

THE CHURCH OF THE LUTHERAN BRETHREN

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In 1890 the United Norwegian Lutheran Church in America was formed. It was a body which was comprised of the Conference for the Norwegian-Danish Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, the Norwegian Augustana Synod, and a group known as the Anti-Missourian Brotherhood. About ten years later in 1900, the United Norwegian Lutheran Church experienced a small loss. This small loss resulted in the Church of the Lutheran Brethren. A group of pastors and congregations led by Knut O. Lundeberg left the United Norwegian Church and formed the Church of the Lutheran Brethren. The people who formed this new church body out of the United Norwegian Church were concerned with the "purity" of their congregations. They were dismayed at what they perceived as "lax standards" of Christians in the large Norwegian Church. The Lutheran Brethren consisted of pastors and laymen back in 1900 who espoused a strict Haugean pietism. This Haugean pietism can be traced back to ^{Hans} Nielsen Hauge (1771-1824) who was a stirring lay preacher in Norway. Hauge is credited with starting the revival movement in Norway in the late 1700's and early 1800's. Through Hauge's preaching of repentance and regeneration, many backsliders were revived to a stronger faith. As a result of their pietistic background and influence by Haugeanism, the Lutheran Brethren grew out of the great revival which swept the Midwest shortly before the turn of the century.

This revival served as the catalyst which moved a group of Norwegian Lutherans from the United Church to form their own church body because of the abuses which they perceived in the United Norwegian

Lutheran Church. As stated in one of their booklets, the revival served as the foundation for the Lutheran Brethren:

The revival did not only cause people to ask, "What must I do to be saved?", but also, "What is the right order in the House of God, as it pertains to church membership, worship, communion, absolution, confirmation, etc.?" They turned to the New Testament for answers to these questions, and there they could find no Scriptural foundation for accepting the unconverted into full membership. Neither could they find any basis for admitting unconverted to communion and for requiring the oath in confirmation from young people who were not in the right relationship with God. Finally, Scripture simplicity of worship as opposed to the elaborate ceremonies which prevailed in many church services. These matters became questions of conscience, and many said with the saints of old, "We must obey God rather than men." 1

As a result of the revival and the convictions which it brought to these Norwegian Lutherans of the United Church, several congregations withdrew from the United Church. Realizing the need to join together for home and foreign missions, Christian education and other concerns, these congregations formed a new Synod.

Rev. K. O. Lundeberg was one of the chief leaders in forming the Synod. Lundeberg became a leader of this movement because he had begun publishing a Norwegian paper entitled "Broderbaandet" which discussed the important topics of the day brought on by the revival which spread across the Midwest. The questions concerned the daily life of a Christian, the order of worship in church and such practices as confirmation in the Lutheran Church. Of special concern to Lundeberg was the evidence of faith in one's life who confessed Christ. The common belief held by the original founders of the Lutheran Brethren was that a

congregation should only consist of confessing Christians whose lives give evidence of their faith. They felt that this point had to be stressed in their formation as a Synod for the Church is the "communion of saints." This belief can be traced back to pietism which stressed the factual evidence which every believer should show in his life to validate his claim to faith.

Although the Church of the Lutheran Brethren has been cited by historians as coming out of the United Norwegian Lutheran Church in America, the Brethren themselves do not mention this church body when they speak of their own beginnings. In a number of their booklets and pamphlets, the Brethren themselves state:

The organization of the Church of the Lutheran Brethren goes back to the turn of the century when five independent Lutheran congregations met in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, in December of 1900, to form a new Synod. Their purpose was not divisive since they were not splitting from any denomination. Feeling the need to join together for projects larger than one congregation could handle, they organized a new church body. 2

While it is true the Brethren were not splitting from the Lutheran denomination as such, they did separate themselves from the United Norwegian Lutheran Church. The impression that Lutheran Brethren give today concerning the founding of their Synod is that it was a direct result and an outgrowth of the revival movement which spread across the Midwest. From this revival a group of believers emerged who organized the Church of the Lutheran Brethren.

To say that the spiritual awakening was not that great of an influence on the Lutheran Brethren is an understatement. The Lutheran

Brethren look back at the revival of the late 1800's and early 1900's as their starting point. Many people, it is claimed, were converted during the revival. Many others were renewed in their faith. These new converts and strengthened believers began to meet in small groups for Bible study and prayer. The life they lived as a member of a Christian church took on a whole new approach and purpose. These people met with some resistance from the established churches. Many pastors did not approve of these Bible study groups because of the tensions which they created in their own ministry and service to the church. But the resistance did not stop these individuals who were influenced by the revival. The Lutheran Brethren themselves say:

