

The Christian Congregation: Its Responsibility, Its Discipline, Its Service

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Introduction

In the letters to the seven congregations of Asia Minor, we read in the letter to Sardis: “I know thy works, that thou hast a name that thou livest” (Rev. 3:1). This congregation quite obviously had the reputation of being a live congregation, but was not so in reality, for the Lord adds the ominous words, “and art dead”!

This causes us to ask: What are the marks of a Christian congregation that is truly alive? The *Augsburg Confession* replies: The holy Christian church is to be found there, where “the Gospel is preached in its purity and the holy Sacraments are administered according to the Gospel.”¹ In other words: The church is Christ’s possession; the Word of God must be preached in all its purity and the Sacraments must be administered according to their divine institution. This is vital for the continued existence of the church. The very essence, the innermost being, of the church is at stake here. Doctrine is involved, the Word of God as the true and only treasure of the congregation. The congregation is both the workmanship and the workshop of the Holy Spirit. It is constantly engaged in warfare with all that is sinful and unholy in its own ranks. Moreover, the exercise of discipline is nothing more than the fruit of the pure preaching of the Word. We dare not separate confession from discipline or discipline from confession. Loehe, in his *Vorschlag*, wrote: “Confession without discipline lacks something. And discipline without confession cannot be a mark and fruit of sanctification, since these themselves stem from the true faith and confession. A true confession also binds itself to discipline.”² In addition, it needs to be said that both confession and discipline, actually all our actions and dealings, rightly understood, are to serve the brethren; as Peter puts it: “As every man hath received the gift, even so minister the same one to another, as good stewards of the manifold grace of God” (I Pet. 4:10).

By way of summary, we could say: A live congregation is one in which men by personal faith confess Christ and consider themselves accountable to Him alone, in which discipline is conscientiously exercised, and in which a proper attitude toward God is followed by a true concern for the brother.

Thus we have circumscribed our theme and arrived at the parts for this essay: *The Christian Congregation: Its Responsibility, Its Discipline, Its Service*.

I

The church is an institution of the Lord. It must therefore realize that it is completely and inseparably bound to Him and His Word. It may not sink to the level of a mere society, or club, in which everyone may espouse and express his pet ideas and notions. The congregation that is fully aware of its responsibility will, above all, take the confession of the truth seriously; it will endeavor to maintain and preserve the Gospel and stand up unequivocally for the testimony of the fathers. Paul writes to the congregation at Rome: “So then faith cometh by hearing” (Rom. 10:17), and to the congregation at Corinth: “I thank my God always on your behalf, that the ... testimony of Christ was confirmed in you” (I Cor. 1:4, 6). No band of steel could hold a congregation together or revitalize the faith and practice of the church better than the preaching which rightly

¹ All English translations of the Confessions are taken from *The Book of Concord*, Theodore G. Tappert, ed. (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1958). AC VII, 1, p. 32.

² Wilhelm Loehe, *Vorschlag zur Vereinigung lutherischer Christen für apostolisches Leben*, 1848.

divides Law and Gospel. Everything depends on God's Word. No dead man can revive himself; no blind man can restore his own sight. The preaching that comforts and rebukes is the decisive means by which personal faith is affected and preserved. A live congregation comes into being only where the proclamation of the Word of God binds men to Christ and makes them members of His Body. A person becomes a Christian only by accepting the expiatory sacrifice of Christ, by being conquered by the good news that Christ has "purchased and won me," a lost and condemned creature, as we confess in the Second Article, "not with gold or silver, but with His holy, precious blood, and with His innocent sufferings and death." Genuine Christian life and doing can come only from the cross of Calvary. The living Christian knows that the pure, unobscured proclamation of the Gospel must be the chief goal of all endeavor and responsibility.

The congregation is the possession of Christ. Its innermost essence is holiness, because its Head is holy. It is holy, not by virtue of the holiness of its members, but because it is the possession of Christ, who has committed to it His holy Word and Sacraments. The congregation must always be intent on keeping these treasures holy. It is a solemn and sacred responsibility of the congregation to see to it that the Gospel is preached in all its purity and the Sacraments are administered according to their divine institution. This responsibility can be met only by strict adherence to the Confessions of the church. Thereby the church and all its congregations testify that they have correctly understood the Word of God. Thereby they testify that they rightly understand and acknowledge God's claim upon their preaching and their life, and desire to obey Him. The duty and responsibility of the congregation extend to all doctrine and life.

What does the New Testament say about the responsibility of Christ's congregation? The church of which we are a part has its roots in the first congregation, which Jesus Himself gathered. Therefore, we must continue to learn from the early church. In Acts 14:23 we read: "And when they had ordained them elders in every church, and had prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord, on whom they believed." Paul and Barnabas appointed reputable and responsible men as elders in every congregation they founded. They commended these men to the Lord with prayer and fasting. And when, later on, Paul sent Titus to the island of Crete, he was directed (Titus 1:5) to appoint elders in the several cities. At the election of deacons Paul advised his pupil Timothy to see to it that they were men of good report both within and without the congregation. Discipline and good order in the family are unconditionally required. For how can anyone guide a congregation of God when there is chaos in his own house? Christ wants the kind of servants who, as Paul says, hold "the mystery of the faith in a pure conscience." They, as the *Augsburg Confession* says, are "according to divine right, ... to preach the Gospel, forgive sins, judge doctrine and condemn doctrine that is contrary to the Gospel, and exclude from the Christian community the ungodly whose wicked conduct is manifest. All this is to be done not by human power but by God's Word alone."³ These servants are in the forefront of responsibility.

The congregation is to see to it that, as Luther says in his explanation of the First Petition, "the Word of God is taught in its truth and purity, and we as children of God lead a holy life according to it." And he adds: "But he that teaches and lives otherwise than God's Word teaches, profanes the name of God among us." The goal must be "that I should be His own, and live under Him in His Kingdom, and serve Him in everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness." Everything sinful and unholy contradicts the very nature of the congregation. It must continually fight against the sin that dwells in the hearts of its members. However, when sin becomes manifest in one of its members and is an offense to the others, the congregation must react with church discipline. The offender, by his sinful act, defiles the very essence of the fellowship to which he belongs and threatens the entire fellowship by his sinful conduct. God requires that we lead holy lives. And he who desires to lead such a life will also welcome discipline. The constitution of the Old Lutheran Church states: "When a member has fallen into sin, and through false teaching or sinful conduct gives offense, the congregation, according to the command of our Lord, is to practice Christian discipline (Matt. 18:15-17; I Cor. 5)." The congregation not only has the duty to save individual souls, but must also strive, in its life as well as in its profession, to represent a holy temple of God. It is to see to it that the temple of God is not profaned by the insertion of "false building stones." This is required by faith as well as by brotherly love, rightly understood.

³ AC XXVIII, 21, p. 84.

God loves us before we come into existence. He loves us in His Word; He loves us in the Sacrament of Holy Baptism, by which He makes us His children; He loves us in the confession and in the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper, in which He offers us forgiveness and gives us sinners His body and blood. He loves us so that we can stand fast in the faith even in the difficult hours of temptation. Our love for the brother is only a dim reflection of His love for us. We live not only for ourselves. Christ places us into a position of responsibility for the brother. We cannot love God without at the same time being aware of our responsibility toward the brother. Luther says: "Because my God has given me, unworthy and condemned creature, without any merit on my part, solely out of mercy, freely and fully, through Christ, all the riches of godliness and blessedness, so I will also become a Christ to my neighbor, as Christ became a brother to me, and do nothing less than what I perceive to be necessary, useful, and of blessing for him."⁴

The conscious faith in Christ acts as a mysterious force to bind Christians together. Of the formation of the first congregation in Jerusalem on Pentecost Day we read: "And the same day there were added unto them about three thousand souls." When we read the Acts of the Apostles and the Epistles, we cannot fail to get the impression that brotherly love, next to the gift of justification, was the second great gift that the first Christians were privileged to possess and enjoy. Eventually this removes all barriers of race and nationality.

