with the consent of the members, for the members living in several communities to form one congregation (parish). A small membership in no way lessens the authority of or decreases the rights of a congregation. Christ confesses even two or three Christians to be His church when there are no more members (Matt. 18:20) and He is in their midst in the same way as He is in the midst of a large congregation.

THE LOCAL CONGREGATION DEFINED

According to the Bible local congregations are communions of believers in certain localities, to which God wants believers to belong and in which He wants them to be responsible for the continuous and entire public (in behalf of the congregation) use of the power of the Keys, which right and responsibility belongs to them. The public use of the Keys includes, among other things, the worship life of the congregation (Word and Sacraments), the continuous care of souls (also individual care), which authority is received through the office of the ministry, the right to call a pastor, and church discipline. The local congregation differs from other groups of Christians gathered around the Word, in that the local congregation has the full and continuous responsibility for the public use of the power of the Keys and for the spiritual care of its members. As such a communion, the local congregation is the only divine order (Fr. Pieper: einzige göttliche Ordnung). There may also be unbelievers mingled (admixti) among the members of the local congregation.

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FELLOWSHIP OF CONGREGATIONS AND SYNOD

The Apostolic congregations were in fellowship with each other. Christian unity prevailed among them. As members of the same body of Christ, these Christians confessed that they were brothers in the faith on the basis of their common Apostolic faith. A few examples of this:

1. The congregation at Rome received a member of the congregation at Cenchrea on the basis of a letter of recommendation. Rom. 16:2.
2. The congregations in Macedonia and Achaia collected "a joint gift" for the needy of the Jerusalem congregation. Paul describes this as "professed subjection unto the Gospel of Christ", and their "koinonia" with them. The gift was delivered by a messenger chosen jointly by the congregations together with Paul and Titus. (2 Cor. 8:16-20). The Apostle Paul delivered the gift together with other messengers of the congregations (plural!) 2 Cor. 8:23.

He knew that he was accountable for it. When the congregation at Corinth showed its love for these messengers of the congregations, it was done "before the churches" (plural!) (2 Cor. 8:24).

3. The Antioch congregation sought counsel from the apostles and elders at Jerusalem (Acts 15). The congregation at Jerusalem received the representatives of the Antioch congregation. The Apostles together with the congregation considered the matter and sent their reply both orally and in a written form to the congregation at Antioch. At the same time the Apostles "gave the right hand of fellowship" to Paul and Barnabas. Acts 15:25, Gal. 2:9.

The meeting at Jerusalem was brought about by a temporary need and came to an end when the matter at hand had been treated. The meeting did not create a lasting organization of congregations similar to our present-day synods.

The joint activity of the congregations naturally demanded arrangements and organization. The Bible doesn't tell us about these. The congregations handled each matter as it arose without forming a rigid organization such as our synods today. The Apostles, as the founders of the congregations and proclaimers of the Gospel, naturally were the ones who, when necessary, arranged and directed the joint activities of the congregations. Because of their office they had the authority to say what was good, but they acted in an advisory capacity, not as rulers of the faith of others. The decisions of the Apostles were not dictatorial decisions. The congregations rather made their decisions and acted independently. When everything went well, the activity was the fruit of faith and occurred in a spirit of unity and love according to the advice of the Apostles.

Even though we don't know what type of organization the congregations used as they worked together, for example when they jointly chose men to represent them, we can make the following important observation: The activity was the activity of local congregations. The needed organization did not create any new congregation independent of the existing local congregations.

The fellowship of congregations with a common confession is a divine matter (de iure divine). Its practical manifestation is "professing subjection unto the Gospel of Christ". The basis of church fellowship among congregations is their common faith. It does not depend on the opportunities for joint activity or on the amount of activity.