When the church resisted, they met in homes because they hungered for the Word of God and the fellowship of believers. Several pastors joined these believers. As scattered groups of believers began studying the Scriptures, many began to ask questions about how they should live their lives as Christians. Guidance was sought from the Bible. Patterns began to emerge. These new converts began to see that God's will for the believer was to live a godly life, patterned after the principles of Scripture. The Christian life was not only teachings to confess, but a life to be lived for God in holiness. Their study further led them to questions about the church. They observed that many went to Holy Communion but didn't live the Christian life each day. Many trusted in their baptism and confirmation with no seeming evidence of daily spiritual life. Many in church leadership were often the most resistant to Bible study, prayer, and the idea of conversion. 3

Thus it can be seen today that the Lutheran Brethren look back at the great revival of the turn of the century as the catalyst for the formation and creation of their church body. A church body which was formed by a group of Christians who were united in practices and attitudes reminiscent of the Pietistic movement in Germany of the 1600's.

Because of the common interests and attitudes toward worship and the Christian life, in December of 1900, five congregations gathered for a convention in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. It is from this convention as was noted earlier that the church of the Lutheran Brethren was organized. A constitution was drawn up which was patterned after the constitution of the Lutheran Free Church of Norway which was organized in 1877. The constitution stressed that each congregation should consist of those Christians whose faith was evident in their lives. Obviously the Lutheran Brethren were concerned with the sincerity of Christians who listed themselves as members of a Christian congregation. Also, it is evident from statements from the Lutheran Brethren that the abuses of the Christian faith which were common in the state churches of Europe were fresh in the minds of the founders of the Lutheran Brethren.

The Lutheran Brethren were blessed with the coming of Rev. E. M. Broen in 1902. Broen served as the first president of the Lutheran Bible School which was under the control of the Brethren. The school was founded in 1903 in Wahpeton, North Dakota. It was moved to Grand Forks, North Dakota, in 1918. At Grand Forks a four-year high school course was also added. The School was again moved in 1935 to its present location. Today the School is situated in Fergus Falls, Minnesota. The name of the School was changed to Lutheran Brethren Schools in 1948. Today the Lutheran Brethren Schools includes Hillcrest Lutheran Academy and the Lutheran Bible School and Seminary.

Ever since its inception, the Lutheran Brethren have been active in foreign mission work. At the beginning of the 1980's, the Lutheran Brethren had a membership of 9,704 members in America supporting 41

missionaries overseas. That averages out to 236 members per missionary. The Brethren have been one of the top church bodies in supporting overseas missionaries. The first missionaries were sent to China in 1902 and were carrying out their work until driven out by the Communists in 1947. The Brethren, however, continued to work among the Chinese with the establishment of a mission on the island of Taiwan in 1952. In 1918 the Brethren began work in Africa in the countries of Sudan, Cameroon, and Chad. The work by the Brethren in these areas includes evangelistic work, the establishment of seminaries and Bible Schools, and a public health program. A program of translation has also been in operation with the completion of two complete Bible translations in the languages of local natives where the Brethren missionaries serve. In 1949, the Brethren extended its mission work into Japan. On the island of Honshu churches and a Bible School were established. This strong emphasis on foreign mission work has resulted in the Brethren having a greater membership on the mission fields than in the homeland. The Brethren back up their talk of being mission minded with financial aid. In 1986 the Brethren spent 45% of the total synodical budget for world missions. It is interesting to note that although the Brethren have only 121 congregations in the United States and Canada, they have 600 congregations and 450 preaching places in Cameroon, Chad, Japan, and Taiwan.

The Church of the Lutheran Brethren are certainly an interesting study for they are unique in many ways among Lutheran church bodies. They claim this uniqueness themselves as they say, "Because of its stand on church membership, its non-liturgical form of worship and its strong

emphasis on evangelism, the Church of the Lutheran Brethren holds a unique position among Lutherans in America." 4 Also, their emphasis on preaching and personal witness to convict people of sin and bring faith in Jesus to people has an effect on their view of the sacraments. They say, "... not to minimize the effective working of the sacraments. However, the mere ceremonial use of baptism and the Lord's Supper was not to be a 'pillow' upon which to rest for assurance of salvation." 5 More will be said later on on the Brethren's over-all view and teaching of the sacraments, but it is important to realize at this point that the Lutheran Brethren fill their own little slot in the world of Lutheran Churches. The purpose of this paper is not only to examine their teachings. By this examination of their teachings it is my express purpose to show how unique the Brethren are among other Lutheran church bodies and especially how they compare in both teaching and practice with the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod. The intended result I have for this paper is to show how the church of the Lutheran Brethren are actually espousing a different type of Lutheranism than the Wisconsin Synod is, and to bring to light some of the problems that may occur with the Brethren's form of Lutheranism .