The congregation lives by faith, but it must also live in brotherly love. Faith and love are so intimately bound together that lack of brotherly love is a sign of weakness or absence of faith. Does not the preaching of justification constrain us to place brotherly love ahead of all other exercises? Each individual Christian is obligated "to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (Eph. 4:3). It can easily be destroyed by our disobedience and our lovelessness.

Paul compares the congregation to a body. If the feet were to say, "We will not carry the body;" the hands, "We will not grasp and hold;" the heart, "I will no longer supply the body with blood;" the head, "I will not think," then there would be terrible confusion. Such is a congregation without awareness of responsibility. It ruins itself by inactivity and ruins also the few who are aware of their responsibility by overworking them. It is no longer one heart and one soul, but at best just one man and a host of freeloaders, of demanding, spoiled, inactive people. A congregation which is living in virtual disobedience, a congregation which is not concerned about preaching and in which sin is no longer called by name and therefore cannot be forgiven, a congregation which does not concern itself about the lonely and forsaken consists of lifeless and loveless individuals and will soon become a lifeless and loveless community. Responsibility always includes and implies what Paul says to the Romans: "And be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God" (Rom. 12:2).

Out of the abundance of examples that detail our responsibility, I would like to single out three. According to I Corinthians 10:17, the body of Christ, which is given to us in the Lord's Supper, binds the recipients together in the body of the church and thus makes them responsible for one another. Is it not our duty to help one another to a more frequent and worthy use of the Sacrament? Then, too, might we not be caught unawares, if the Lord were to inquire after our godchildren? How often we imagine and believe to have fulfilled our obligation when we confess the faith in their stead at the time of Baptism, remember them with gifts at Christmas and on their birthday, and think thus to have met our responsibility. Finally, we are not only to be stewards of the mysteries of God, but also of the finances of the congregation. It were better if we needed to say nothing about this and had sufficient understanding to make us willing to offer also our earthly gifts to God, but the money bag, too, must be converted. We raise our own standard of living without a thought of the possibility that our congregation may breathe its last clue to undernourishment. We keep our church in such a financial condition that it exists only by virtue of the support we receive from overseas, but never seem to get to the point of proper development from within.

Love is the mortar that ties the individual stones, the individual members of the congregation, together. For if I "have not love, I am nothing" (I Cor. 13:2—RSV). We should be genuinely aware of our responsibility. We must not hesitate to speak our mind with one another. But it must be done in the spirit of friendliness. Jesus

⁴ *Luther Schriften* (Erlangen), 27:196.

Himself was always very frank but never loveless. Christian love is, above all, mutual truthfulness and faithfulness. The important virtue in a congregation, as in marriage, is faithfulness. Keeping oneself aloof from the congregation is not only faithlessness, not only an offense against the brethren, but also a sin against God, who is the Head of the church. The exclamation: "What's it to me!" dare never be heard in a Christian congregation.

In our congregations we find many weak, indolent, and poorly-grounded Christians. These must be guided and guarded and girded. Luther remarks that a living Christian cannot do otherwise than direct and lead to the right way a neighbor who is straying or steeped in sin, to the way on which *he* has found comfort and help. He proclaims the Gospel to him and thus frees him from his sin.⁵ We are too prone to leave the delinquents to themselves instead of making an earnest effort in their behalf. If our church is faulted for being concerned about and looking after scattered brethren, we shall gladly accept the criticism and put up with it. Why do we look after them at quite an outlay of time and money? Because we are not ready to leave to themselves those whom Christ has led to a living faith and a new life; because God has laid upon us the responsibility not to let them perish in spiritual starvation. We cannot simply neglect the aged and infirm. We cannot leave the dying without comfort. We cannot write off the scattered just because they are farther removed from us.

II

Christ gave His congregation the Holy Spirit and promised that He would lead them into all truth. Therewith He also obligated them to preach the true doctrine of salvation unmistakably, scripturally, purely. True preaching, the preaching of Law and Gospel, includes also the exercise of discipline among the members of a congregation. Discipline is a measure that a congregation applies through the bearers of the spiritual office for the sake of both the individual and the congregation. Its purpose is, first and foremost, the conversion of the sinner and then to guard the congregation against offense. The purpose and goal of all discipline is the restoration and return of the lost sheep to the fold of the congregation.

Confession and discipline belong together and are vital to life. The fact that discipline in doctrine and life has not at all, or not sufficiently, been exercised has ever and again shown itself to be dangerous and damaging to the existence of any church, any congregation. Discipline is not optional for us; it is an urgent command. "And it is the clear command of God that we should flee from Idolatry."⁶ The *Apology* declares: "We should forsake wicked teachers because they no longer function in the place of Christ, but are antichrists. Christ says (Matt. 7:15), 'Beware of false prophets'; Paul says (Gal. 1:19), 'If anyone is preaching to you a gospel contrary to that which you received, let him be accursed.'"⁷ Dollinger says: "We act as if the exercise of discipline were entirely a matter of our own judgment, and since life is much more pleasant without it, it is almost entirely neglected. But the discipline of the church is by no means ... a human ordinance but ... a command of the apostles and of their Lord."⁸ Christ permits no abridgement of His charge to His disciples. The Holy Spirit countenances no impurity in His members. The individuals are not merely members of the congregation, but members of a body of which Christ is the Head. They dare not tolerate evil on the part of one of their fellow members. When a member impenitently persists in sin, all of the members and the entire body are dishonored and disgraced. Therefore, the congregation has no choice but to exercise discipline. Unholiness and impurity may not simply be overlooked. The evil must be removed either by sincere repentance and amends on the part of the offender, or, if he remains impenitent and persists in his sin, by exclusion from the congregation. We hasten to add: There is only one sin which excludes from the communion of saints and that is persistent refusal on the part of the offender to hear and heed the admonition of his brethren, which amounts to persistent impenitence and adherence to his sin.

⁵ *Erl.* 15:40.

⁶ *Treatise*, 58, p. 330.

⁷ *Apology* VII and VIII, 48, p. 177.

⁸ Robert Dollinger, "Kirche ohne Kirchengenossenschaft?" in *Junge Kirche*, vol. 4, 1936, pp. 510f.

Many times the failure to exercise discipline is excused by the well-known complaint of Luther: “But I don’t as yet have the people and the persons for it!” In such cases it is usually said that the people are not adequately trained and the congregation not mature enough to be fully aware of the necessity of discipline. But a Christian congregation dare not satisfy and comfort itself with this excuse. Of course, it depends on the character and make-up of the congregation, as to whether discipline can be exercised in a lesser or greater degree. But the start must be made sometime, and the training must be begun. For the Lord says unmistakably: “Son of man, I have made thee a watchman unto the house of Israel: therefore hear the word at my mouth, and give them warning from me” (Ezek. 3:17). The provision for the exercise of discipline is made when confession and absolution are practiced in accordance with the Scriptures and when Law and Gospel are properly proclaimed and the Sacraments are rightly administered. The admonition and warning, “You can not be saved in your present state,”—rightly understood—is the greatest service of love we can render to one another. This is also true when it finally results in the “let him be unto thee as an heathen man and a publican.” What must become of a congregation that no longer offers such conscientious exercises of love? The injunction is: Win the brother from the way to hell back to the Lord, who has bought him.

However, the congregation dare not be misled by the world’s false notions of tolerance and erroneous ideas of love. Inflexibility in doctrine and in the admonition of the erring brother is no more presumptuous than when I warn a brother of danger and disaster. Polite silence over against evil can never be love. The way to hell is not only paved with good intentions, but much more with our ineptitude and reluctance to speak a word of warning in love. Christ’s Kingdom is a kingdom of the open but also the closed door. Woe to the church that rejects the Keys or refuses to use them!

It would be wrong suddenly to exercise full discipline in a weak congregation, and equally wrong to try to build a congregation only by means of rigid discipline. This would be “no less foolish than the delusion of advising critically ill people to restore their health by strenuous bodily exercise.”⁹ One cures a sickness by beginning purification at the root. It is not that church discipline doesn’t produce good fruits, for discipline itself is a good fruit of a healthy tree. Church discipline is the natural result of true preaching of the Word.