The synod is one form of expressing the fellowship that exists between the congregations belonging to it, and also a way of handling joint matters. There is no command in the Bible that fellowship and joint activity must be practiced expressly in the form of a synod. The Apostolic congregations acted jointly whenever the situation demanded. The local congregation, however, is not just one form among many to exercise the power of the Keys, but it is the will of God that Christians belong to it. In this respect there is therefore a distinct difference between the local congregation and synod. The local congregation exists because of the will of the Lord (de iure divino; göttliche Ordnung), whereas the synod exists as a result of a voluntary agreement among local congregations (de iure ecclesiastico). The duties of a congregation, when it acts along or together with other congregations as a synod, are of course holy and divine (de iure divino) and they must be carried on according to the pure marks of the Church. When the synod has been defined as a human arrangement (de iure humano), this description does not apply to the activity of the synod, but it refers to the synod as one of the forms of joint congregational activity. A congregation can, without being guilty of sinning, refrain from joining a synod, provided that it does not withhold the hand of fellowship or love from those who believe the same.

The synod is not independent of the local congregations. The synod does not baptize people into membership. Even in a mission situation people are baptized into the fellowship of the congregation that is being born. In Corinth Paul left the matter of baptizing to the congregations. A synod does not care for souls. Its activity, for example the publication of literature, proclaiming the Word by means of radio, serves the cause of caring for souls. But a synod does not offer the 100% spiritual care that a congregation through its activity, and especially through the office of the ministry offers. A synod cannot examine those who intend to partake of the Lord's Supper without the testimony of the local congregation concerning those who intend to commune (for example, those under church discipline). This is the reason why the celebration of the Lord's Supper belongs in the local congregation. When congregations arrange a joint Communion service, for example in connection with a church convention, the examination of the communicants and the responsibility in the matter belongs to each communicant's own congregation and pastor. If such a Communion service takes place in some local congregation, it is the obligation of that congregation to see to it that the attendance of members of sister congregations at Communion is not in contradiction to the exercise of the spiritual responsibility of their own congregation and pastor.

The delegates to a synodical convention are representatives of local congregations and are also (in one way or another) chosen by them. They do not participate in the convention on the basis of their personal faith or the royal priesthood of all believers, but on the authority of the local congregations. The convention does not hold the delegates responsible for carrying out its decisions, but the congregations, in approving the decisions of the convention, are responsible for carrying them out, even those having to do with financial matters. The Christianity of the delegates to the convention, as far as it can be outwardly determined, is not determined by the witness they give at the convention, nor by their use of the Word at the convention, but their Christianity is determined by the testimony of their local congregation. All the afore-mentioned indicates that the synodical convention is not a congregation in the same way as a local congregation, even though it is gathered around the Word. The synod gets its authority to act, for example to elect officials, call professors, mission workers, publish and distribute literature, etc., from the local congregations, and the activity of the synod is actually the joint activity of congregations.

When one congregation has the right to call workers, it is only natural that two or more congregations also have the right to call one together. The synod's right to call depends on the congregations. But no separate group has the right to call independently of the local congregation - not even the synodical officers nor the delegates to a synodical convention.

Synods, church federations, etc. are always dependent on the local congregations in respect to the marks of the Church. The local congregations on the other hand, according to the Word of God, in themselves possess the marks of the Church in their fullness.

TEMPORARY CHRISTIAN GROUPS

Christians naturally not only meet one another at church gatherings, but at other times too. For mutual strengthening they have the right to use the Word. Their meetings and their use of the Word on such occasions is on a private level. If they, for example, decide among themselves who will lead the devotion and the prayer, they do not thereby call themselves a pastor. The leader's task in such a situation is an individual or private matter - not a public one. His duties do not include the care of souls or the responsibility for them. The task is temporary and ceases when the devotion comes to an end. When Christians gather together in this manner and use the Word, they do not thereby seek to supplant their congregation with their gathering. A temporary or incidental group is not a congregation, even though all those present may be true Christians. If some group in a congregation seeks to supercede the congregations, this is what Paul censured in Corinth, where some claimed to be followers of Paul, some of Cephas, and some of Apollos, and others rejected the office of the ministry entirely claiming to be followers only of Christ. Nowhere in the New Testament is there an example of any other independent group of Christians besides the local congregation using the power of the Keys. The exhortation (1 Cor. 14:40) "let all things be done decently and in order" has not been given to some separate group, but to the local congregation. When Christians temporarily meet with one another and use the Word, this must naturally also be in accord with the true doctrine and confession. They can regard each other as brethren in the faith on the basis of their relationship to their local congregations. Here too, the local congregation has its own significance.