The Lutheran Brethren have departed from some traditional practices of the Lutheran Church because they consider some of these practices to be neither Scriptural nor Lutheran. For example, their view of of confirmation is this:

Because confirmation as it is generally practiced gives an erroneous impression of the true nature of the Christian life. There is a good deal more to being a

Christian than learning the facts of the catechism and going through a ceremony. Because experience and observation have proven beyond the shadow of a doubt that the majority of the confirmands do not take seriously their confirmation vows. Because the traditional rite of confirmation is neither Scriptural nor Lutheran. Nothing can be found in the Bible in support of it. It was not introduced among Lutherans until about 150 years after the Reformation. Luther himself regarded it as too much of a concession to the Catholic church. 6

This topic of confirmation will be dealt with later in this paper, but it is mentioned here to show how the Brethren have put themselves in a unique position among Lutherans. Their view of confirmation and what it has been used for in the Lutheran Church is typical of what their view of the Christian faith and life should be.

The Lutheran Brethren have produced a tract entitled What Does It Mean To Be A Christian? In this writing they use five key words which outline what they consider being a Christian is all about. First, being a Christian means that you "recognize" that you are not a Christian because you are good. "Recognize" that you are not a Christian because you are doing the best you can. And "recognize" that you are not necessarily a Christian because you are a member of some church. Secondly, the Brethren use the word "confess". "Confess" that you are a guilty sinner in God's eyes, "confess" that you cannot save yourself, "confess" that you are hopelessly lost without Jesus as your personal Savior. The third term is "believe". "Believe" the good news that Christ died for the ungodly and "believe" that Christ was raised from the dead and is able to save all who come to God through Him. The fourth word is "call". "Call" on the name of the Lord Jesus by acknowledging

your sins. Finally, the fifth key word is "rely". "Rely" on God's promise and not upon your feelings, and by faith declare that you are saved by the blood of Jesus Christ. Therefore, the Brethren say this will lead you to openly confess Jesus with your mouth as your Savior and Lord.

The Lutheran Brethren is basically a confessional church. They adhere to the Apostolic Creed, Nicene and Athanasian Creeds, Augsburg Confession and Luther's Small Catechism. They stress the importance and efficacy of the Word and the Sacraments. They teach that the knowledge and benefit of Christ's redemption is brought to man through the means of grace. However, they add that, "all who having reached the age of accountability must have a conscious experience of sin and saving grace." ⁷ Apparently there is no one age which is looked upon by the Brethren as the age of accountability. For most people it comes around age 14 when after two years of instruction the young person is encouraged to make application for communicant membership in the congregation. The Brethren state it this way:

Young people who at this time give evidence of a living faith in the Lord Jesus Christ are encouraged to join with the congregation in the monthly communion service and to make application for communicant membership in the congregation. ⁸

Those young people who are not accepted into membership at the time of their confirmation are still regarded as non-communicant members of the church. The church prays for their salvation and continues to encourage them to participate in church activities. So while the Lutheran Brethren teach the efficacy of Word and Sacraments, they still require

a conscious experience and a personal testimony of faith (by each individual) which is supported by one's daily living. This stress on the conscious experience and age of accountability makes the Brethren unique among Lutherans.

Agreeing with their concept of who is ready for communicant membership is the Brethren belief and teaching of what constitutes the local Christian congregation. They teach that the local congregation is the communion of saints or believers in the gospel. From this they teach that, "the membership of the local congregation shall comprise only those who by life and testimony show that they are living in fellowship with Jesus Christ." ⁹ The Brethren not only take into consideration a person's confession of faith but also his faith as it expresses itself in daily life before they will determine that one is truly converted. In their booklet entitled Questions and Answers the Brethren state what is considered by them before one is allowed to be a member who is truly converted:

First of all, part of this responsibility rests with the applicant himself. He has already been made aware of the requirements for membership. He knows that he must profess faith in the Lord Jesus Christ as Savior before he will even be considered. Secondly, it is the duty of the board of elders, exercising the God-given spirit of discernment, to evaluate that testimony as to its genuineness and as to whether it is in harmony with the applicant's daily life. If there is nothing in his daily life that contradicts his testimony, the church accepts him. ¹⁰

Thus it can be seen from their own statements that an evidence of confessing faith is seriously weighed before an individual is accepted as a member.

Although the Brethren emphasize the conscious experience of faith and a personal testimony backed up by one's daily life, they regard the sacraments as the means by which God conveys grace and saving faith to the individual. The Brethren accept Luther's definition of a sacrament and therefore teach that both bring spiritual blessings. This can be seen in their teaching on infant baptism:

It is the baptism of infants or small children that is often questioned, mostly on the grounds that they do not need to be baptized and are not able to receive the blessings of baptism. We, however, are convinced by the Word of God that infants both need to be baptized and are able to receive the benefits offered through baptism. 11

The Lutheran Brethren teach that little children can be brought into contact with God's saving grace through the Sacrament of Holy Baptism.