The most important means of discipline is the Word of God (Heb. 4:12). By means of a proper preaching of God’s Word the Holy Spirit exercises church discipline. God wants to work on us by means of the Word we preach. His promises to us are always bound to the use of His Word. One cannot be a Christian and bypass or remain outside the congregation. Christians are as intimately bound together as are the members of our body. Christ is the Vine, we are the branches (John 15:5), who abide in Him and who can live only by and through Him. We simply cannot remain Christians and survive without the preaching of the Word, without the Sacraments, and without fellowship with the brethren. For that reason the apostle warns us: “And let us consider one another to provoke unto love and to good works: not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is; but exhorting one another” (Heb. 10:24–25). Whoever absents himself from the divine services of the congregation or does not cultivate brotherly fellowship, will not only lose contact with his fellow members but also with the Lord, the Head of the congregation. The preaching of the Word and the administration of the Sacraments can no longer strengthen and sustain His faith. Hunger for the Word diminishes; likewise gratitude for God’s Word and works. The assistance of the congregation in combating the Old Adam, the world, and the prince of this world is no longer at hand. Whoever forsakes the divine services and is indifferent toward the life of the congregation resists the Holy Ghost, who desires to work on him through the Word. This already indicates to us that we cannot simply remove a member’s name from the roster of the congregation, but must follow the divinely prescribed course of church discipline. This involves, first of all, every attempt to bring an erring one back to the fellowship of his brothers and sisters in the faith.

Church discipline belongs primarily to the care of souls. Love, not lovelessness, grace, not law, speaks the first word. Congregational discipline is not a matter of emotion but of wisdom and compassion. The congregation that is exercising discipline acts not as an Old Testament people of the Law but as a New Testament congregation of faith. Therefore, church discipline belongs, first of all, into the realm of brotherly

⁹ Christian Stoll, “Kirchenzucht” in *Bekennende Kirche, Sechste Reihe, Heft 51/52*, p. 11.

admonition. Only when pastoral exhortation no longer avails, when the grace of God is spurned, is excommunication possible.

The New Testament gives us two directives for the exercise of congregational discipline. The first we find in Matthew 18:15–17: “Moreover if thy brother shall trespass against thee, go and tell him his fault between thee and him alone: if he shall hear thee, thou hast gained thy brother. But if he will not hear thee, then take with thee one or two more, that in the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established. And if he shall neglect to hear them, tell it unto the church: but if he neglect to hear the church, let him be unto thee as an heathen man and a publican.” Note that it says: “If thy brother shall trespass against thee, go and tell him his fault.” Many think that the sin of the neighbor does not concern them. This is a convenient out and avoids much unpleasantness; but God shows us that it is not right. The sin of the brother demands my taking a position over against it. If I want to be a disciple of Jesus, I dare not ignore the matter; I must act. “Go and tell him his fault between thee and him alone.” However—rightly understood—the goal is not the reproof and the admonition but the endeavor to recall the brother from his erring way, to win him back. In other words, the congregation must not leave the erring brother to his fate but lead him to sincere repentance. Here, however, every trace of selfishness, haughty condescension, self-righteous harshness, or cocksureness must be avoided. Rather, imbued with love for the brother, we ought to be sober, sincere, and humble. It all depends on the right spirit. It is not a matter of proving that *we* are right, but that the brother concedes that *God* is right in His judgment and in His mercy.

The several steps of admonition point up the great concern that must obtain. Each step must be kept as private as possible. After all, it is not a matter of putting the offender in the pillow, of humiliating him, not even when the second and third steps need to be followed. It is a matter of winning the brother, and the more fellow Christians are involved, the more intensive should the love be to bring this about.

Three stages are therefore employed with regard to the erring brother. Each stage can conclude the matter, if a settlement is reached. The first stage is between two persons. If the matter cannot be resolved, one or two more members of the congregation are drawn in. If these cannot achieve a settlement, the entire congregation must make the effort. If this achieves nothing, then, but only then, one thing remains: “Let him be unto thee as an heathen man and a publican.”

The other directive is given by Paul (I Cor. 5:1–5): “It is reported commonly that there is fornication among you, and such fornication as is not so much as named among the Gentiles, that one should have his father’s wife. And ye are puffed up, and have not rather mourned, that he that hath done this deed might be taken away from among you. 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 together, and my spirit, with the power of our Lord Jesus Christ, to deliver such an one unto Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that the spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus.”

The offense is so serious that Paul has only one consideration: the judgment. But note how solicitously he proceeds! Before the verdict is pronounced, these three must collaborate: the congregation, the spirit of the apostle (Paul is not in Corinth), and, most decisively, Christ. A decision must be made only in His spirit. Thereby every false emotion is eliminated. Not until all three have reached a unanimous decision, dare the verdict be pronounced upon the offense. Cf. Luke 17:3; Galatians 6:1; II Timothy 4:2; II Thessalonians 3:14; Titus 3:10; James 5:19.

So surely as the power of the Keys can be exercised, according to the *Augsburg Confession*, “only by teaching and preaching the Word of God and by administering the sacraments (to many persons or to individuals, depending on one’s calling),”¹⁰ the use of the Keys still remains as a special task besides preaching and the administration of the Sacraments. Such dealing requires the utmost care. The sin itself divides; but God uses the confessed and pardoned sin to give the blessing of a renewed and deeper fellowship, and the congregation is edified and grows. Woe to the congregation that withholds from its members that which restores the roots: Forgiveness of sins! When we no longer practice mutual confession and absolution, the pivotal

¹⁰ AC XXVIII, 8, p. 82.

exercise of humility, yes, the following of the cross, ceases among us. Now we understand Luther when he says: “To restore a grieving and despairing heart (through the forgiveness of sins) is much greater than to conquer a nation.” Therefore, “it should be the first and foremost concern of all bishops to have the people learn the Gospel and the love of Christ.”¹¹ However, the love of Christ is the passion for overcoming sin. It is not a matter of rigorous condemnation but of saving the fallen, imperiled brother. One might also say: True life will be evident in the congregation in the measure that the members exercise forgiveness of sins among one another.

This is true also with regard to pastoral dealings with members. It is a matter of leading the congregation into the discipline of the Holy Spirit by means of preaching as well as by pastoral care. At the same time, we dare never forget that we are only instruments, helpers, of God. It is not a matter of psychology, or human judgment, but of the question: Where is your brother? It seems to be a fact that people would much rather run to the consultation room of a physician with their life’s problems than to look up their pastor. In any case, the fact remains that most people, also many church members, live without a curate of souls. Whether this is due to timidity on the part of the members or to the personality of the pastor is debatable. Nevertheless, we find here an earnest admonition that we pastors and, in the sense of the universal priesthood, all Christians, must equip and prepare ourselves much differently for our task in the care of souls, so that we view it with greater joy and compassion, with more courageous confidence in the Lord, who sends us and whose strength is mighty in our weakness.

Here are a few references that may be of help to one or the other. It is not without significance how we look upon the person we desire to help, whether we observe and appraise him, or whether we look upon him with brotherly understanding and with the purpose of setting him right. If we could see with Jesus’ eyes, we would certainly be alarmed over how often our care of souls becomes pure pride. It baffles us repeatedly to note how children, in most instances, react correctly to strangers in spite of their lack of experience. They simply are able to observe without bias. We must seek this unbiased and impartial perception again and again in our prayers, if we want to deal responsibly with our fellow members. We can certainly see others, and to some degree ourselves, quite correctly. Even our cold human mind is able to observe sharply, yet it does not discern that which is essential. We might say, it perceives only a motionless snapshot of a living person. One cannot learn to evaluate people as one learns to do a mathematical problem. The first requisite is that we do not make the other person feel that we are looking at him appraisingly, but that we are deeply concerned about him, recognizing our responsibility toward him, that we look at him with eyes of faith, which means, we have confidence in his Baptism. We confidently believe that God in his Baptism assures him of cleansing from all sin and of a new life. And when God assures something, it shall be done.