A temporary group of Christians does not have the essential marks of the Church. It does not baptize. It cannot celebrate the Lord's Supper because a celebration of the Sacrament under such conditions would mean by-passing the office of the ministry of one's own congregation and its responsibility for examining the communicants. Temporary use of the Word does not tell us much about the effects of the Word. The Augsburg Confession assumes that the Church is where the Word and Sacraments are in continuous use (docetur, ministrantur, the present passive indicates a continuing situation. Augs. VII). It assumes a continuous adhering to the Word and Sacraments, living by them. A group of Christians temporarily gathered together does not have these marks. Christians present at such a gathering cannot in all cases be regarded as Christians merely on the basis of their confession at that meeting, but a proper confession also includes a person's relationship to his congregation and its ministry. When, for example, a congregation disciplines an impenitent sinner in order to lead him to repentance, it may happen that such a person will, upon meeting individual Christians, give a most orthodox confession of his faith to show that he is a genuine Christian, but in his own congregation he is not ready to settle matters, because he has not actually repented of his sin.

If a temporary group of Christians begins publicly using the power of the Keys, which belongs to the local congregation, serious contradictions, of a necessity result. These contradictions concern, in addition to each one's relationship to his own congregation and pastor, also the common responsibility that the members of a local congregation have toward each other's spiritual state, in other words church discipline.

"WHERE TWO OR THREE ARE GATHERED TOGETHER IN MY NAME", Matt. 18:15-20

In this passage Jesus, first of all, teaches His disciples how an individual, not public, trespass ("if thy brother shall trespass against thee") is to be handled in a Christian manner. The erring "brother" is a member of the congregation (compare 1 Cor. 5:12,13: "Do not ye judge them that are within? But them that are without God judgeth. Therefore put away from among yourselves that wicked person.") If the erring brother does not listen to the one whom he has sinned against, the next step of the procedure follows. "In the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established." The witnesses are already members of the congregation! They cannot, however, if the erring brother remains impenitent, handle the matter to its completion, but the matter is to be brought to the congregation. Here we therefore have an instance, where two or three Christians, in obedience to Jesus' command, are trying to win their erring brother, but who do not have the right to use the power of the Keys publicly. This passage shows us that not any two or three Christians are a Christian congregation in the same sense as the local congregation. These witnesses are individual Christians, but they do not constitute a congregation.

In the third stage of discipline, the matter comes before the congregation and becomes public. The activity of the congregation is public by nature. As such it must be established by witnesses. The congregation is responsible for the spiritual care of its members. Even though the trespass here described is an individual matter, the spiritual responsibility lies with the whole congregation. An established, continuous case of impenitence is a public matter that concerns the whole congregation, so that the person trespassed against, cannot individually release the trespasser from church discipline, but also he is bound by the decision of the congregation. "Let him be unto thee as an heathen man and a publican." The text rigidly binds the public use of the power of the Keys to the congregation and forbids an individual from acting contrary to the decision of the congregation.

When Jesus had taught the right use of church discipline, He promised: "Again I say unto you, that if two of you shall agree on earth as touching anything (peri pantos pragmatos) that they shall ask, it shall be done for them of my Father which is in heaven. For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them." (Matt. 18:19,20.) The correct practice of church discipline which the Savior has just taught is such a difficult matter, that it demands "the power of our Lord Jesus Christ." (1 Cor. 5:4) Jesus now promises this strength to them here. Verses 19 and 20 are directly connected to the verses dealing with the correct practice of church discipline and the first word of verse 19 "again" (palin) binds it to the previous verses. Confessional Lutherans have taught that the two or three witnesses mentioned in these verses are the smallest possible congregation, in whose midst Jesus is also present with all His power. The context compels us to treat the matter in this way. In addition the following factors support this interpretation:

The local congregation began from a mission situation, generally from two or three. This is the smallest possible number for public witness-established activity. Two or three is the number of witnesses. According to the Bible, the actions of the

Congregation in regard to individual members must be based on matters that can be established by witnesses. Jesus' teaching in Matt. 18:18-20 points to the time after Pentecost. Jesus speaks of those who in the future will agree "concerning any matter" (peri pantos pragmatos). The members of the congregation have actually agreed among themselves that they as a congregation and as believers in Christ, bear the full responsibility for the use of the power of the Keys. Christians do not always think of this, when the origin of the congregation is far in the past.