At the same time, however, that the Brethren speak of the power and efficacy of God's saving grace conveyed through baptism, they add a hint of man's cooperation in coming to faith through baptism. In the writing entitled A Biblical View of the Sacraments the Brethren speak beautifully of God's work in bringing faith to an infant through baptism and explain how faith is a gift of God. But then they add that, "He (God) is able to create faith in any heart that is open to Him. What heart is more open to God than the heart of a little child where resistance is absent." 12

Although the Brethren believe and teach that baptism is a means of regeneration, the above statement from their own sources seems to indicate that man's will wasn't totally depraved at the Fall. They teach that, "Man was originally created in the image and after the likeness of God to live in His fellowship. He fell into sin through the

temptation of Satan and thereby lost fellowship with God, became totally depraved and is under the wrath of God." ¹³ It seems like their belief in total depravity is "softened" a little when they speak of a heart being open to God or that a baby does not have resistance present in his heart.

The Lutheran Brethren speak of a need for a conscious fellowship on the part of individuals with God. They especially look for this conscious experience with God in those young people who were baptized as infants and are ready for confirmation instruction in God's Word and the teachings of the church. The Brethren believe and teach that this conscious experience of the baptized person is essential for the individual to continue to live with God in unbroken fellowship. They teach that the time must come in each individual's life when spiritual life becomes conscious and real. The Brethren explain this conscious reality as:

"This is a time of crisis in the lives of our children and young people, which is characterized by a realization of the sinfulness of the heart, a conscious acceptance of the grace of God, and the surrender of the life to Him. By this the young person ratifies or approves, as it were, the act of the parents in having him baptized as an infant. Such an experience in the lives of our children and young people is essential and should be encouraged." ¹⁴

The Brethren are afraid that a person will fall in^{to} the danger of considering himself a Christian because he has been baptized as an infant or has godly parents or is living a good life or is faithful in church attendance. They believe that when these things are relied on for salvation, they become items of self-righteousness which may lead to the

loss of one's spiritual life. The outward form of godliness is not enough as the Brethren say, for it is vital for young people to know Christ as their personal Lord and Savior.

The Church of the Lutheran Brethren accepts the traditional teaching of the Lutheran ^{Church} involving the Lord's Supper. They believe and teach that in and with the bread and wine Christ gives Himself to the believing communicant in a real way. They view the Lord's Supper as a sacrament which has all three of the requirements for a sacrament in the wide sense. They teach that it follows baptism in importance because its purpose is to nourish the life that has been created through the Word in the Sacrament of Baptism.

Therefore, the Brethren very definitely teach that the forgiveness of sins is offered through the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper. The Brethren state in their pamphlet entitled A Biblical View of the Sacraments:

The divine gift received in the Lord's Supper is therefore the remission or forgiveness of sin. This is what the new covenant offers, and it contains all the other blessings of the redemption of Christ. This teaching is in harmony with our Explanation of Luther's Small Catechism, question No. 308 . . . It is pointed out in these words: "Given and shed for you for the remission of sin." Through these words, the remission of sins, life and salvation are given unto us in the sacrament, "for where there is remission of sins, there is also life and salvation." This gift is received through the Word, but according to Christ's own words, it is also received and confirmed in the Lord's Supper . . . It is a comforting thought for the believer, that as he receives the elements of bread and wine and together with them the body and blood of Christ, that on the basis of the merits and sacrifice of Christ the forgiveness of sins is imparted to him. 15

The Brethren also teach and confess that both believers and unbelievers receive the body and blood of Christ. The unbeliever, however,

does not receive the forgiveness of sins but rather as I Corinthians 11:29 states, he receives condemnation which the Brethren teach is some divine discipline or judgment which will come upon an unbeliever and teach him the error of his ways. Because of this condemnation which is brought upon an unbeliever, the Brethren practice a communion which is open only to the believer. The Brethren do not stipulate that this believer be a part of their church body. They state, "We will not knowingly permit anyone at the Lord's table who has not truly repented of his sins and who does not believe on the Lord Jesus Christ." 16 There are no indications in their writings whether this "believer" needs to be a member of their church body or someone whom they have considered eligible on a personal basis for participation in the Lord's Supper with them.

Because of the pietistic influence on the Church of the Lutheran Brethren, they teach that people should not only attend the Lord's Supper after a "real self-examination". One of their lines found in their pamphlet reads like this, "We must find out if we need to partake of the sacrament and if we are truly prepared to enjoy this privilege". 17 It is very good and proper to be serious about self-examination, but the Brethren give the indication that the Lord's Supper isn't something which needs to be attended frequently. But the Brethren do say that a person should not consider himself for communion based on his worthiness or unworthiness, but rather it should be based on the need for the grace of Christ. With that in mind the Lord's Supper would be taken frequently by all Christians for all believers are in constant need of the grace of Christ.