To deal in a pastoral manner does not mean that we are afraid to get to the point; but we will not be ruthless and loveless. A surgeon who wants to remove a tumor must cut sharply, but he will do it delicately, because he sees beneath the crust that which is essential—life—and because he does not want to endanger this life. To deal in a pastoral manner means to see both sharply and solicitously, to see so sharply that we surmise what actually is concealed behind the many integuments, behind the pride and the problem, and yet do it so humbly and lovingly, that the life which we behold, the person whom we are to judge responsibly, does not cringe and withdraw further into a shell or try more anxiously to disguise his condition. Curiosity is never capable of such seeing, neither is objectivity - only love is capable of so perceiving. It is not true that love is blind; being in love is blind. Love gives sight. To love a person, a physician once said, means “to see him as God intended him.” Luther says: “Do you desire to know the sum of Christian life, superbly and fully expressed and yet briefly and quickly stated and quite to be remembered . . . so that you know what to do and not to do and how you are to fit yourself for it? The answer is love.”¹² From this he concludes: “All that God commands and wants is love.”¹³ “All other commandments, including the divine, must be regulated according to the First Commandment. If they run counter to it, they must be set aside, even if they were divine commandments.”¹⁴

¹¹ *Lutherische Monatshefte*, 6/62.

¹² *Erl.* 18:279.

¹³ *Erl.* 51:284.

¹⁴ WA 14, 610, 12ff.

Church discipline is an act of love for the fellow man. However, this love is not required only of the pastor. A congregation dare not make dealing with imperiled members so easy for itself that it resolves the difficulty by passing it on to the church council (elders) that, in turn, passes it on to the pastor. Naturally, the pastor and the church council are not excused from this responsibility. They are chiefly responsible. But the words of Paul are pertinent here: “And whether one member suffer, all the members suffer with it; or one member be honored, all the members rejoice with it” (I Cor. 12:26). Active love will appeal to the erring brother much more readily than mere words. He often feels quite inhibited in the presence of the pastor. However, if a fellow member comes to him, he is apt to speak more freely and, as a rule, be much more inclined to hear and heed him.

The farmer must first prepare the soil, before he can sow the seed. The soil of the human heart will certainly be deeply affected and prepared by the Law. But God also wants to make use of personal friendship and intercession to loosen the soil, in order that the testimony of Christ may be sown in it. Here we often fail. We speak about Christ instead of simply testifying for and of Him. That which springs from the head usually only reaches the head; that which comes from the heart, and that alone, finds its way to the heart. We should rather simply say: “See what God has done for me; this He desires to do for you. I had nothing stable in my life, I lived only for the present with never a thought of God. I had no peace. But since I belong to the Lord, He has given me all things. I now stand in the faith and trust of God. Now I know the true purpose and goal of life. Now I have pardon and by it peace with God and man.”

However we may have begun our conversation, it will lead to the proper goal only if we place the brother under the cross when he comes to a knowledge of sin. Every attempt to force a sinner to repentance, no matter how well concealed, is wrong. The worst kind of force is moral force. Repentance is wholly the work of the Holy Spirit. We can only do what John the Baptist did—point to Christ and say: “Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world” (John 1:29). He bears also your guilt. Only the Holy Ghost can bring a man to the conviction that he is a sinner and that he needs and has a Savior.

Herewith we have spoken essentially about the problem of those whom we may label “fringe-members”; this ought to receive more attention. By such fringe-members we commonly mean such members as seldom, if ever, make use of Word and Sacrament and are quite indifferent to the congregation and the church. They are still carried by the congregation, because it is hoped that they will still find their way back. Of course, we shall first need to ascertain why they became fringe-members. Each case may be classified differently and must therefore be handled differently. I shall be able to mention only a few groups and give a few directives for dealing with them.

There is one group whose connections with the congregation have become dangerously loose, because they halt between two opinions, are torn between two pet pursuits, sports events and social affairs on the one hand and church life on the other. In preaching places where afternoon worship services are held, this halting becomes evident in young men, when they ask: “Pastor, can you not hold services at another hour? At three o’clock I must play for my club.” As sincerely as the pastor may want to set the time of service to suit the most people possible, he still cannot relieve the people from the responsibility of making a choice, a decision. A Christianity, a church life, which must accede to the competition of pet pursuits, which no longer stands up to those who ridicule churchgoers, has become very questionable. Once the church member’s power of resistance has been worn down, it is often only one short step to actual inward defection from Christ.

Another group seems to keep itself aloof from the congregation because the pastor, or one of the councilmen, or one of the members has conducted himself in an unseemly manner. How often we are a hindrance instead of a help to one another on the way to God! It may not be anything reprehensible, but a weak brother has taken offense at it. In such cases, each one must earnestly ask himself how he became an offense to the brother. Brotherly love must move us to avoid such actions and utterances lest we may cause others to fall from the faith. However, the others must also be told: There dare be no isolationists in a Christian congregation. Whoever says, “I am a Christian but I do not care to associate with the rest,” sins against the brethren and against God. To decline fellowship means to decline Christ. We cannot be reconciled with God without at the same time being reconciled with each other.

Many times young Christians get to be fringe-members because father and mother, who perhaps attend church regularly and should set an example of Christian life, force them to conclude from their conduct: "Christians are no better than others, perhaps even worse." How many a mother, how many a father, has thus caused a child to stray from rather than stay with Christ! At such a time it will be in place to remind the young people that we are not perfect and must continually repent and seek forgiveness. It will also be proper to call to their attention that we are saved, not by the faith of another, but by our own personal faith in Christ. However, words alone will hardly be convincing. Rational, concrete arguments will not solve the problem. Many times, it is true, criticism is directed against an alleged and ostentatious piety, but the rejoinder: Going to church does not make one pious, and the reference to bad church members is only an excuse for one's own immoral life. We ought therefore always seek to ascertain what lies behind every argument that is advanced.

There is a third group whose motives are not clear, who came to us in the wild post-war period and are still carried on the roster of the congregation but take a very negligible part in the life of the congregation. Here our primary mission obligation is to make them realize that it is not enough to present themselves before the Lord once every three months. But how often we drive these people away from the congregation instead of bringing them into closer association with it! An example will illustrate what I mean: An elderly woman is one of this group. For some time she has absented herself from the divine services. Whether her excuses were according to the truth is rather doubtful. After two house calls she finally comes to the service again. The others stare at her, and on the way out of church a regular attendant cannot resist making the remark: "Well, where did grandma lose herself today?" No comment is necessary.

The fourth group includes those who plead the excuse of living at too great a distance from the church. They cannot regularly participate in the life of the congregation, and this usually ends disastrously. In this group are also those who are scattered far and wide and whom we are able to serve but rarely. This poses a marked problem which can perhaps be solved only by referring these people to nearby sister free churches, or supplying them more frequently with good sermons than heretofore, and inviting them to special church affairs, such as mission festivals, anniversaries, and the like.

Finally, our concern for a live congregation points us to one more group. These members are apparently not guilty of any particular sin, but they rarely partake of the Lord's Supper. In this connection we wish to emphasize at the outset, that whoever refuses to make use of the means of grace actually rejects God. But this conclusion will not suffice. The problem of Communion attendance is not only serious in the territorial church, but it is also so in our church and causes us deep concern. Only continual instruction can improve the situation. This supplies the reason for the following exhaustive exposition of confession and Communion.

For Luther and the church of the 16th and 17th centuries it was a foregone conclusion that the Lord's Supper was more frequently celebrated by the congregation and received by the individual. So we may ask: Why do our members come to the Sacrament of the Altar so infrequently? I have often found that church members who were exhorted and urged to attend Communion more frequently have given as reason that they were unable to prepare conscientiously for confession and did not want to "eat and drink damnation" unto themselves. We will have to take this reverence for confession and Communion seriously and seek to preserve it. It would seem to me to be more proper than a superficial "yes" in confession. The danger of superficiality can appear when all at once the Lord's Supper is celebrated schematically, and therefore legalistically, each Sunday.

The solution of the Communion problem requires a deeper understanding for confession. The pastor should always be a person in whom the people have confidence as regards confession. But in a live congregation he will be only one of many upon whom the burdens of others are laid. If one makes of his confession a phonograph record that is played everywhere, he must expect to be viewed with suspicion and distrust. A true confession is so delicate and personal, that one should not parade it through the streets.