The two or three mentioned by Jesus are gathered together in the name of Jesus. This points to a gathering for a purpose. In this context it is impossible to imagine some accidental situation, let us say for instance a family reunion to which God in the sense of the 1st Article, leads Christians who confess the same faith. Jesus is, of course, present there with them, as He is with individual Christians. But the fact that the Savior mentions more than one but nevertheless only two or three must be significant. We cannot explain this by saying that Jesus would rather be with two or three than with one. Taking this approach we would have to conclude that the number of people present adds more Jesus' presence, which would be a fleshly conclusion. Coming together in Jesus' name and being together in His name points to the Church or the communion of saints in the sense of the 3rd Article. In Jesus' name a Christian cannot by-pass his congregation or his pastor. Being together in Jesus' name means that Christians have the Word and the authority of Jesus for such a gathering. When Jesus here gives the promise of His presence to two or three and not on the one hand to one, or on the other hand to a larger group, this can but mean that Jesus is present with the smallest possible congregation.

In verse 20 the word for "gathered together" in the original text is synagoo. It is in the perfect tense, which indicates that the gathering together has once occurred and continues in being together. Paul uses the same word for the gathering together of a congregation in Jesus' name to deal with a case of church discipline in a public matter (1 Cor. 5:4). The word is also used elsewhere when congregational activity is meant. (Acts 4:31; 11:26, 14:27, 15:30, 20:7,8). The word synagogue comes from the same word, which word was used to denote not only the synagogue congregations of the Jews, but also the congregational gatherings of the Christians (James 2:2). Despite the fact that the word synagoo is a terminus technicus, its use in the Scripture is not restricted to congregational activity. The context in which it appears must decide its meaning in each case.

AN OBSERVATION REGARDING THE OFFICE OF THE MINISTRY

This essay deals only with the divine nature and characteristics of the local congregation. The doctrine of the ministry (as divine mandate) demands a separate study. At this time, however, we would like to call your attention to a certain matter. One of the basic duties of the shepherd of a congregation is to care for the souls belonging to the congregation and account for them before God. This care of souls and the responsibility for them is by nature continuous and includes all the members of the congregation, whether they be children, aged members, soldiers, theological students or other students, or the sick - or whether they live in the congregation's main locality or move away from it. The responsibility is assumed by another congregation and its ministry regularly only when a member has given up his membership in his former congregation. The office of the ministry of a congregation differs from special offices which have possibly been established jointly by congregations, in that it has the complete and continuous responsibility for the care of souls.

THE RULE AND THE EXCEPTION

Members moving from one area to another, wars etc. may bring about special situations in which members are separated from their local congregations and their pastors by great distances and therefore cannot be in personal contact with them. In discussions concerning the Church and the Ministry special cases are often cited. Naturally in all situations we are to try to abide by the rules, but it is not always possible.

A classic example is an emergency baptism when for example a mother may baptize the child if the pastor cannot come in time. The local congregation and its ministry are for the purpose of creating and sustaining faith. In situations where the practical application of the doctrine of the Church and Ministry would obviously be against the purpose for which they have been established, a departure from the rule is justified. Each situation must be considered individually. It is impossible to know before hand what different types of situations and special cases may arise.

If on the basis of special cases we make conclusions that overthrow the basic rule or the Biblical doctrine and Practice, we are violating all rules of common sense. The old proverb already states: "The exception proves the rule". In other words the exception is not the rule, nor does the exception do away with or destroy the rule.

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