A rather unique aspect of the Brethren in their teaching of the Lord's Supper is their view toward associating absolution with the communion service. They state in their booklet Questions and Answers:

We also believe that the practice followed in many, if not most, Lutheran churches of associating absolution with the communion service is entirely unscriptural and often results in deceiving men concerning their true spiritual state and plunges them headlong into perdition. 18

From this it is evident that the Brethren do not see the need or Scriptural proof for the absolution in the Lord's Supper service. Not only do they see no need for it or Scriptural proof for announcing the forgiveness of sins in the communion service, but they also believe that such a practice is harmful because it may deceive some men as to what their true spiritual condition is.

The emphasis which the Brethren place on the Lord's Supper is seen by the form and use of Holy Communion in their services. The Brethren have separated their communion service from their regular form of worship. The celebration of the Lord's Supper is set apart from the regular service and is conducted informally. A positive emphasis may be seen in the Brethren's attempt to set apart communion from the regular service. However, the Brethren's infrequent use of the communion service may tend to down play the importance of and the need for the Lord's Supper. The Brethren usually hold their communion service only once a month. In some congregations communion may be held less than once a month. The dropping of the number of communion services offered each month and throughout the year reflects the influence of pietism on the Church of the Lutheran Brethren.

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The service itself is very informal. In fact, the Brethren refer to their communion services as "meetings". They usually open with a hymn and a free prayer by the pastor or one of the members. A brief meditation follows the prayer which is based on Christ's suffering and death. The consecration of the elements is done by the pastor. The distribution of the elements is done by the elders of the church. After the distribution the service closes with a prayer and testimonies of faith by any communicants who may wish to do so. Thus it can be seen that the Brethren also hold a unique position among Lutheran Churches in their practice of Holy Communion.

Another teaching and practice which sets apart the Church of The Lutheran Brethren is in its view of the local congregation. The Brethren regard the local congregation as an organized assembly of believers in Christ in any given place where the Word of God is rightly taught and the sacraments administered. The Brethren readily admit that there is basically no difference between them and other Lutheran church bodies in theology on this point, but rather the difference lies in practice. The Brethren contend that the difference in practice is one of emphasis. They claim that they consistently emphasize the New Testament concept of the local church and make a serious effort to practice it through the administration of the individual church. The Brethren also say that, "Many other Lutheran churches, while acknowledging this practice to be both Biblical and ideal, regard it as impractical and limiting the ministry of the church." 19 The Brethren very definitely emphasize the concept of the local church in their practice and teaching.

The teaching and practice of the Brethren in regards to the concept of the church does play an important role in determining church membership. The Brethren agree that the Bible sometimes uses the word "church" as applied to the church universal. But the Brethren point to the passages in the New Testament which for them support their practice of local church administration. Such passages which use the words "Saints", "Beloved of God", "Brethren", "In God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ" when referring to the specific relationship between God and His children are used by the Brethren to describe the members of the local church. In these passages Paul is addressing local churches, therefore, the Brethren are convinced that all members of a local church must be true believers of Jesus. Since all members of the local church are members of the body of Christ, the Brethren teach that such members who by their life or teachings indicate that they are not living with Christ should be removed. To carry this point even further, the Brethren believe that no local congregation with a mixed membership of believers and unbelievers can possibly exercise church discipline. The Brethren very seriously believe and teach that a local congregation is comprised of only true believers in Jesus. They believe that the local organized church is comprised of nothing but true believers.

The kingdom of God as the Brethren explain is much broader than the church. The kingdom of God as expressed in Matthew 13, the Brethren teach is not the same as the church or the local congregation. Rather the kingdom of Heaven or God includes everything created where the good and evil grow together until the Day of Judgment. Therefore, the Brethren teach that neither the visible church in the Roman Catholic view nor the invisible church in the Protestant view can be equated with the kingdom of

God. In the words of the Brethren themselves, "The Church is the instrument of the kingdom, the agency that the kingdom of God ordinarily uses . . . The Church is the messenger of the kingdom, 'the light of the world,' the voice in the wilderness bringing the call and the message of God to all men." 20

In the book House of God by M. E. Sletta, the Brethren teach that the expressions which the Bible uses for the congregation (or the church) and for the kingdom are not the same. They contend that the teaching of the Bible about the kingdom and the congregation is not the same. This view of the kingdom of God and the church explains the Brethren fear that church discipline is not practiced today in many churches because of confusion of the terms. M. E. Sletta states, "Church discipline . . . is practiced very little in many churches. The reason for this is that the world is in the congregation and how can the world discipline the world? The terms, 'kingdom of heaven' or 'kingdom of God', therefore, do not have the same meaning as the terms, 'church' or 'congregation'". 21 The Brethren believe that the kingdom of God in the parables refers to God's providence in both Heaven and earth. The kingdom of God is the spiritual force operating in the world for the world's salvation. M. E. Sletta says that in the parables this power operates and works in the world to prevent it from sinking down in sin and corruption. The field, then, in the parables is the world and not the church.