The governing and guiding principle must ever be: Whoever rightly divides Law and Gospel expects salvation from God alone and not from some human activism, much less from an artificial revival of the confessional. Luther says: "One may well stimulate but never drive; one may well invite, but never coerce. One

may strengthen the people in their confession but never use the confessional to threaten and frighten. They should confess freely, willingly, and gladly. If this cannot be attained, force should not be used.”¹⁵

A Christian will always look upon the one who is confessing while being fully aware that God is also looking upon him. He dare never reduce the one confessing to an object of curiosity. A pastor must know and understand: When God sends a person to me, it does not mean only that I am to be concerned about *his* soul, but I am to ask myself whether God is not sending him to me for my benefit also. In such humility our care and cure of souls must be carried out. This does not keep us from seeing clearly. On the contrary, it is only thus that we shall learn to look upon our neighbor with the eyes of God, to love him, and not merely to view him with cold appraisal.

Whoever sincerely desires to help another, whoever is deeply concerned about his soul, must always be ready to listen, really to listen. This requires much patience, and being patient is not merely a technique to be learned; it is a fruit of faith. Only praying people have patience. The one who is active and fervent in prayer is always ready to accept the gift of speaking and being silent at the proper time. He will oftentimes abstain from human judgment even though he may have observed things that give him the right to pass judgment, because he knows that he is not the “sovereign.” The believer knows who is the real Authority; that God judges both the one confessing and the confessor. This alters our relation to the neighbor. We may no longer exalt ourselves above him, for we, too, are standing on the lowest rung. We no longer point to the mote in the brother’s eye, because we have seen the beam in our own eye, and it has frightened us. However, this does not exclude our venturing to speak a firm “no,” a stern judgment. Paul counts himself among the “chief of sinners.” This nowise muzzles him, but makes him a fearless witness: “Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners” (I Tim. 2:15). Our worship of God has become false and foul when we no longer call sin by its right name. It makes our worship vain and our faith vacuous. In this way we cannot be saved. However, as long as sin is called by its right name among us, as long as we continue to remit or retain sin, so long will we remain a congregation in which Jesus Christ works in us by His Spirit and makes us willing and faithful and fruitful unto good works. The point is that we dare not overlook sin and ignore it by simply continuing to worship in pious fellowship, but what is important is that sinners might be saved. Misunderstood love can never replace confession. We may not excuse people from making confession. The way of the prodigal son to the father is only by repentance.

Now we may supply the answer to the question raised earlier, why so many people would rather consult a psychiatrist than a pastor. They want it known that they desire to be helped but not hurt. They would rather be patients than sinners. They want to be spared the responsibility and remain neutral. But whoever seeks to avoid his Judge passes his Savior by. The cure of souls dare never degenerate into enthusiastic soul-help. This would merely deaden the pain and not heal the wound. True cure of souls will not spare the sinner the awareness of his guilt. Where nothing is said about guilt, there can be no pronouncement of forgiveness. Only this pronouncement heals the soul. There is no detour, no secret bypass that can lead to peace with God and still avoid His judgment. Whoever will not bow to God’s judgment neglects God’s grace. Now we really understand the deep concern of Paul that it is possible to receive the Lord’s Supper unworthily: “Ye cannot drink the cup of the Lord, and the cup of devils: ye cannot be partakers of the Lord’s table, and of the table of devils” (I Cor. 10:21). Reverting to paganism and, at the same time, appearing at the Lord’s Table are incompatible. Worthy reception of the Lord’s Supper obligates us to avoid sin. Paul lists a number of sins which are incompatible with fellowship in the Holy Spirit: Idolatry, immorality, stealing, avarice, drunkenness, slander, un-brotherly conduct, lack of trust in God and lack of fear of God. For that reason he gives the communicants of all times the advice: “But let a man examine himself, and so let him eat of that bread, and drink of that cup. For he that eateth and drinketh unworthily, eateth and drinketh damnation to himself, not discerning the Lord’s body” (I Cor. 11:28–29).

On the other hand, is not our neglect of the Lord’s Supper to be explained in many cases by our neglect in our preparation for confession to put into the forefront the glorious and comforting invitation of our Lord: “Come unto me, all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest” (Matt. 11:28)? To guard the

¹⁵ Adolph Koeberle, *Der Herr über alles*, 1957, p. 208.15

sinner against receiving the Lord's Supper to his damnation is really only one aspect of true preparation. A sacred solemnity overshadows our celebration of the Lord's Supper. Realizing that we receive the true body and blood of Christ, we are moved to approach the Lord's table with trembling awe, in the spirit of the prophet: "Woe is me! For I am undone; because I am a man of unclean lips" (Isa. 6:5). But where is the exulting joy over the forgiveness of our sins, over being permitted to enjoy the most intimate communion with Christ that characterized the early church? In Acts 2:46 we are told of the ἀγαλλίασις, the sacred joy that filled the church at this feast.

There is no plainer evidence that a congregation or a synod is decadent than the decline in Communion attendance and the deterioration of Communion discipline. "In the Supper of the lord is the heart-beat of the Church. Where the heart dies, the whole body dies. The Church dies with the Lord's Supper."¹⁶ Communion cannot be replaced by mere preaching. Only where the Gospel is preached in its truth and purity can the Sacrament be preserved and rightly administered. And only where the Sacrament is rightly celebrated can the preaching of the Gospel remain pure. The congregation must have concern for both. No one can understand Luther's contending for the Lord's Supper, if he overlooks the fact that giving up the divinely instituted celebration of the Lord's Supper inevitably leads to a disintegration of the faith. For Luther the struggle for the divinely instituted use of the Sacrament was at the same time a struggle for pure doctrine. Justifying faith belongs to a blessed attendance at the Lord's Table.

Admonition, directed to the sinner's conscience in the confession, is a prerequisite for the invitation to the Sacrament that dare not be given up. A congregation that fails to practice closed Communion is doing wrong by its members. Communion announcements are a remedy against indifference, make the congregation aware of the seriousness of its duties, and, in connection with the pastor's counseling, cannot be without conscience-provoking influence. If it becomes evident that the one concerned has departed from the doctrine of the church, he may not be admitted to the Lord's Supper, for the worshipful use of the Sacrament of the Altar contributes to a closer binding together of the members of a church who agree in doctrine. If the erring one refuses to give up his sinful life, he must be denied admittance to the Lord's Table.

The pastor has the authority and the duty to withhold absolution and the Sacrament from such as are manifestly impenitent. In such cases, he is acting not only as pastor of the individual member, but as shepherd of the entire flock. To him are committed "the Keys of the Kingdom of Heaven" by virtue of his call from the congregation. He is to be a custodian over them. As administrator of the Keys he must see to it that these will be administered according to the will of the Lord of the church. As administrator of the Sacrament of the Altar he is to see to it that it is not misused and profaned. As shepherd of the congregation under his care, he is to see to it that no offense is given by admitting an unworthy communicant to the Sacrament. And last, but not least, he has the duty to see to it that absolution and Communion serve for the communicant's blessing and not for his judgment. He is to exercise pastoral care and church discipline.

If it becomes apparent that the one confessing views his confession only as a matter of form, if he spurns all admonitions to repentance, absolution must be denied him, and pastoral dealing then becomes an ease of church discipline. Nevertheless, it is to be noted: a secret of the confessional can be a matter of pastoral care, but never a matter of church discipline. Church discipline belongs into the realm of pastoral care, but pastoral care, as such, is never church discipline.

Denying someone admittance to the Lord's Table is known as suspension. We must distinguish between suspension and excommunication. Suspension is temporary exclusion from the Sacrament. To employ suspension as a threat is un-evangelical. Suspension is an act of love, not a punitive act. Suspension is declared, because there are still prospects and hopes of a willingness on the part of the offender to come to contrition and repentance. Suspension is applied, wherever absolution cannot yet be pronounced. The erring one cannot be admitted to the Lord's Table, because he would receive the Lord's body and blood unto judgment. Denying admittance to the Sacrament is designed to awaken the need of forgiveness and lead to sincere contrition and

¹⁶ Hermann Sasse, "Kirche and Herrenmahl," in *Bekennende Kirche*, Heft 59/60, 1938, p. 74.

repentance. Suspension from the Sacrament is both a pastoral and a disciplinary measure. It must be applied in all cases of public and persistent offense (I Cor. 5:11).