The experience that the forefathers of the Brethren had with the state church in Norway has had a bearing on the development of Brethren teaching and practice concerning the doctrine of the church. The Brethren point to the passages found in the Epistles which refer to the church as "saints" and those who have been called out from sin to Jesus. Therefore, the Brethren

contend that these expressions cannot truthfully be used about state churches or a mixed congregation where many of the members do not even profess Christ. These expressions are used only of believers and are not to be used of organizations that are not comprised of believers with pastors, elders, and deacons to serve them. Because of the abuses of the state church in Norway, the Brethren are very sensitive about what is to properly be called a church. Also, their pietistic tendencies play a major role in their thinking on this subject.

This stress on purifying congregations to be certain that they are composed of only true believers expresses itself in the Brethren's speaking of two classes of Christians. The Brethren state it this way:

The Bible does not teach that all professing Christians are true Christians . . . The Bible reveals this serious and searching truth that there are two kinds of professing Christians in the world: one born of the flesh and the other born of the Spirit. 22

Since there are two classes of Christians, the Brethren believe it is the church's responsibility and duty to exercise church discipline upon such worldly people who only confess Christ. Because the church consists only of believers, it must carry out discipline on those who do not back up their confession with righteous living.

Some of the theological leaders to whom the Brethren look for guidance also have stated very strongly what their view of the church is. A Dr. Odland writes:

From the Word of God I am personally convinced that the apostolic churches consisted only of such members who testified to the saving power of Christ in word and deed, and I am also convinced that it is the apostolic teaching that the church at all times should consist of

such people . . . But here is where the church has sinned much through the ages and is still sinning. The carnal desire to be great and powerful has led the church into worldliness and falsehood. 23

From the last sentence, it can be seen that much of Dr. Odland's concern for the church has been prompted most likely by the abuses of the state church in Europe. I think it is important to remember that the Brethren have in the back of their minds the concept of the state church when they speak of what a true church should consist of. Obviously the state churches in Europe consisted of many people who were not Christians but were called Christians by the state because they were citizens of that country.

Although the Brethren are correct in their teaching that the term "kingdom of Heaven" as it is used in parables such as are found in Matthew Chapter 13 cannot be equated with the church, they tend to stress the visible church concept above the invisible church. The Brethren feel that although the spiritual life of a Christian is indeed "hid with Christ in God" as they say, the Christian himself is not invisible. Again it is true that the Christian is visible by the fruits of his faith, but only God knows positively who is part of the church and who is not. Since God alone can look into the heart and can see through a confession and beyond the works of an individual, He alone knows the true church with all of its members. Man does not have the insight into the heart and, therefore, can only base his knowledge of the church on outward signs. Sometimes these signs are going to be deceiving. This is why the term "invisible" has been used by the dogmaticians. The true church is not visible to man for he is limited in his perception. There are definite

outward marks of the church, but because there are wicked men who openly confess faith and may even appear to be followers of Christ while they deny and reject the truth in their hearts, the concept of the "invisible church" must not be denied as representing the true church on earth. The Brethren say, however:

To use the term "invisible" is unfortunate because it so often gives a wrong impression (or room for much misunderstanding). When we with the old dogmaticians speak about the invisible church as the real church or the proper church, and the visible as the improper or unreal church, then we can misunderstand this in two ways: First, that the real church is not the invisible church. Secondly, that the visible church is not the real church. In this way the church is eliminated from the realities of the world. 24

Now the Brethren readily admit that the reality of the church can only be observed or known by faith, but they stress and press the issue that the true church is a visible reality which is revealed by the inner spiritual fellowship expressed by believers. While this can be understood in the correct sense, the emphasis on the visible church as being the true church does have its problems. When speaking of the true church, the emphasis is better placed on the invisible church which embraces all true believers in Christ. As the apology of the Augsburg Confession states:

If we were to define the church as only an outward organization embracing both the good and the wicked, then men would not understand that the kingdom of Christ is the righteousness of the heart and the gift of the Holy Spirit but would think of it as only the outward observance of certain devotions and rituals. 25

As far as church government goes, the Brethren admit that the Bible does not give detailed directions for a church constitution. But

the Brethren do find in the Epistles a pattern which can be used to organize congregations. There is no mention of a "secretary" in the Bible, but someone must have been in charge of records for numbers and names of believers in the church as the Brethren point out. They also mention that the term "treasurer" is not used yet the church certainly kept tab on their financial matters as evidenced from Acts 11:30. The New Testament does mention the office of deacon and elder. Therefore, these offices play an important role in the government of the local Brethren congregation.

The Brethren believe that the office of the elder is very vital to their health as a spiritual group of believers centered around the Word. The Brethren view the office of the elder as the most important office within the congregation. They say:

The basic synodical view is that the elder is a gift of God to the congregation. He has been divinely equipped to perform the functions of his office. The important consideration for the congregation is to study the qualifications of elders laid down in the Word of God and then to discover within the congregation those who have been thus divinely equipped. 26

The Brethren include the pastor in the office of elder when they speak about it. The board of elders is the leader of all the spiritual activity in the congregation.

For instance, the elders take an active role in deciding church membership as they accept applications for membership. The duty of evaluating a person's readiness to become a member rests on the shoulders of the Board of Elders. The elders evaluate the testimony of ~~of a~~ faith

which an applicant makes before the elders. The elders also closely examine the applicant's daily life to determine if his lifestyle matches up with his confession. If the applicant is approved by the elders, the church accepts him as a member. There are basically four steps involved before one becomes a member of the church. First, he makes his desire known to the pastor or one of the elders. Secondly, an interview with the applicant is conducted by the pastor and Board of Elders. Thirdly, the congregation considers the applicant for membership based on the evaluation of the Board of Elders. And, fourthly, if the congregation approves, he meets with the congregation at its next communion service and is welcomed as a member. He is given the opportunity to testify at that service of his relationship to the Lord.

The members in the Brethren church who have the right to vote are communicant members both male and female. In most of the congregations, voting members include men and women who have passed their twenty-first birthday. There are, however, a few Brethren congregations who only allow the male communicant members over twenty-one to vote. According to the synodical constitution, each congregation is free to determine their own voting practices. But when the synod meets in convention, only male members are given the right to vote.

Besides the four steps to membership, which includes an evaluation by the Board of Elders as to the qualifications of the applicant, three conditions must be met by the applicant before he will be considered for membership. First, all applicants for communicant membership must have assurance of a right relationship to God. Second, all applicants must

accept the Lutheran confession of faith including every part of the constitution of the congregation they wish to join. Third, no applicant will be accepted who is a member of a lodge or who practices Spiritism.

The other type of member in the Brethren church is a catechumen. A catechumen is a baptized child of communicant members of the church. They are listed as catechumen until they become, as the Brethren say, "personal believers in Christ". This brings up the point of confirmation which was mentioned earlier. The Brethren do practice confirmation, but they themselves say it is not the traditional confirmation service. It does not involve a vow on the part of the catechumen nor is it to be regarded as a public confession of faith. The service does not automatically admit the catechumen to communicant membership of the church. Basically, the service is nothing more than an acknowledgement that the catechumen has completed a basic course of Christian instruction. Those young people who at the time of their confirmation are ready to come to a conscious faith in Christ are considered for communicant membership. Those young people who are not ready to come to a conscious faith in the Lord Jesus are regarded as non-communicant members of the church and are made the objects of persistent prayer for their salvation. They are encouraged to participate in the activities of the church which are open to them.

The Brethren say that they have rejected the traditional form of the confirmation service because:

It violates the principle of free choice inherent in Christianity. The confirmands make the answer they are expected to; custom dictates their course of action.

They are placed in a position in which it is difficult, if not impossible, to say no ... their parents and friends expect them to say yes; their brothers and sisters took the vow; they have no desire to be different ... 27

The Brethren feel very strongly about making a young person's confession of faith something that he or she desires to do from the heart and not from family or social pressures.

Of all the points mentioned thus far in this paper, the concept of low-church probably sets off the Lutheran Brethren more so than any other point. Some points of the low church style which the Lutheran Brethren practice are as follows: the pastor does not wear a clerical robe, the ritual of the Common Service is not practiced, common gospel songs are used rather than traditional hymns, the arrangement of the the pulpit and altar are different. The low-church form of worship is simple and informal. The center of the worship service is the preaching of the Word and the Brethren feel that with a non-liturgical form of worship the preaching of the Word is heightened. Basically the Brethren feel that the low-church form of worship is the best means of bringing the gospel to men and men to God. They allow Christian liberty for others who wish to practice a higher form of church worship, but they are bound by their own convictions to follow a low-church form.

The Brethren believe that public worship should be designed to lift up Christ so that unbelievers who may be in attendance will be drawn to Christ in faith. And what better way to draw unbelievers to Christ than to highlight the preaching of the Word. The public worship service in the Brethren mind is aimed at the unbeliever and is not considered the

most wonderful worship service for the believer. The communion service is only for the believer and the unbeliever is not welcomed to attend and observe the communion service in the Brethren Church. The communion service is considered by the Brethren as the most wonderful worship service for the believer.