Suspension from the Sacrament is a means of the church that is intended to lead to repentance. For that reason, spiritual work needs to be done on him who is under suspension. This is to continue until it achieves sincere contrition, or excommunication must be declared. Normally, suspension ought to be applied only until the next observance of the Lord's Supper, and should rarely exceed a year. But it must be noted: If the application of suspension on the part of the congregation was a result of a ruptured relationship to God, then the lifting of the suspension must be preceded by a reconciliation of the suspended one with God. Since suspension was a result of sin, the sin must be confessed and absolution pronounced. If this has occurred—in public offenses also publicly—then the offense may no longer be held against the offender, and he must again be regarded in every sense of the word as a member of the congregation.

What has thus far been said about suspension from the Sacrament plainly indicates that we can hardly apply it to so-called fringe-members. The problem they present to us is simply this, that they rarely get to the divine services and also despise the Sacrament. If the pastor, church council, and congregation have done all in their power to win back such a person, but without success, he must be dealt with. His soul is in danger. We do not have the right privately to remove his name from the membership roster and then feel satisfied that we have solved the problem. Neither dare concern over our small membership cause us to shrink from taking proper action. We forget only too readily, that the growth of a congregation depends on God and not on us. But God wants us to deal openly in all love and brooks no lack of discipline.

On the other hand, we dare not succumb to the other extreme that we give offense to weak Christians by being hasty and harsh in our dealings. Prof. H. Kirsten once set up 32 theses against un-evangelical practice. I would like to cite a few of them in this connection.

6. Evangelical practice foregoes not one iota of that which God requires; but demands nothing more than faith and love.

9. Evangelical practice seeks to prepare the way for the working of the Gospel by means of the Law, but avoids trying to assist in the process; and because it expects the fruits of the Spirit solely through the Gospel, it is willing to wait for them.

11. Evangelical practice restricts pastoral care to specific application of the Law and the Gospel; it leaves the searching and judging of the heart to Him who alone can judge the heart.

22. Zeal dare not be so blind as to prevent love from reigning over the Law and to despise wisdom as counselor.

Un-evangelical and legalistic practice includes also the following:

24a. Unnecessary, or premature, or unedifying polemics. To admonish unto repentance and faith, instead of preaching that which works repentance and faith.

24b. Leaving reproof to the time of announcements or confession ... suspension (from Communion) except for manifest impenitence.

24e. Following the principle that one must each time publicly certify the presence or the lack of salvation of the deceased.

24f. Meddling in domestic and marital affairs except in the case of open sins.

25. Legalistic discipline turns the Gospel into Law; makes the Law the disciplinarian but not to lead the offender to Christ; makes confession a torment, pastoral care a bungling, church discipline a pressure on the conscience, makes the people petty, painfully work-righteous and pharisaical, and the church a police agency.

Let us therefore hold this fast: For every congregation which does not want to give up its own identity, the exercise of discipline, which must always extend itself upon doctrine and life, is a duty that may never be

surrendered. This is not a matter of trivialities but a matter of God's Kingdom coming and God's will being done. The congregation must not be swayed by false notions of tolerance, which are always at the expense of the truth. But it must also guard against every form of legalism. Where this principle is not upheld, the congregation will either fall into a terrible pharisaism or suffer a collapse of all discipline. Loehe says: "A church which holds fast to the true confession and the necessity of discipline has hopes of building itself up; there is no hope for the church that lacks one or the other, thus also for the church that denies the necessity of discipline."¹⁷ The live congregation, which draws its life from Christ, will not only seek to attract and win souls, but will also separate itself from such as refuse to follow the calling of the Lord; in other words, such a church will become either a savor of life unto life or of death unto death. We dare not leave the estranged to "the slowly-working discipline of their own conscience" in the hope that they will eventually come to contrition and return. This was the argumentation in Germany fifty years ago. We cannot share such an attitude. However, without follow-up and instructive pastoral care, which hopes to be able to stand before the judgment seat of God, fellowship with a fringe-member may not be broken. Concern for such a fringe member is the only thing that matters in church discipline. Its goal: restoration to the congregation under God's Word and Sacrament.

III

The most important passage in the New Testament which speaks of the service of Christians is found in I Peter 4:10: "As every man hath received the gift, even so minister the same one to another, as good stewards of the manifold grace of God." The well-known Parable of the Talents in Matthew 25:14–30 is applicable here. It wants to say: God has given us gifts, capabilities, and talents for the purpose of fully and faithfully serving the Lord Himself and all who are with us in the congregation. God wants us to be His co-laborers, not because He needs us but because He has resolved to use us as His instruments and place us into His service.

Christ has called His church to life through His apostles. This He still does by calling individuals to follow Him. It is He who places us into His service. And we will faithfully discharge our duties only if we let the Holy Spirit continually equip us with His gracious gifts. So we may say: "A man can receive nothing, except it be given him from heaven" (John 3:27). In our life and service we can become givers only insofar as we have first become receivers. God must first set us free from ourselves before we will be willing to help the brother. Only when our life has first been cleansed and sanctified by God will we be able to be true witnesses of His mercy. Only he can serve his brother or neighbor with eternal gifts who has first let God bless him with the imperishable treasures of heaven. The Lord must become the pivotal point of our entire life and the source of our strength, so that our life and service can become more than lip service, that it become reality: "I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me" (Gal. 2:20).

Pastor Kroeker, who was active in Russia in the twenties, was once asked how one could attain a Spirit-filled life and a blessed service. His answer was: "My brother, it depends less on whether we have the Holy Spirit than on whether the Holy Spirit has us." Fruitful service is possible only for him who allows himself to be served from above. An example is the sending of the disciples. Equipped with special power and authority (Mk. 6:7), Jesus sent them out among the people. They returned from their first mission. Their service had not been in vain, their message not without fruit. Their hearts were enraptured by what they had taught and wrought. Even the evil spirits had been subject unto them. However, their success became a peril to their souls. Jesus was well aware of the danger connected with even the holiest service. Therefore He said to them: "Come ye yourselves apart into a desert place and rest awhile" (Mk. 6:31). Whoever desires to care for souls and serve God must place his own soul into God's care. Even the most faithful servant of Jesus is himself no living fountain. Only the Lord is that. Only He can give the eternally refreshing water. We can only be channels of this fountain. Only those disciples remain fresh and fruitful who take time to hear when the Master speaks. When we study the career of great men of God, we constantly meet up with a secret of their "success," namely, that they took time to be alone with God. Mary of Bethany (John 12:7) let the Master first equip her, so that later she knew how to

¹⁷ Wilhelm Loehe, *Vorschlag*, p. 38.

serve. She knew that Jesus must first give to her before she could offer something to Him. She knew that what the Lord gave to her was of much greater importance and value than that which she could give to Him. In order to lead to God, we must have been with God. Only he can continue to serve who continues to commune with God. From our association with Him we learn to expect everything from Him, to find everything in Him, to live through everything with Him. Whether He takes us aside into a quiet place, or whether He manifests His glory when we are under the cross we must bear, it is all to one purpose, namely, that He become great in our life. Only he who knows a great Savior will become fit to engage in the saving of souls. We are completely dependent upon Him, as He said: “Without me ye can do nothing” (John 15:5).

In the Lutheran sense one could say that there is only one service, one office in the Christian church, namely, the office of the ministry. However, the ministry, the office of the proclamation of the glad tidings of Jesus Christ, has many forms. Scripture tells us how it must all be combined: “Now there are diversities of gifts, but the same Spirit. And there are differences of administrations, but the same Lord. And there are diversities of operations, but it is the same God that worketh all in all. But the manifestation of the Spirit is given to every man to profit withal” (I Cor. 12:4–7). Here the apostle speaks of gifts, offices, and operations. So it is not only the pastor who has an office and is called to serve, but also all of the members have offices and are called into service.