The Brethren believe that one of the best reasons for restricting ceremonial acts and symbols in the church is that many who are not full-grown in the faith fail to comprehend that the external observance of these practices is no substitute for a repentant heart. They fear that high-church rituals lead to formalism and dead orthodoxy. One way to combat this, the Brethren believe, is to have a strong preaching ministry. A second reason for the low-church style is the economical use of time and money. Since more people come to Sunday morning worship than any other, the simplest and most direct way to win them is to tell them the gospel message. The Brethren believe the low-church style best facilitates this endeavor. A third reason for low-church style is that art in music and poetry tend to confuse people who do not have the ability or educational background to comprehend the gospel message through the art. And finally, the Brethren feel that people who practice a highly liturgical worship find it more difficult to speak about their personal life of faith. Group confession of sin and faith, they feel, stifles personal confession. Also, the pastor to them is the teaching elder, and if most of his public appearances center in a symbolic altar service, the impression that is given is that he is a priest.

The main emphasis on the preaching of the Word is to encourage people to relate what God has done for them personally. The Brethren say, "We must not be satisfied in our pastoral work until each of our baptized children will testify without the force of form that Jesus is Lord."²⁸ The Brethren believe that by not having their pastors wear clerical robes, by not having them pray toward the altar, by not blessing the people from the altar indicates that the pastor is not a priest. In many of their churches, the altar is gone. Their communion service is not centered around the altar, but the elements are brought to the people.

Other trademarks of the Brethren's style are evangelistic meetings where the gospel is simple and clearly preached. This is done to call people to a clear personal heart-commitment to Christ. In the end what the Brethren are aiming for is this commitment to Christ which is as they say "the heart of worship".

The Brethren state in their doctrinal statement that they adhere to the Augsburg Confession and Luther's Small Catechism. They respect Luther as a leader and instrument of God to bring about the needed reform in the Christian Church. They consider themselves Lutherans and, therefore, the name Lutheran appears in their name. They do admit, however, that there are some unique differences which separate them from other church bodies who also call themselves Lutheran.

One area of difference can be seen in the sacraments. Although they teach and believe the Sacrament of Baptism to be efficacious in producing faith, they have left the door open for the will of man to

cooperate in his conversion at Baptism with a statement like this referring to infant Baptism, "What heart is more open to God than the heart of a little child where resistance is absent".²⁹ This statement certainly leaves room for man's cooperation in the conversion process. This point alone would separate the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod from the Lutheran Brethren. In this same point of conversion, the Brethren stress the "crisis experience" which is to them the point in one's life when a conscious relationship with God is realized. The Brethren say it is only until after that point is experienced that one's salvation is real to him. Again, this type of emphasis on the experience of the individual would separate the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod from the Brethren.

When it comes to the Lord's Supper, two things among others probably stand out which would be points of difference between the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod and the Brethren. First, the Brethren do not observe Holy Communion as often as do most churches in the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod. This can be traced back to the pietistic influence on the Brethren. From reading statements by the Brethren on the Lord's Supper, one can easily come to the conclusion that taking the Lord's Supper often is not needed or is it wise. This goes back to the pietistic belief that communion is abused when it is offered often. Also, the low-church emphasis on the part of the Brethren also plays a role in de-emphasizing communion. Secondly, the Brethren feel strongly that to include an absolution as part of the communion service is wrong. These points would separate the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod from the Brethren.

Another point of difference between the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod and the Brethren concerns the concept of membership. The Brethren check into a member's life or one who wishes to be a member to find out if he is qualified. The Brethren say, "we do let it be known through public announcements and literature that men and women with acceptable qualifications will be welcome to apply for membership." 30 This emphasis on "qualifications" may tend to lead people to think that they are not "qualified" for membership into God's church. None of us are "qualified" but it is only by grace that we are part of God's family. The emphasis on the life of the individual is a point of disagreement between the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod and the Brethren. Their teaching on confirmation and how they practice it is a good example of the Brethren's view of membership.

Finally, the low-church practices of the Brethren very visibly separate them from the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod. The Brethren may not even look Lutheran to those of us from the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod. If you were to attend one of their services, they would probably remind you more of a Baptist church than a Lutheran. As one of their members once said, "The Lutheran Brethren are the Baptist of the Lutheran church." You would not see the pastor wearing a robe. You would not see an altar in many of their churches. You would not sing many of the hymns found in our hymn book. You would not see a liturgical form of service. These would be the visible differences between the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod and the church of the Lutheran Brethren.

I think it is important to keep in mind where the Brethren have come from. They came out of a church body which was likened by many to the state churches of Europe. It must be kept in mind that the Brethren are pietistic and in some ways readily admit this. The aim of the Brethren is to awaken the Christian to a life of a conscious relationship to God. Their hope is that through this vibrant relationship the church will reach out to the unbeliever with the gospel in its most simple and direct method. That is why the Brethren do many things which cater to the unbeliever in their public worship service. We in the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod may disagree with their methods and practices, but I do think that we can agree with their motives of reaching people for Christ and strengthening the faith of their own members.

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30. Pedersen, p. 14

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