Luther says in the explanation of the First Article: If I believe that God has made me and given me all that I have: my faculties, my five senses, my sound members and my energy; if I am indebted to Him for my family, my home, my possessions, yes, all the good fortune of my life; if I believe that He has hitherto spared me from all harm and led me safely through all dangers and also will continue to direct my life; then I owe Him thanks and praise. And my service shall consist in obeying His will. But the greatest gift of God is the gift of His Son, in order that He might redeem me from death, sin, and the devil. I am dearly bought by His blood. Therefore, all that I am and have belongs no longer to me but to Him. However, Christ has done all this because He loved me, so that, according to the Second Article, “I should be His own, and live under Him in His Kingdom, and serve Him.”

God does not look for people who merely admire Him; the angels are much better able to do that. Christ looks for people who are interested in one another and serve one another. The pen is made for writing, the plane for planing. By the same token, a Christian is not an ornament, or an exhibit, but he is to be responsive and active. Rather act and make mistakes than do nothing. Christ has redeemed us. He served us, in order that we may now serve our neighbor, specifically with the gift God has given us. God is so rich that not one of His children is without gifts. But woe unto him to whom many talents have been entrusted, but who, instead of trading with them, buries them. Here we may apply the word of Luther: “Everything we have must be placed in His service; if it is not used to serve, it is robbery.”¹⁸

The Lord does not rear His children to be alone. He does not spare them from testing, conflict, and difficulty, but places them squarely into the world. As Christ was sent by His Father into the world to minister unto us, so it is our assignment on earth to serve the Lord in the person of one of the least of His brethren. This does not mean that we are in the world to conform to the world, but to overcome the world by faith. We are not called to lose ourselves in the world, but to bring the lost world back to God. The deciding question for Luther was: “How can I find a gracious God?” At the same time, he was concerned that one not only lets God serve him, but that he on his part serves his neighbor. It is in this sense that we are to understand his words: “One should become another’s daily bread and another’s Christ.” The Lord never asks for anything He has not first given. He never expects anything of us for which He has not equipped us. If He wants to place us in His service, under His testing, or upon the way of the cross, He prepares and fits us for these. God said to Abraham: “Take now thy son, thine only son Isaac, whom thou lovest, and get thee into the land of Moriah; and offer him there for a burnt offering upon one of the mountains which I will tell thee of” (Gen. 22:2). But this command comes only after many “experiences.” And when it comes, Abraham has the strength from the Lord to take the

¹⁸ *Einer trage des anderen Last, Predigtband, 1962, p. 126.*

appointed way; God has prepared him for it. All personal exercises in Christianity have the purpose and goal of making us fit to serve the brethren.

We call ourselves an evangelical church. This means that the Gospel, the good news of Jesus Christ, is the deciding factor for us. But a live Christian congregation is not only evangelical, it is also and always evangelistic. Williams Evans puts it thus: “Evangelical could mean: Truth on ice; evangelistic means: Truth on fire. Evangelical could mean: Secure in defense; evangelistic means: An army on the march, with every eye to the front.”¹⁹

The driving force of the early Christians and all true servants of God was always what Paul said: “The love of Christ constraineth us” (II Cor. 5:14). What is said of love in connection with the exercise of discipline is equally applicable here. To serve means to love. Service consists not in carrying on a controversy, judging harshly and hastily. We have a beautiful example of the fashion in which Jesus ministers unto man and strives to win him, the stow of the rich young ruler. Jesus could easily have exposed him to public shame; but He didn’t! And so the young man went his way sorrowfully, that is, goaded by his conscience, but not angry or bitter. We cannot spare a person the “offense of the cross,” but that is not the same as being tactless and rude. Inquiring people are just the ones who sense whether we are seeking to understand them or merely attacking them. To serve does not mean to enslave but to set free, to seek to win the confidence of the inquiring or erring, and to lead them to Him who is the Way, the Truth, and the Life. Just as the world was not redeemed from its guilt by means of force, but by means of the cross, so we can lead the inquiring and erring to the light of truth only by means of love.

What do we need for our service? Bodelschwingh once said it most meaningfully: “We need hearing ears, seeing eyes, open mouths, helping hands, and praying hearts.” So we will want to ask the Lord to give us ears that really hear, as Isaiah says: “The Lord God . . . wakeneth mine ear to hear as the learned” (Isa. 50:4). In addition, we shall let Him give us seeing eyes, of which it is said:

Send men whose eyes have seen the King
Men in whose ears His sweet words ring;
Send such Thy lost ones home to bring;
Send them where Thou wilt come. (*Luth. Hymnal*, 506:2).

Let us pray that we might see Christ, the Light of the world, and receive eyes that not only see the faults and failings of others, but also have eyes for their needs. If the ministry of Christ was a lowering of Himself from His heavenly majesty and power into the abject poverty of our human lot (Phil. 2), then our service requires not a self-sufficient piety but meek concern for the weak brethren. We shall also ask for a mouth that will not keep silence but will speak the proper, helpful, admonishing, or comforting word at the right time. May God keep our lips clean and make especially us servants of the Word free from all vain words. The most helpful hands are empty, folded hands, which first reach up toward God that He may fill them. Of Jesus we often read: “He went apart to pray.” This was the source of His strength; He took time for God. Whoever, like Him, takes time for God, whoever holds out his hands to be filled, will also have hands that can give and bless. It is surely one of the finest things that can ever be said of human hands, that they are able to pass on the blessings they have received from God.

The members of our body are dependent upon and complement one another. So the members of a congregation are dependent on one another. A live congregation is a community that is active in working for Christ. Each one has his particular place and task, but all pull together. If the hand or the foot, the eye or the ear, refuses to do his part, the whole body suffers. Members of a congregation should also support, encourage, and edify one another. There is no better way for Christians to do this than by sharing their knowledge and experience. This is precisely why experienced, proven, and true Christians are usually elected as council members and elders. Christ isn’t our private possession, but our common treasure, which we are to share with others. Personal witness and exchange of experiences are an integral part of the Christian community. It can

¹⁹ *Lutherischer Rundblick*, 1956:2.

benefit and bolster a brother immeasurably, if we simply and humbly share with him our answers to prayer and the wonderful manifestations of divine providence in our own life. Neither should we hesitate to speak of our temptations and trials, our failures and sins. “Confess your faults one to another, and pray for one another” (Jas. 5:16). Two things will always need to be in the forefront: The preservation of the congregation and the winning of non-participants.

In the measure in which we as fathers provide for our families, we will also be concerned that our congregation gain and grow. This requires, first of all, that we grow inwardly in faith and understanding. To this end, we should instruct, admonish, strengthen, and comfort one another. But it must also be our deep concern that our congregation would enjoy outward growth. We dare not leave this part of it to the pastor alone; we, too, must go to work to win souls for Christ. How is this done? The heavenly Sower went out to sow his seed. The Good Shepherd went out to seek the lost. So we must go forth, else nothing will be done. The familiar words of Bodelschwingh are in place here: “Don’t delay! They’re dying in the meantime!” Andrew begins his work very simply by going after his own brother Simon and bringing him to Jesus (John 1:41). The Samaritan woman, after Jesus had opened her heart, went into the city and said to her townfolk: “Come, see a man, which told me all things that ever I did; is not this the Christ?” (John 4:29).

Like Peter and Andrew and the other apostles, we are called to the service of Christ; to us His words apply: “I will make you fishers of men” (Matt. 4:19). “I will make you,” He says. We cannot do it by our own wisdom and strength; the Holy Ghost must show us the way and make us willing to learn of Him. We are only too well aware of our failings and often feel ourselves completely inadequate and unfit for the task. “Ah, Lord God! Behold, I cannot speak: for I am a child,” cried Jeremiah (1:6). We, too, oftentimes think that we are not suited for this or that service, for we are too unversed in the Scriptures, too uncertain in questions of faith, too deficient in the experiences of life. St. Paul encourages us: “Wherefore comfort one another with these words” (I Thess. 4:18). And in the very next chapter he tells us: “Now we exhort you, brethren, warn them that are unruly, comfort the feeble-minded, support the weak, be patient toward all men” (I Thess. 5:14). He has confidence in the members that they will measure up to their task. It is true that we are not sufficient of ourselves, but we are not to testify of ourselves but of our Lord Jesus Christ. He who does nothing makes no mistakes. If we were to wait until we are perfect, the end of the world would come first. Whether we gather the offering, light the candles, clean the church, administer the finances, or discuss the concerns and problems and needs with the pastor, in all this we serve the congregation and our God. However, I should like to point to one distinct service, visiting the sick and the shut-ins. There is an African proverb that says: “Only he who sleeps near the sick understands their sighs.” In order to have a true understanding and appreciation of our brother’s inward and outward problems and needs, we must be willing to come near to him, to suffer with him, to bear with and for him.

Whoever is in the service of Christ must also discipline himself. Paul writes: “And every man that striveth for the mastery is temperate in all things. Now they do it to obtain a corruptible crown; but we an incorruptible” (I Cor. 9:25). In the same chapter (v. 27) he says: “But I keep under my body, and bring it into subjection: lest that by any means, when I have preached to others, I myself should be a castaway.” By an unchristian life we become an offense to many. By loveless behavior we hinder them from drawing near to the Gospel.

A live congregation will always be mission-minded, unremitting in seeking and striving to win others. This means we must endeavor to bring the Gospel to men today in the language of our day. This does not suggest that we use the jargon of the streets, and neither does it say that we speak the language of Canaan. We are sometimes reluctant to evangelize because we know evangelism in its odious forms from the sects. We should learn from the modern way of evangelizing, without adopting every one of its methods. Pastor Stallmann in Stuttgart rightly says in his pamphlet, “The Living Congregation”:

Our worship services are the heartbeat of our congregational life. From this center must radiate a warm, cordial atmosphere. In a theater we are politely ushered to a seat; how much more should we extend a warm welcome to strangers and visitors in the house of the brotherhood of Christ by

ushering them to a seat and handing them a hymnal! Let us shun a false timidity. The young lady who serves as an usher at the movies is certainly not timid. How cold and aloof our Christians are when they jealously guard their hymnbook and pew and treat strangers with indifference and even coldness.²⁰

By showing friendliness we can gain an approach to others. Of course, this in itself does not bring a person to faith. It is unscriptural to trust only in the missionary activity of individuals and expect everything of such activity. Whoever overlooks this; his service is affected by cancer at the roots. People wear themselves out in Christian activism, in religious hustle and bustle, but their service makes them neither gracious nor glad; they are more apt to become vexed and weary. Their activity touches the surface in its breadth, but not in its depth, and the souls entrusted to them are not strengthened but only “worked over,” because their activism lacks self-surrender and serenity before God. In such cases we do not see God’s power which is mighty in the weak; we see only pious folks active for God. Others, of course, cultivate association with God in the closet and in the church, but no saving blessing goes out either in their own life or that of others, because their service, in the last analysis, is not service of God, but an expression of their own personality. We often forget what Luther says: “All life is cursed and corrupted which lives only for him (the serving person) and for his benefit and good.”²¹ False busyness is just as dangerous as thoughtless indifference; pious activity is just as misleading as indolent do-nothingness; and faithless activity is as wrong as inactive faith. Let us not forget: Every man to whom we can render service is given to us of God. People whom we have gained by our own doing can easily desert us again. But when God gives us a person and does His work in him, our service will bear abiding fruit.

We must indeed continually ask whether we are doing all we can, whether we are becoming an obstacle to others, whether we are speaking at the proper time. But we need not be concerned whether the Gospel is timely. Surely such a concern should never cause us to water down or pervert the Gospel. If we realize and hold fast what II Thessalonians 3:1 says, namely, that the Word of the Lord has free course, that it is Christ who builds His church, and that He makes use of us only as His instruments, then we shall be preserved from all unscriptural, sectarian, legalistic, and reward-seeking enthusiasm. There is no more excellent way than that which God has paved for us. There is no greater joy than to serve where He has opened doors for us. For then the soil is already prepared for the message with which we are to serve. We do indeed have the duty to see to it that the Gospel may have “free course.” We must present it and invite to it. It is our Christian duty to go out after the lost, the imperiled, the weak, and seek them; but it is not our business to make each town a Christian community. We can neither force nor enforce faith. Realizing this, we will also muster the necessary patience; for patience does not permit itself to be misled in its activity, even if there is at first little “success” to be noted. There is not much assurance in service. No one can guarantee immediate, visible success. We shall not often do great things that strike the eye and gain the attention of the majority. Else we might easily become proud. In most cases, our life will expend itself on small, humble, unpretentious things. But there is great promise in these. God knows where there was real sacrifice and surrender in service for Christ. He evaluates our service not by what we have done but by how we have done it. This makes us independent of men. Whoever fears the judgment of God will not fear the judgment of the world. Whoever kneels before God will not cringe before men. As long as we remain faithful to Him, we have His word: “I know thy works: behold, I have set before thee an open door, and no man can shut it: for thou hast a little strength, and hast kept my word, and hast not denied my name” (Rev. 3:8). And one day He will say to us: “Well done, thou good and faithful servant: thou hast been faithful over a few things, I will make thee ruler over many things: enter thou into the joy of thy Lord” (Matt. 25:21).

In the Lord’s kingdom the names of men are written in small letters. Very little fuss is made over even the most illustrious names. Their entire service would have achieved nothing, if God had not given life. As great as the difference may be among the individual servants of God, they are, after all, completely dependent on the

²⁰ Gerhard Stallmann, *Die lebendige Gemeinde*, 1962, p. 65.

²¹ Adolf Koeberle, *Die Seele des Christentums*, 1932, p. 183.

life Jesus gives, preserves, and completes. He alone knows the motives for our service. He knows whether we are motivated by love for Christ or by love for ourselves. He sees beneath the surface. He knows our innermost being. Many a name that we write in capital letters is very small in His sight. And many a name that we don't even know will be brought into the light and honored. He knows the real character of our service. Therefore, His judgment is all-decisive. This will help to preserve us from faint-heartedness, when men fault us because our statistics show no numerical strength and tangible growth. God knows how much love, effort, and sacrifice goes into service that appears outwardly to be very scanty indeed. And He will royally reward this apparently meager service that is done in His name. He knows whether we are only building churches out of stone, engaged in religious activity, or whether we are building solidly, that is, whether through our service men are being born again. He knows whether we have our eye on reward and honor. The final evaluation of our service belongs to the living God. It is an earnest consideration, but at once a strong consolation, that it is God who pronounces the final verdict upon our service.

Let us hold this fast: We may count on God's power, which is strong in our weakness. The Holy Ghost will continually make and keep us fit for the work of the Lord, so that we may say with the disciples: "We cannot but speak the things which we have seen and heard" (Acts 4:20). He wants to open our eyes, that we may see new methods, new possibilities, and He will give us the courage and confidence to go forth and serve. "Depart: for I will send thee far hence unto the Gentiles" (Acts 22:21). "We preach Christ crucified, unto the Jews a stumbling block, and unto the Greeks foolishness" (I Cor. 1:23). But at the same time, we step and stand before the world with the most joyous word that was ever spoken: "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life" (John 3:16). Only when a congregation abides and lives in this Gospel will it serve and evangelize properly; only then will its doing and dealing be assured of God's blessing.

Conclusion

In conjunction with the picture that Paul employs for the Christian congregation in Ephesians 6:10–20, we may say: The live Christian congregation is always serving, always in conflict. Its body is enclosed in the armor of faith. In its hands it bears the weapons of love. On its head it wears the helmet of hope, namely, that Christ alone is its Deliverer and Redeemer. All responsibility, all exercise of discipline, and all service of the congregation reaches its climax in this, that we might ever and again learn anew and better to pray: "Thy kingdom come!"

As a branch upon a vine
 In my blessed Lord implant me;
 Ever of my Head divine
 To remain a member grant me.
 Oh, let Him, my Lord and Savior
 Be my Life and Love forever!²²

²² *The Lutheran Hymnal* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1941), No. 41, v. 5.